

Primary School EFL Teachers' Professional Agency in South China: An Ecological Perspective

Yuanyuan Chen¹

¹ School of English Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China

Correspondence: Yuanyuan Chen, School of English Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, No.2 Baiyundadao North, Baiyun District, Guangzhou, China. E-mail: yuchen@gdufs.edu.cn

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Abstract

Teacher agency has emerged as an important research field during the past decades, yet it remains a great challenge for primary school EFL teachers in China to appropriately enact their professional agency. Based upon a semester-long observation of the English classes in a primary school in Southern China, semi-structured interviews with the expert EFL teachers, documents such as the participating students' reflective journals, this qualitative study aims to explore how EFL teachers in Southern China enact their agency in the professional contexts in an ecological perspective.

Findings show that the expert EFL teachers have complicated agentic reactions towards different interplays with different microsystems in the ecological system of their working environment. Implications for further teacher professional development are discussed concerning how to enhance teachers' agency in internship and in-service training.

Keywords: teacher agency, ecological system, primary EFL teacher

1. Introduction

In February 2019, the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council issued the document "China's Education Modernization 2035"; and in 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released the "Education 2030 Framework for Action", both of which emphasize the significant role of teachers in terms of the development of education and overall development of China. Additionally, in recent years, the State Council and the Ministry of Education have issued various policies and laws related to K-12 education, clarifying regulations for management and teaching in primary and secondary schools. Meanwhile, the Chinese government has made a national