

Teacher Agency and Professional Identity: A Narrative Study of Outstanding EFL Teachers in Indonesian Islamic Junior High Schools

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Received: November 17, 2025

Accepted: July 1, 2026

Online Published: September 10, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n6p449

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n6p449>

Abstract

Using a narrative inquiry approach, this study examines the relationship between teacher agency and the formation of professional identity among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesian Islamic Junior High Schools. While research has examined teacher agency and professional identity, limited attention has been given to how these elements interact within value-based education such as Islamic schools in Southeast Asia. This study explores how excellent EFL teachers adapt their values, beliefs and approaches to satisfy the needs of 21st-century education. This study is based on in-depth interviews with two outstanding EFL teachers purposively selected based on shared criteria, including extensive teaching experience, engagement in curriculum development or instructional innovation, participation in professional learning communities, and professional recognition. The participants represented different professional profiles, with one characterized by extensive experience and professionalism and the other by innovative teaching practices. The research examines the developmental processes of teacher agency and professional identity. Although institutional factors frequently present challenges, the findings indicate that teachers demonstrate agency by diversifying their learning, experimenting with new pedagogical approaches, and collaborating with colleagues. Their professional identity grows through reflection, experience, and important interactions. The findings suggest that encouraging reflection, supportive leadership, and teamwork are key to building teacher agency and professional identity in values-based EFL settings.

Keywords: teacher agency, teacher professional identity, narrative inquiry, EFL teacher, Islamic junior high schools, professional development

1. Introduction

Teacher professional identity refers to how teachers understand themselves as professionals and how they interpret their roles, responsibilities, values, and commitments within particular educational contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). In language education, teacher professional identity shapes how teachers make pedagogical decisions, respond to institutional expectations, and engage with students in everyday classroom practice (Barkhuizen, 2016; Varghese et al., 2016). Rather than being a fixed attribute, professional identity is widely viewed as a dynamic and evolving construct that develops through teachers' experiences, social interactions, and participation in professional communities (Wenger, 1998; Beijaard et al., 2004). In the literature, teacher identity is widely understood as a dynamic and evolving construct shaped through professional experiences, social interactions, and participation in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). This perspective highlights that teaching extends beyond the implementation of curriculum mandates. Teachers continuously interpret educational goals, negotiate institutional expectations, and construct meaningful pedagogical practices within their specific contexts.

Teachers shape their professional identities over time by reflecting on their work, gaining experience, and participating in school communities. Factors such as institutional structures, cultural values, and educational policies all influence in this process (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teacher identity is particularly relevant to language education because it shapes how teachers think, feel and act in their professional practice (Truong et al., 2025; Weng, 2025). However, EFL teachers in Indonesia face complex challenges arising from students' diverse levels, varied backgrounds, and learning needs (Widodo, 2016), as well as curriculum requirements. As a result, teachers continuously negotiate competing expectations while sustaining coherent professional identities across their teaching contexts.

Alongside professional identity, teacher agency has emerged as another key construct for understanding teachers' professional practice.

Teacher agency refers to teachers' capacity to act purposefully, make informed pedagogical decisions, and shape educational processes in response to contextual opportunities and constraints (Priestley et al., 2015). Agency is not merely an individual characteristic; rather, it is achieved through the interaction between personal capacities, professional experiences, and social conditions. Teacher agency is teachers' capacity to act purposefully, make pedagogical decisions, and influence learning according to their professional beliefs and situations (Priestley et al., 2015). Instead of just implementing curriculum policy, teachers show agency when they interpret, adapt, and transform practices to meet students' needs. Recent research highlights its increasing significance in addressing educational issues, including curriculum reforms and assessment policies (Ketonen and Nieminen, 2025), professional development (Marshall and Horn, 2025), and innovative approaches such as project-based learning (Liang et al., 2025). Conceptualizing agency in the fields of language education also addresses the aspects as implementation of language policies and improvement programs, professional development, and references EFL teacher's classroom actions (Du and Curdt-Christiansen, 2026; Lu, 2026).

Recent research highlights that teacher agency is more than just a personal trait. It is shaped by social context and professional experience. For example, Lau et al. (2025) find that teachers' professional agency changes over time as personal motivations interact with shifting institutional settings. Furthermore, other studies have explored how teachers enact agency when addressing difficult knowledge in classrooms (Hung, 2025), responding to culturally and linguistically diverse learning environments (Trojan and Auger, 2025), or adapting to digital and online learning contexts (Tao et al., 2024; Ashton, 2022). More recently, emerging research highlights new forms of teacher agency in technologically mediated environments, such as teachers' interactions with generative artificial intelligence in instructional design (Krushinskaia et al., 2026).

Increasingly, scholars argue that teacher identity and agency are deeply interconnected. Professional identity influences how teachers interpret educational challenges and envision possible actions, whereas agentic actions simultaneously contribute to identity construction and transformation (Truong et al., 2025; Weng, 2025). Studies have shown that teachers' identities are shaped through participation in professional communities and through opportunities to exercise agency within institutional structures (Juma-Elflow and Osam, 2025; Williyen et al., 2025). In language education, reflective and culturally responsive pedagogical practices have also been found to strengthen both agency and professional commitment (Malgoubri, 2026). Together, these findings suggest that identity and agency should be understood as mutually constitutive dimensions of teachers' professional lives.

Teacher identity and agency play a key role in values-based education, especially in Islamic schools. In Indonesian Islamic junior secondary schools, English teachers are expected to teach language skills and also include moral and religious values in their lessons. As a result, English teaching here aims to build both language ability and character. Teachers need to balance language goals with the values expected in Islamic education. Research shows that teachers in these settings often take on different roles and use their agency to match their teaching with school and cultural expectations (Cruz-Arcila, 2020; Ma'mun et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of research on teacher identity and agency, important gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature has been conducted in secular educational settings, with limited attention to faith-based institutions, particularly Islamic schools in Southeast Asia. Second, although previous studies have examined teacher identity and agency as related constructs, relatively few have explored how they are enacted and negotiated through teachers' everyday professional experiences. Third, little is known about how experienced and professionally recognized EFL teachers construct their identities through agentic actions while navigating the pedagogical, institutional, and moral demands of Islamic schooling in Indonesia. Addressing these gaps is important because it can provide a more contextually grounded understanding of how identity and agency develop in value-based educational environments.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates how teacher agency is manifested in daily teaching practice and how such agency contributes to the development of professional identity among EFL teachers in Indonesian Islamic junior secondary schools. Particular attention is given to teachers' reflective interpretations of their professional experiences and instructional decision-making.

To explore these issues, this study uses a narrative inquiry approach, which values human experience as an important source of knowledge for understanding social and educational practices (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry helps researchers see how teachers make sense of their professional journeys, reflect on their teaching, and develop their identities over time. By focusing on teachers' stories, this approach provides insight into how professional agency emerges in the routine of teaching.

The focus of this study is to investigate EFL teachers in Indonesian Islamic Junior High Schools who have received professional recognition or awards for their teaching. These teachers are viewed as reflective practitioners who are committed and embrace innovative practices. This study investigates the enactment of teacher agency and formation of professional identity by examining how outstanding teachers take root in their communities.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the relationship between teacher agency and professional identity among EFL teachers in Indonesian Islamic junior secondary schools. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How is teacher agency manifested in the daily teaching practices of EFL teachers in Indonesian Islamic junior secondary schools?

RQ2. How does teacher agency contribute to the development of teachers' professional identity?

By examining teachers' narratives and professional experiences, this study contributes to the literature on teacher agency and professional identity by providing empirical insights from a value-based educational context. In addition, the study offers practical implications for teacher professional development in English language education, particularly within Islamic school settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Agency in Language Education

Teacher agency has become a prominent construct for theorising how teachers negotiate complex educational contexts (Priestley et al., 2015; Biesta and Tedder, 2007). Agency can therefore not be considered a personal attribute, but rather it is described to be situated in both a sociocultural and spatial context which provides teachers with the capability to respond reflectively, make pedagogical choices as well as adjust learning practices around institutional, social and student demands (Tao and Gao, 2021; Lu, 2026; Malgoubri, 2026).

An ecological perspective shows that teacher agency, which is the ability of teachers to act with purpose and make decisions in their work, comes from three main factors. These are past experiences (iterational, meaning how previous experiences shape current actions), current classroom and institutional conditions (practical-evaluative, referring to how teachers assess and respond to present circumstances), and professional aspirations (projective, or how teachers envision and work toward future goals) (Priestley et al., 2015). In language education, especially in EFL settings, agency helps teachers bring new ideas to their teaching, adapt the curriculum, and focus on students' needs. This flexibility lets teachers respond to students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Cruz-Arcila, 2020; Barkhuizen, 2016; Wu et al., 2026).

However, structural constraints such as centralized curricula, heavy administrative workloads, and assessment-driven mandates can limit how much teacher agency is possible (Priestley et al., 2015; Tao and Gao, 2021). Recent studies also emphasize the role of professional development, technology integration, and culturally sustaining pedagogical approaches in enhancing agency (Krushinskaia et al., 2026; Dharamshi et al., 2026; Williyen et al., 2025).

2.2 Formation of Teacher Professional Identity

Professional identity describes how teachers perceive their roles, responsibilities, and values in educational practice (Beijaard et al., 2004). Teachers develop this identity dynamically and relationally as they reflect with students, colleagues, and within institutional contexts (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Varghese et al., 2016). Teachers negotiate their personal beliefs, professional norms, and institutional expectations, making identity a continuous process of becoming rather than a fixed attribute (Barkhuizen, 2016; Tajeddin and Yazan, 2024).

Biographical and experiential factors also shape language teacher identity. These include teachers' own language learning histories and their involvement in professional communities (Barkhuizen, 2016; Truong et al., 2025). The mix of personal, professional, and contextual influences forms a complex and evolving identity. This identity steers pedagogical decisions and reflective practice. Recent studies show identity formation ties closely to teacher agency. Reflective actions shape, and are shaped by, professional self-conception (Hung, 2025; Weng, 2025; Lu, 2026).

2.3 Narrative Inquiry in Teacher Identity Research

Narrative inquiry is widely used to examine teacher identity and agency because it captures lived experiences and reflective practices (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Barkhuizen, 2016). By analysing teachers' stories, researchers can uncover how pedagogical decisions, professional challenges, and personal beliefs interact to shape identity over time. Narrative approaches also highlight the emotional, ethical, and social dimensions of teaching that are often overlooked in quantitative studies (Tao and Gao, 2021; Marshall and Horn, 2025).

2.4 EFL Teaching in Islamic School Contexts

Teaching English in Islamic schools presents the central challenge of reconciling global language proficiency with the integration of religious and moral education (Cruz-Arcila, 2020; Theriana et al., 2025). Teachers are expected to include moral and spiritual values in language lessons while meeting the different needs of their students. Research shows that EFL teachers in these settings use their own judgment to balance these goals. They adapt materials, teaching methods, and classroom interactions to fit both institutional and cultural expectations (Hidayati, 2024; Tan, 2014; Troyan and Auger, 2025).

Even though this topic is important, there are still few studies on agency and professional identity in Islamic EFL settings. In particular, there is little research on how reflective practice and social interactions shape teachers' identities. This gap highlights the need for contextually grounded, narrative-based research that examines how teachers exercise agency and construct professional identities within Islamic educational institutions (Weng, 2025; Ma'mun et al., 2025; Du and Curdt-Christiansen, 2026).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Sociocultural Perspective on Teacher Identity and Agency

This study uses a sociocultural perspective based on (Vygotsky, 1978) social development theory, which holds that learning and professional growth occur through social and cultural interaction. Teaching is not a set of isolated tasks; it requires negotiating institutional norms, cultural expectations, and student needs. As a result, professional identity remains dynamic and is continuously shaped through interactions with students, colleagues, and wider educational communities (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009).

3.2 Communities of Practice

The concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) complements this perspective, emphasizing that identity develops through

collaborative engagement and shared professional experiences. In schools, communities of practice give teachers chances for reflective learning, peer feedback, and working together on teaching strategies. These experiences play an important role in shaping professional identity (Wenger, 1998; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

In Islamic schools, these communities are shaped by both teaching goals and ethical and spiritual values. Teachers bring these values into their classroom practices (Theriana et al., 2025). Participation in such communities enables teachers to develop identities as educators who support both academic and moral development, reinforcing the interplay between professional identity and agency.

3.3 Ecological Model of Teacher Agency

This study applies an ecological model (Priestley et al., 2015) in consideration of teacher agency. The agency is born both out of iterational (past experiences), practical-evaluative (now teaching context) and projective (future aspirations) dimensions I have come to develop as a product of this interaction. This perspective emphasizes that agency is dynamic and contextual, shaped by institutional affordances, professional cultures, and student diversity (Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Lu, 2026; Malgoubri, 2026).

3.4 Conceptual Relationship between Professional Identity and Agency

Based on these frameworks, teacher professional identity and agency are mutually constitutive. Professional identity shapes the values and beliefs guiding pedagogical choices. Agency enables teachers to enact, reflect on, and adapt these choices, which in turn reshapes identity (Beijaard et al., 2004; Priestley et al., 2015). In Islamic EFL contexts, this relationship is complex. Teachers balance language learning goals with religious and moral values, connecting their sense of agency and identity. These qualities grow through reflective practice and social interaction (Cruz-Arcila, 2020; Troyan and Auger, 2025; Weng, 2025).

This theoretical approach supports focusing on outstanding teachers, meaning those who are professionally recognized, for this study. They show strong agency and reflective identity development, offering valuable insights into how recognition, experience, and context influence teaching practices (Dharamshi et al., 2026; Krushinskaia et al., 2026).

The following diagram illustrates a proposed conceptual model for understanding the dynamics between teacher agency and professional identity in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) grounded in Islamic values. This model is rooted in a dual theoretical foundation—the Sociocultural Perspective and the concept of Communities of Practice—which are depicted as the foundation for the core constructs. At the center of the model, Professional Identity and Teacher Agency are positioned in a dynamically interrelated relationship. Teacher agency is then further elaborated into three interacting operational dimensions—Iterational, Practical-Evaluative, and Projective—which provide feedback to the main constructs. This entire framework is situated within the specific context of Islamic EFL instruction, which emphasizes moral and academic development as its primary goals, as well as their influence on teacher agency and identity.

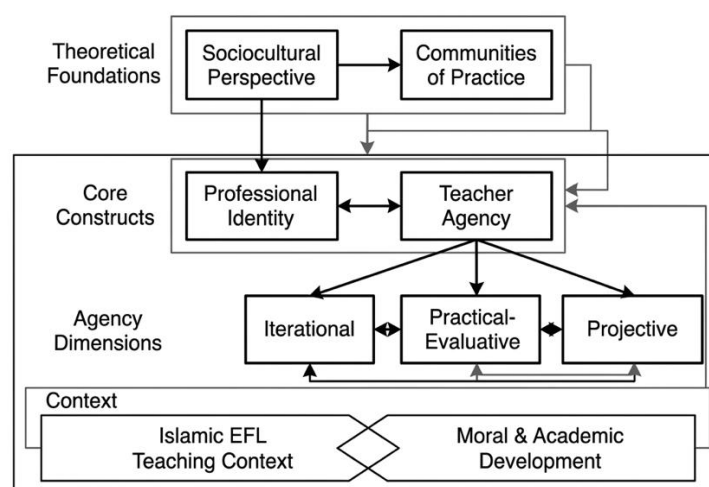


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

As shown in the figure, this conceptual model highlights how the theoretical foundations of the Sociocultural Perspective and Communities of Practice provide a framework within which teachers' Professional Identity and Agency are formed and interact. The two-way arrows between identity and agency emphasize that how teachers view themselves influences their actions, and conversely, their actions shape their self-understanding. Furthermore, this model operationalizes teacher agency through three interrelated dimensions: Iterational (oriented toward past experiences), Practical-Evaluative (oriented toward present actions), and Projective (oriented toward future aspirations), which are depicted in interacting boxes. The reverse arrows from these dimensions to Teacher Agency and from the Practical-Evaluative dimension to Professional Identity indicate a process of continuous learning and professional development. Finally, the entire model is influenced by the context of Islamic EFL teaching and the goals of moral and academic development, which actively

shape how teachers act and define themselves within that educational environment.

4. Method

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesian Islamic Junior High Schools construct and negotiate their professional identities through the enactment of teacher agency in their everyday teaching practices. Narrative inquiry was selected because it enables researchers to examine professional experience as lived and storied phenomena situated within particular social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Rather than focusing solely on observable teaching behaviours, this approach attends to how teachers interpret, make sense of, and give meaning to their professional experiences over time.

Consistent with narrative inquiry, this study was guided by the three-dimensional inquiry space proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), namely temporality (past, present, and future experiences), sociality (personal and social conditions shaping experience), and place (the specific contexts in which experiences occur). These dimensions informed the design of interview questions, data interpretation, and the construction of participants' narratives.

In language education research, narrative inquiry is frequently employed to investigate teachers' experiences and the development of their professional identities through personal experiences, instructional strategies, and social contexts (Barkhuizen et al., 2025; Riessman, 2008). This approach enables researchers to understand how teachers interpret and respond to curriculum requirements, educational policies, and classroom challenges.

This method is especially useful for studying English teaching in Indonesia. EFL teachers in Islamic schools often deal with challenges like the need for global language skills, limited resources, and the task of including religious and local cultural values in their teaching (Widodo, 2016; Weng, 2025). Narrative inquiry thus enables this study to explore how teachers navigate these complexities and build their professional identities.

4.2 Participants and Research Context

This study involved two experienced EFL teachers working in Indonesian Islamic Junior High Schools. Following narrative inquiry principles, participants were selected through purposive sampling because they could provide rich and information-intensive accounts of teacher agency and professional identity development (Palinkas et al., 2015). The selection criteria included: (a) a minimum of ten years of English teaching experience, (b) active engagement in curriculum development or instructional innovation, (c) participation in professional learning communities, and (d) recognition through regional or national professional achievements.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and institutions. Table 1 presents participant profiles.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Qualification	Teaching Experience	Current Role	Subject
Teacher A	Male	Doctorate (English Education)	16 years	English Teacher and Curriculum Coordinator	English
Teacher B	Male	Master's Degree (English Education)	15 years	English Teacher and Teacher Mentor	English

Both participants taught English at the junior secondary level (Grades 7–9) and were actively involved in school-level decision-making processes. Their additional responsibilities as curriculum coordinator and mentor provided opportunities to exercise agency beyond classroom instruction, offering valuable insights into the relationship between professional identity and agency.

Although selecting highly accomplished teachers enabled the study to generate rich narratives, it may also introduce success bias. Teachers with strong professional reputations often have greater access to professional networks, institutional support, and development opportunities. Therefore, this study does not seek statistical representativeness. Rather, it aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how teacher agency and professional identity are experienced and negotiated within particular professional contexts.

The study was conducted in two Islamic Junior High Schools located in different regions of Indonesia. Both schools implemented the national curriculum while simultaneously promoting Islamic values and character education. Within this context, English teachers were expected not only to develop students' communicative competence but also to integrate religious values, moral education, and local cultural knowledge into classroom practices (Widodo, 2016). Such expectations created a complex professional environment in which teachers continuously negotiated curricular demands, institutional expectations, and personal pedagogical beliefs.

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and supporting documentary evidence. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data because they enabled participants to narrate their experiences while allowing flexibility for probing and clarification (Riessman, 2008).

Each participant participated in two interview sessions lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Interviews were conducted primarily in Bahasa Indonesia to facilitate rich expression and minimize linguistic constraints. Follow-up questions were occasionally posed in English when participants referred to specific teaching practices or professional experiences related to English language instruction.

The interview protocol was developed based on the study's objective of understanding how EFL teachers enact agency and construct professional identities. Questions were organized around three narrative dimensions: (a) professional background and career trajectory, (b) experiences of exercising agency in teaching and school decision-making, and (c) reflections on professional identity development within Islamic school settings.

Examples of guiding interview questions included:

1. Can you describe your journey to becoming an English teacher?
2. What challenges have you encountered in teaching English in an Islamic school?
3. Can you recall situations in which you made important pedagogical decisions independently?
4. How do religious and cultural values influence your teaching practices?
5. How do you see yourself as an English teacher today, and how has that perception changed over time?

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were checked against the recordings to ensure accuracy before analysis.

To enrich the narratives and support data triangulation, relevant documents were also collected, including lesson plans, reflective teaching notes, professional portfolios, curriculum documents, and records of professional achievements.

Participant	Session	Duration	Main Focus
Teacher A	Interview 1	60 min	Professional journey and teaching experiences
Teacher A	Interview 2	85 min	Teacher agency and identity reflections
Teacher B	Interview 1	90 min	Professional journey and teaching experiences
Teacher B	Interview 2	75 min	Teacher agency and identity reflections

The use of multiple data sources enabled the researcher to develop a richer understanding of participants' lived experiences and to corroborate emerging interpretations across different forms of evidence.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), which combines attention to the structure and meaning of personal narratives with the identification of recurring themes across participants' stories. This approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand both individual experiences and broader patterns related to teacher agency and professional identity.

The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, open coding was conducted to identify meaningful segments related to professional identity, agency enactment, teaching challenges, institutional influences, and professional learning experiences. Third, related codes were grouped through axial coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to generate broader conceptual categories. Examples included pedagogical agency, identity negotiation, religious-professional integration, leadership agency, and professional growth. Fourth, categories were reviewed and refined through iterative comparison across interviews and supporting documents, resulting in the development of overarching themes.

Following thematic development, narrative accounts were constructed for each participant to preserve the chronological and contextual integrity of their experiences. These narratives were then compared across cases to identify convergences and divergences in how agency and professional identity evolved over time.

Throughout the analysis, interpretation was guided by the narrative inquiry framework of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This analytical lens enabled the researcher to examine how past experiences, social relationships, and institutional contexts shaped participants' professional identities and expressions of agency. To enhance analytical rigour, a second qualitative researcher independently reviewed a subset of transcripts and coding decisions. Differences in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached. This process strengthened the credibility and consistency of the thematic interpretations.

4.5 Research Validity and Ethics

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, data triangulation was employed by drawing on multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, documents, and field notes, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Member checking was also conducted to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected the teachers' perspectives and to provide participants with opportunities to elaborate on or clarify their accounts. Prior to data collection, all participants provided informed consent, and their confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Also, the study adheres to the ethical principles of research; i.e., participants provide informed consent in writing, confidentiality is

maintained through the anonymisation of participants and entities, and the right to withdraw is provided (Orb et al., 2001). The researcher has also ensured that teachers could express, reflect on, and communicate their experiences honestly and openly by creating a safe and comfortable environment.

Reflective ethics go beyond individual actions. Researchers apply them by reviewing their stance in narrative interactions, staying alert to biases, and placing teacher narratives within the local social, historical, and cultural context. These steps help ensure that the research is valid, reliable, and ethically sound. As a result, its outcomes can be trusted and cited in global scholarship about EFL teachers' professional identity and agency (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008).

5. Findings

This section presents the findings of a narrative inquiry exploring how experienced EFL teachers in Indonesian Islamic junior high schools enact teacher agency in their professional practice and how these experiences contribute to the construction of professional identity. The findings are organised according to the study's research questions and the themes generated through thematic narrative analysis. Guided by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework, the analysis examined participants' experiences across temporal, social, and contextual dimensions. Four interrelated themes emerged from the narratives: (1) adaptive pedagogical agency, (2) professional identity formation through reflective and relational experiences, (3) negotiating Islamic values and English teaching, and (4) the reciprocal relationship between teacher agency and professional identity. Together, these themes illustrate how teachers exercise agency in responding to contextual challenges, negotiate the integration of Islamic values with English language teaching, and construct their professional identities through reflective, relational, and values-based experiences.

5.1 Participant Profiles

Before presenting the themes in detail, the following section briefly introduces the participants and provides an overview of the thematic structure identified in the analysis.

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Professional Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Teaching Experience	Highest Qualification	Professional Recognition	Leadership Role
Teacher A	Male	40–45	16 years	Doctorate (English Education)	National Teaching Innovation Award	Curriculum Coordinator
Teacher B	Male	40–45	15 years	Master's Degree (English Education)	Provincial Outstanding Teacher Award	Teacher Mentor

Both participants are outstanding EFL teachers who have demonstrated strong professional engagement in their schools. Their professional achievements and leadership roles in the school community show that they have valuable experience with teaching innovation, reflective practice, and working with colleagues. These qualities made them well-suited to explore the link between teacher agency and professional identity. The next section describes the main themes found in the analysis.

5.2 Overview of Themes

Table 2. Overview of Themes and Sub-Themes

Main Theme	Sub-theme
Adaptive Pedagogical Agency	Pedagogical responsiveness
	Instructional innovation
	Resource improvisation
Professional Identity Formation	Reflective learning
	Recognition and professional affirmation
	Relational identity with students
Negotiating Islamic Values and English Teaching	Values-based pedagogical adaptation
	Balancing communicative teaching and moral education
Agency–Identity Reciprocity	Identity-guided agency
	Agency-driven identity development

These themes illustrate how teachers exercise agency in navigating classroom challenges while simultaneously constructing their professional identities through reflective and relational processes.

5.3 Theme 1: Adaptive Pedagogical Agency

One of the most notable findings of this study is that teacher agency is not only reflected in their ability to implement the curriculum, but especially in their ability to interpret, adapt, and transform teaching practices according to the real needs that arise in the classroom. Both research participants demonstrated that teacher agency is not abstract or theoretical, but rather is concretely present in the daily pedagogical decisions they make when faced with learning dynamics.

In teachers' narratives, agency emerges as pedagogical flexibility. Instead of following pre-planned methods, teachers adjust strategies based on student responses. Teacher A, for instance, treats teaching as a process requiring constant improvisation and reflection. He explains:

"I always adjust my teaching methods in direct response to my students, treating them as active participants in shaping classroom instruction. Sometimes methods planned at the outset prove ineffective in practice. If students seem uninterested or do not understand, I immediately try another approach tailored specifically to their needs and participation at that time."

This statement shows that for teachers, the learning process is not an entirely predictable activity. Instead, learning is understood as an interactive process that requires sensitivity to the classroom situation. Agency in this context does not only mean freedom to act, but also reflects the professional ability to read the learning context reflectively and make responsive pedagogical decisions.

Teacher B shared a similar experience, emphasizing the importance of innovation in maintaining student engagement in the English learning process. He developed various thematic project-based learning approaches designed to connect language material with students' real-life experiences. In his interview, he explained:

"I try to create theme-based project modules so that students don't just learn English as theory. For example, they make simple projects such as posters or short stories related to their daily lives. That way, they learn the language while doing something real."

This initiative shows that teacher agency appears in the ability to create innovative practices. Teacher B's project-based approach aims to increase student motivation and give a contextual learning experience. Pedagogical innovations like this one allow students to be active in class. Language learning is no longer seen as just memorizing structures.

In addition to methodological flexibility and pedagogical innovation, teachers' agency is also evident in their ability to overcome limitations in learning resources. In the context of Islamic junior high schools in Indonesia, limited learning facilities often pose a real challenge for English teachers. However, both participants indicated that these limitations actually encouraged them to develop more creative teaching strategies.

Teacher A described this situation as part of the reality that many teachers in schools have to face. He stated:

"Sometimes the teaching materials available are very limited. Not all classes have complete facilities. So I have to find other ways to keep the learning process interesting. I often use simple games, pictures, or digital media that I can access from the internet."

This statement shows that teacher agency is also reflected in the ability to improvise pedagogically. Instead of seeing limitations as insurmountable obstacles, teachers view them as opportunities to explore alternative learning approaches. This kind of creativity allows teachers to continue creating meaningful learning experiences even in less-than-ideal conditions.

Teacher B also emphasized the importance of utilizing learning resources that are relevant to students' lives. He explained that the use of local materials often helps students understand the material better. In his interview, he stated:

"I often use local stories or reading materials that are relevant to students' lives. Sometimes I also take materials from the internet that are relevant to their culture. That way, students find it easier to understand the lesson content."

The use of contextual learning resources shows that teacher agency also involves the ability to connect learning materials to the social reality of students. In the context of language education, this approach not only helps students understand the language more effectively but also makes the learning process feel more relevant to their life experiences.

In addition to classroom teaching practices, teacher agency also emerges through professional interactions with colleagues. Both participants emphasized that discussions with fellow teachers are an important part of the process of developing teaching practices. Teacher A, for example, explained that she often discusses with other teachers to find the best strategies for dealing with diverse classes.

"I often discuss with other teachers how to teach more effectively. Sometimes we share experiences about methods that work or don't work in the classroom."

This kind of interaction shows that teacher agency is not always individual. In many cases, an agency develops through professional collaboration that allows teachers to learn from each other's experiences. Through discussion and reflection together, teachers can broaden their perspectives on effective learning practices.

Teacher agency appeared not only in collaboration but also in balancing curriculum and student needs. The national curriculum sets required competencies, yet both participants shared that teachers can still create more creative learning approaches.

Teacher B explained how he tried to balance curriculum demands with a more interactive learning approach:

"Even though the curriculum has determined the material that must be taught, I try to add creative activities so that students are more active. For example, through group discussions or small projects that make them use English directly."

This practice shows that teacher agency means interpreting the curriculum flexibly. Teachers are not only policy implementers. They also adapt policies to real learning conditions as professionals.

Another dimension of agency—that is, the capacity of teachers to make intentional decisions and act purposefully in their professional practice—emerges in the teachers' narratives as adaptive classroom management. Teacher A explains that in some situations, she has to change her classroom management strategies to ensure that every student receives sufficient attention.

“Sometimes I divide the class into small groups so that I can focus more on helping students who need it. That way, they can learn more comfortably.”

By adjusting classroom activities, teachers foster a more inclusive and responsive space.

In addition, both participants also emphasized the importance of continuous professional development as part of their agency as educators. Teacher B, for example, stated that he actively participates in training and seminars to update his pedagogical knowledge.

“I often attend online training or seminars on language learning. From there, I get many new ideas that I can apply in the classroom.”

Participation in professional development activities shows that teacher agency is also related to the initiative to continue learning and improving one's competence. Teachers not only play the role of educators but also as learners who continuously strive to improve their professional practices.

These findings demonstrate that teacher agency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning at Islamic junior high schools in Indonesia is multifaceted. Teacher agency is evident in practices such as experimenting with new instructional techniques, adapting to limited resources, collaborating with colleagues, and actively pursuing professional development.

These practices suggest that teacher agency contributes to a more flexible, responsive, and meaningful learning environment for students. In the context of 21st-century education, which demands flexibility and creativity in learning, the ability of teachers to exercise this kind of pedagogical agency is an important factor in the success of educational practices.

5.4 Theme 2: Professional Identity Formation

The findings of this study indicate that teachers' professional identity is not formed instantly or through a linear process. Professional identity develops progressively through teaching experiences, self-reflection, interactions with students, and career recognition. The narratives of both participants indicate that becoming an English teacher is an ongoing process. Teachers analyse their experiences and utilize them to construct their professional self-concept.

Reflection on teaching was consistently identified as a pivotal factor in shaping professional identity. For Teacher A, reflection surpassed routine evaluation; it was an integral professional habit that illuminated the impact of various classroom strategies. The teacher explained:

“I usually write reflections after finishing a lesson. From there I can see which methods worked and which ones need improvement. Sometimes I also realize that the way I explained something was not clear enough for the students.”

Reflective practice enables teachers to closely examine the way learning occurs in classrooms. Thinking about what works and, perhaps more important, what does not help teachers to become more mindful of their role as guides. This process is how they grow as professionals and are able to view themselves as lifelong learners.

Besides reflecting on their own, teachers also shape their professional identities through the challenges they face in teaching and learning. Both participants emphasized that the complexity of the classroom is often the most important source of learning in their professional journey. Teacher B, for example, described how the experience of teaching in a classroom with a very diverse student background encouraged him to develop a more inclusive teaching approach. He recounted:

“In my class, students' abilities vary greatly. Some understand the material quickly, while others need more time. This situation requires me to think more creatively in developing learning strategies so that all students can keep up with the lessons.”

The experience of dealing with student diversity not only influences teachers' teaching strategies but also contributes to the formation of their professional identity. In Teacher B's narrative, these challenges are understood as part of a learning process that helps him grow as an educator. He explains further:

“From that experience, I feel that being a teacher is not just about delivering material. Teachers must also be able to understand the needs of each student and find ways for them to learn well.”

This narrative shows that teachers' professional identities develop through a reflective process triggered by real experiences in the classroom. The challenges faced by teachers are not merely seen as obstacles, but as opportunities to develop pedagogical competencies while deepening their understanding of the meaning of the teaching profession.

Beyond daily teaching, professional recognition strengthens teachers' identities as educators. Both participants in this study received awards for their educational contributions. For instance, Teacher A shared that receiving the National Teaching Award deeply shaped his self-image as a professional educator. He stated:

“When I received the (national) award as an outstanding teacher, I felt that my efforts had been appreciated. It motivated me to

continue developing myself.”

When teachers are acknowledged, they feel incentivized to do an even better job, and they also start seeing themselves as part of a professional community. Also, these types of recognitions give teachers social validation in the sense that they see evidence that their teaching methods are appreciated and are useful for the broader educational environment.

Teachers also develop their professional identities through their interactions with students. Both participants said that building relationships with students gave them a strong sense of professional satisfaction. Teacher A said one of the most meaningful times for him in his teaching was when he saw students’ progress. He said:

“When I see students who used to struggle finally grasp the material, it gives me a lot of satisfaction. Moments like that make me feel my work as a teacher is really meaningful.”

This experience shows that a teacher’s professional identity is built not only through formal achievements but also through relationships formed during learning. When teachers see their positive impact on student growth, they find deeper meaning in their work.

Teachers’ professional identities evolve with experience. Both participants said their understanding of teaching has changed since their careers began. Teacher B described how his view of the profession today differs greatly from when he started. He described the change as follows:

“When I first started teaching, I was more focused on how to deliver the material correctly. But after several years of teaching, I began to realize that being a teacher also means guiding students to develop as individuals.”

This narrative shows teachers’ identities change over time. With experience, they not only improve teaching skills but also grasp their social and moral responsibilities. Thus, professional identity includes more than instruction; it means understanding a teacher’s wider role in education.

Teachers’ interactions within school communities shape the formation of professional identity. Both participants noted that talking to colleagues provided new perspectives that inspired them to improve their teaching. Teacher A explained:

“Discussions with fellow teachers often give me new ideas about how to teach. Through these conversations, I also learn to see learning challenges from different perspectives.”

Such interactions show that teachers’ professional identity develops not only individually but also socially. When teachers are talking and collaborating their perspective is broadened and they feel more a part of their profession. This reflective learning helps them keep growing in their work.

Both participants also said that working with students from different backgrounds encouraged them to use more inclusive teaching methods. Teacher B noticed that having a range of learners often pushed him to create more creative learning activities. He noted:

“Every student has a different way of learning. Some understand better through discussion, while others prefer learning through practice. Therefore, I need to try different approaches so that all students can engage in the learning process.”

These are examples that illustrate how teachers’ professional identity develops as they constantly adapt to diverse student needs. As they adapt their methods for varying learning styles, they gain a better understanding of inclusive facilitator and pedagogical role.

The findings show that EFL teachers build their professional identity through many factors, including self-reflection, teaching experience, recognition from others, and their relationships with students and colleagues. As a result, professional identity changes and develops over the course of a teacher’s career.

Today’s education system requires teachers to be flexible and innovative. Having a strong professional identity helps teachers approach their work with more thought and purpose. Teachers with a clear sense of identity are better prepared for instructional challenges and can adapt their pedagogy to students’ needs.

5.5 Theme 3: Negotiating Islamic Values and English Language Teaching

A key theme that emerged from the participants’ narratives concerns the challenges of negotiating a synthesis between Islamic values and communicative. Within Islamic junior high schools, participants described their professional role as extending beyond the delivery of linguistic knowledge to include the responsibility of maintaining and modelling the school’s moral and religious orientation. This dual responsibility often created tensions as teachers sought to balance communicative language teaching with the broader goals of Islamic character education. Consequently, participants frequently struggled to integrate communicative language teaching practices within the wider educational mission of fostering students’ moral and religious development. Both participants shared examples where they needed to balance these two areas. For example, learning English often involves activities like role-play, open discussions, and group work that help students share their opinions and practice communication. However, teachers also see themselves as responsible for ensuring that classroom activities are consistent with Islamic values and suitable cultural norms.

In addition, Teacher A said some of the classroom interaction that they designed needs more thought around how the activity fits into moral expectations of the school. He noted:

“When teaching speaking, I choose topics meaningful to students and in line with Islamic values. My goal is to improve their English and help them develop good character.”

Similarly, Teacher B noted that teaching English in an Islamic school involves balancing academic goals with moral instruction. He stated:

“Sometimes the challenge is how to make English learning interesting while still maintaining the values that the school wants to promote. We have to think carefully about the materials and examples we use in class.”

These experiences show that teacher agency in this context is more than pedagogical innovation. It also involves navigating institutional and cultural expectations. Teachers work to balance language instruction with value-based education. They adjust their teaching methods so both can exist together. The challenges faced by participants highlight how professional identity and teacher agency develop within a particular sociocultural and religious educational setting.

5.6 Theme 4: Agency-Identity Reciprocity

This study demonstrates that teacher agency and professional identity are interlinked, not apart forms. They challenge and encourage one another in a day-to-day pedagogical context. The participants' narratives suggest that many of the decisions and actions they make in their classrooms flow out of who they see themselves as teachers, and are also part of what builds and reinforces that identity.

Agency was found in both participants as they made pedagogical decisions, which they believed were best for their students and classroom contexts. These choices were not simply technical or neutral; rather, they filtered through the teachers' own beliefs, values and previous experiences - forming their professional identity. This professional identity provides a guiding framework for how teachers use their agency in the classroom.

Teacher A explained that his teaching methods were shaped by his belief that teachers should act as facilitators, helping students build their own understanding. This belief guided how he designed learning activities and interacted with students. He said:

“I believe that students should be given opportunities to be active in the learning process. That is why I often try to design activities that allow them to discuss or work together in groups.”

This example shows that teaching decisions are not just reactions to curriculum requirements. They also reflect the professional identity teachers build over time. In this way, teacher agency is how professional identity appears in classroom practice.

Experiencing agency in teaching helps strengthen teachers' professional identity. When teachers see that their teaching choices lead to positive results, they often feel more confident in their abilities. This idea appears in Teacher B's story, where he explained that using certain teaching strategies successfully made him more confident in his approach. He said:

“When I try a new method and it turns out that students become more active in class, it makes me even more convinced that the approach fits my way of teaching.”

These experiences show that agency is not just about what teachers do, but also about how they reflect on and make sense of their actions. By thinking about their teaching, teachers learn which methods work best for them and strengthen their sense of being skilled professionals.

The findings show that the link between agency and professional identity changes depending on the situation. Sometimes, a strong professional identity helps teachers act with more agency. In other cases, school rules or structures can limit how much agency teachers have. For example, Teacher B shared that he sometimes has to change how he teaches because of school policies or set curriculum requirements. He said:

“Sometimes we want to try something different in class, but there are school rules or programs that must be followed. In situations like that, we have to find ways to keep the learning interesting without violating those rules.”

This example shows that teacher agency always works within certain school structures. Teachers cannot make all their own decisions, since school policies, national curricula, and administrative rules often shape what they do. Still, the study found that teachers can find ways to adjust their teaching, even with these limits.

In this regard, agency means teachers' ability to work within structural limits while staying committed to student learning. Both participants in this study often found creative ways to adjust their teaching to meet students' needs without going against school policies.

The link between agency and professional identity also shows in how teachers see their roles in education. For both participants, being an English teacher meant more than teaching language skills. It also meant helping students grow personally. This view shaped how they used their agency to create activities that built both language ability and students' social skills and confidence. Teacher A explained:

“I always try to create a classroom atmosphere where students feel comfortable speaking in English. The goal is not only for them to use the language, but also to help them become more confident.”

This view is more than just academic achievement. When teachers care about the growth of their students, they work to develop supportive and meaningful learning environments.

Another theme emerging from the participants' narratives is the evolving relationship between teachers' sense of agency and their professional identity over the course of their careers. Rather than contrasting early-career and late-career teachers, both participants—being experienced teachers—reflected retrospectively on how their sense of agency developed gradually across their own professional trajectories. This development appears to have contributed to their growing confidence in making instructional decisions,

particularly in relation to lesson implementation. Teacher B, for instance, described this shift as a gradual process that unfolded through ongoing learning and accumulated teaching experience.

“When I first started teaching, I mostly followed the textbooks or existing guidelines. But now I feel more confident adjusting my teaching methods to the classroom situation.”

This change suggests that as teachers develop their professional identity, they also become more able to act independently. With more experience, teachers often feel more confident making their own teaching decisions and adjusting their methods to fit students’ needs.

The participants’ stories show that teacher agency affects more than just what happens in the classroom. Both teachers stressed that ongoing learning and professional development are important parts of their commitment to teaching. Teacher A stated:

“I feel that teachers must continue learning. Education is always changing, so we also need to keep updating the way we teach.”

This statement unfolds how agency can also manifest itself in teachers’ pursuit of continuing development. By actively pursuing growth opportunities, teachers often feel a little surer of their professional identity and bolstered in their resolve to be good at teaching.

The studies show that teacher agency and professional identity are interconnected. A teacher’s professional identity informs their desired values and beliefs as an educator, but it is through making decisions in teaching that they create and reinforce that identity.

Understanding how these two concepts intersect explains the consideration and pliability of teachers’ teaching minds. Strong professional identity teachers tend to wield their agency well in response to challenges and find ways to create authentic learning opportunities for students.

These findings suggest that supporting teachers’ professional development should go beyond improving teaching skills. It is also important to help teachers build a strong sense of professional identity as reflective and independent practitioners. When teachers have the chance to make decisions in their teaching, they not only improve how they teach but also become more committed to their profession.

The following figure is a conceptual model that visualizes the complex dynamics of the interaction between professional identity and teacher agency. This model seeks to capture the reciprocal nature of this relationship, in which how a teacher defines themselves professionally influences their capacity to act autonomously in making pedagogical decisions, and vice versa. As illustrated in the following diagram, this model not only depicts the core internal cycle but also integrates internal supporting factors (such as teachers’ beliefs and values) and external supporting factors (such as professional development), all of which are embedded within and influenced by the broader structural context of the educational environment.

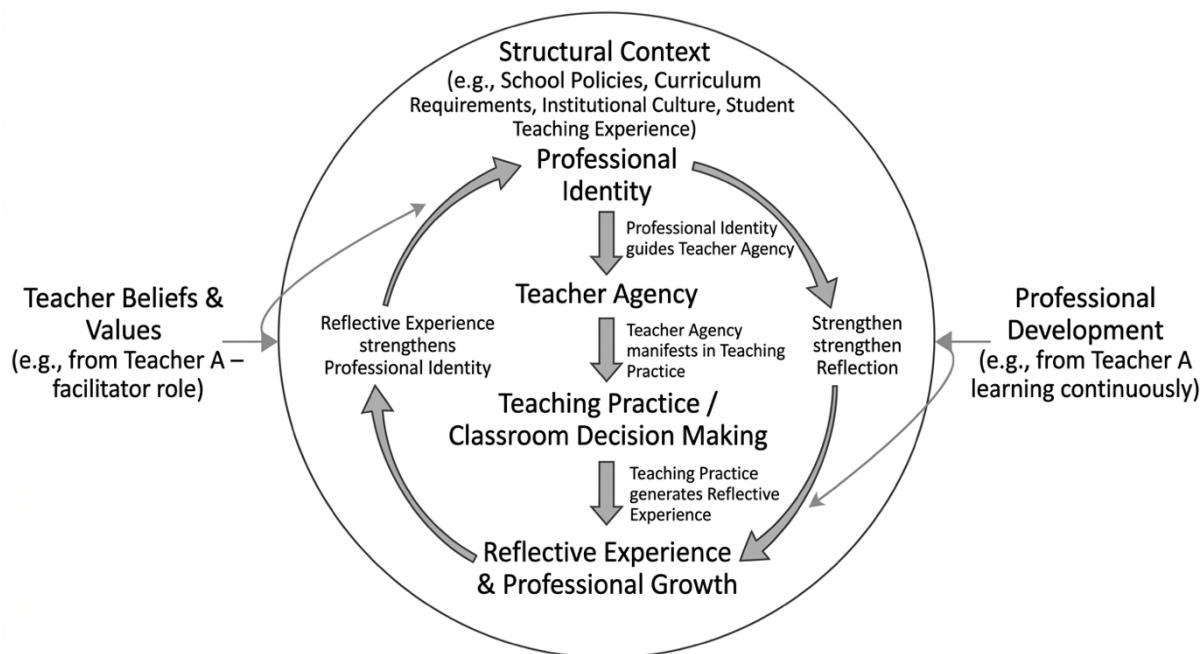


Figure 2. The Synergistic Relationship between Teacher Agency and Professional Identity

This conceptual model illustrates how a teacher’s professional identity functions as an internal compass guiding the teacher’s agency in making decisions in the classroom, as indicated by the arrow flowing from Professional Identity to Teacher Agency. These decisions and teaching practices then generate experiences that give rise to a process of reflection, which ultimately reinforces and reshapes the teacher’s professional identity, forming a continuous cycle. Furthermore, the diagram highlights the crucial role of teacher beliefs & values, which feed into professional identity, and professional development, which reinforces the cycle of reflection. Most importantly, this entire dynamic process is depicted as occurring within a “Structural Context,” emphasizing that the development of identity and the

manifestation of teacher agency do not occur in a vacuum, but are profoundly shaped by the realities of school policy, curriculum, and institutional culture.

5.7 Cross-Case Synthesis: The Dynamics of Teacher Agency and Professional Identity

Analysing the two participants' stories shows that their experiences as English teachers reflect both their own teaching styles and similar patterns in how teacher agency connects to professional identity. Even though they had different backgrounds, both teachers understood their roles and handled classroom challenges in similar ways.

In both cases, teacher agency emerged as an answer to the complexity that they dealt with in the classroom. They described how they adapted their teaching style to support students of varying abilities. In this sense, agency involved more than autonomy as a freedom to act - it meant making decisions about teaching with the benefit of experience.

Teacher A showed agency by creating activities that got students involved. This teacher believed learning English was about more than just grammar; it was also about building students' confidence as speakers. To support this, Teacher A used group discussions, language games, and teamwork to make lessons more engaging. Teacher B showed agency by adjusting their teaching style for each class. Teacher B said that every group of students is unique, so teaching methods should change to fit their needs. These examples suggest that teacher agency includes both creativity and adapting lessons for students.

In both cases, agency helped teachers respond to changes in the classroom. Even when school rules or the curriculum limited their options, teachers found creative ways to teach. The analysis also shows that professional identity shaped how teachers acted. Both teachers said their beliefs about teaching influenced their work. For them, teaching was not just about sharing knowledge but also about helping students grow both academically and personally.

Teacher A described a professional identity centred on active learning, which led them to use student-centred teaching methods regularly. Teacher B saw their role as ensuring all students had equal learning opportunities, so they focused on inclusive teaching. These examples show that professional identity shapes how teachers approach their work. It influences how they view classroom situations, handle challenges, and set teaching goals.

The findings indicate that teacher agency and professional identity are mutually influential. Professional identity provides teachers with guiding values and beliefs, while the exercise of agency in the classroom contributes to the development and reinforcement of that identity. When teachers use certain strategies successfully, they gain confidence in their methods. Facing challenges encourages them to reflect and improve their teaching. This process shows that professional identity changes as teachers learn from their experiences.

As teachers gain more experience, they usually become more confident in making decisions about how they teach, which helps strengthen their sense of agency in the classroom. The findings indicate that the school environment significantly influences both agency and professional identity. Elements such as school policies, curriculum requirements, and institutional culture affect the extent to which teachers can exercise agency. Nevertheless, the data demonstrate that, despite certain constraints, teachers are able to adapt their instructional methods while maintaining a commitment to student learning.

Across both narratives, teacher agency and professional identity emerged as mutually constitutive dimensions of teachers' professional lives. Participants' stories revealed that pedagogical decisions, reflective experiences, interactions with students, and engagement with institutional expectations continuously shaped how they understood themselves as teachers. At the same time, these evolving professional identities informed how they responded to classroom challenges and exercised agency within their respective educational contexts.

6. Discussion

The study shows that English language teacher agency is more than just an individual's ability to make teaching decisions. It grows through thoughtful reflection on classroom experiences, the school environment, and the development of professional identity. In both cases examined, agency appeared when teachers interpreted what was happening in class, changed their teaching methods, and responded to student needs. This supports the idea that agency depends on the situation and relationships, and is not simply a personal trait (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998); Priestley et al., 2015; Biesta and Tedder, 2007). In EFL settings, agency stands out as teachers balance different curriculum requirements, student abilities, and school expectations (Barkhuizen, 2016; Tajeddin and Yazan, 2024; Du and Curdt-Christiansen, 2026).

The study also shows that agency often appears when teachers reflect and adapt their teaching. Both participants stressed the importance of changing their methods to fit their students, showing that teaching decisions are based on interpretation, experience, and judgment, not just routine. These flexible approaches match research on how teachers can innovate and adjust their strategies to fit local and cultural needs (Dharamshi et al., 2026; Malgoubri, 2026; Lu, 2026; Krushinskaia et al., 2026). This highlights that teacher agency involves teachers' capacity to respond to contextual tensions and enact purposeful actions in their teaching practice (Tao and Gao, 2021; Nguyen and Ngo, 2023; Hung, 2025).

The findings also indicate that professional identity contributes significantly to teachers' decision-making. Participants said that being an English teacher is not just about teaching language, but also about helping students build confidence, communicate, and grow morally. This aligns with studies indicating that professional identity is constructed through personal beliefs and social environments (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Varghese et al., 2016). Identity shapes how teachers exercise their agency, manage curriculum

requirements, and respond to students' needs (Barkhuizen, 2016; Truong et al., 2025; Weng, 2025).

Professional identity develops over time through reflection. Participants said that early in their careers, they focused on teaching content effectively. With more experience, they started to see themselves as mentors, role models, and supporters of a positive classroom environment. This pattern matches earlier research showing that reflection helps strengthen both professional identity and teacher agency (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Yuan and Burns, 2017; Tajeddin and Yazan, 2024). More recent studies also show that teachers who reflect and adapt to their context develop stronger strategic and deliberate agency, which helps them handle complex professional and cultural challenges (Williyan et al., 2025; Theriana et al., 2025).

Agency reinforces identity and vice-versa. A professional identity enacts and defines for teachers a set of values with which to make choices when teaching, and the exercising of that agency reinforces their identity through experience. This concept aligns with the ecological viewpoint (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2026) since it considers past experiences, current situations, and future goals all together. Finding this balance in EFL teaching allows teachers to adapt curriculum–culture–institutional demands while adopting reflexive and flexible practices (Barkhuizen, 2016; Miller and Gkonou, 2018; Lau et al., 2025).

Teachers' agency is shaped by the institutional context. Participants noted that school policies, administrative rules and national curriculum guidelines influenced their teaching decisions. This is in line with the claim that agency does not depend simply on an inherent predisposition of individuals but also on their relation to their work context (Biesta and Tedder, 2007; H  k   et al., 2012). Recent studies related to language education also indicate that the surrounding environment, including school culture, evaluation methods and policy reforms can facilitate or detain teacher agency (Ketonen and Nieminen, 2025; Tao and Gao, 2021; Du and Curdt-Christiansen, 2026). To build stronger teacher agency, it is important to focus not just on individual skills but also on creating supportive school environments that encourage reflection and innovation (Dharamshi et al., 2026; Malgoubri, 2026).

This study adds to our understanding of how teacher agency works in Islamic EFL settings. Teaching English in Islamic schools means teachers must balance global language goals with moral and religious education. Teachers show adaptive and culturally responsive agency by including ethical values, choosing materials that fit their context, and encouraging ethical communication in class (Cruz-Arcila, 2020; Theriana et al., 2025; Ma'mun et al., 2025). These actions show how teachers can reclaim agency despite cultural and institutional limits, helping students grow both academically and in character (Trojan and Auger, 2025; Weng, 2025).

The findings also show that teacher agency changes over time as teachers balance their beliefs, professional identity, and the demands of their environment. The teachers in this study showed transformative and creative agency by reflecting and adapting to classroom and institutional challenges (Dharamshi et al., 2026; Krushinskaia et al., 2026; Lu, 2026). This supports the idea that professional identity and teacher agency develop together through experience, reflection, and involvement in educational communities (Varghese et al., 2016; Barkhuizen, 2016; Marshall and Horn, 2025).

In summary, this study builds on earlier research by showing that EFL teacher agency in Islamic schools comes from the mix of reflective practice, professional identity, and the school environment. It highlights the need for teachers to be adaptive, culturally aware, and grounded in their context. The results suggest that supporting teacher agency means providing broad support, including professional development, time for reflection, and policies that encourage innovation and trust teachers' judgment (Hung, 2025; Wu et al., 2026; Malgoubri, 2026).

7. Conclusion

This study investigated how teacher agency is enacted in the daily practices of EFL teachers in Indonesian Islamic junior secondary schools and how such agency contributes to the development of professional identity. The findings reveal that teacher agency is manifested through adaptive pedagogical practices, including responsiveness to students' needs, instructional innovation, resource improvisation, professional collaboration, and ongoing professional learning. These practices demonstrate that teachers do not merely implement curriculum requirements but actively interpret and adapt teaching in response to contextual realities.

The study further shows that teacher agency contributes significantly to the development of professional identity. Through reflective engagement with classroom experiences, interactions with students and colleagues, and participation in professional learning activities, teachers continuously construct and reconstruct their understanding of themselves as educators. At the same time, professional identity shapes how teachers interpret challenges and make pedagogical decisions. The findings therefore highlight a reciprocal relationship in which agency and identity mutually influence and reinforce one another.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between teacher agency and professional identity in a faith-based educational context. The findings demonstrate that agency is not solely an individual capacity but a contextually situated process shaped by pedagogical, institutional, and sociocultural conditions. Practically, the study suggests that supporting teacher development requires more than enhancing instructional competence. Schools and educational stakeholders should create opportunities for reflective practice, professional collaboration, and continuous professional learning while also providing sufficient space for teachers to exercise professional judgment.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved only two participants from Indonesian Islamic junior secondary schools, which limits the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. In addition, the narrative inquiry design prioritised depth of understanding over broad representation. Future research could involve a larger and more diverse group of teachers across different

institutional settings and career stages. Longitudinal studies may also provide further insight into how teacher agency and professional identity evolve over time.

Overall, this study demonstrates that teacher agency and professional identity are mutually constitutive dimensions of teachers' professional lives. Understanding this relationship is essential for supporting teachers as reflective, adaptive, and contextually responsive professionals in contemporary EFL education.

AI-Assisted Writing Disclosure

The authors used artificial intelligence (AI) tools to help with language editing and to make the English clearer during the revision of this manuscript. These AI tools were only used for language support and did not play any role in designing the research, analysing data, interpreting results, or shaping the study's main ideas. All of the intellectual content, analysis, and conclusions in this article are the authors' own work and responsibility.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (LPDP) of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia, the Higher Education Funding and Assessment Centre (PPAPT) of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, under the Indonesian Education Scholarship scheme (Beasiswa Pendidikan Indonesia, BPI), and Beasiswa Indonesia Bangkit (BIB), as well as the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia for their support and funding of this research.

Author contributions

Anisah Setyaningrum designed and compiled the research and wrote the initial draft of the article. Suminto A. Sayuti and Jamilah play a role in methodological validation and qualitative data analysis. Muhammad Fauzan Aminudin and Haya Haratikka handled the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Hilma Pami Putri and Meggy Merlin Mokay were involved in the process of triangulation and interpretation of the research results. Ning Setio Wati edited and formatted the manuscript in accordance with the journal's guidelines. All authors have agreed to the final version of this article.

Funding

This work was fully supported by Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (LPDP), the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia, the Higher Education Funding and Assessment Centre (PPAPT) of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, under the Indonesian Education Scholarship scheme (Beasiswa Pendidikan Indonesia, BPI), and Beasiswa Indonesia Bangkit (BIB), the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia.

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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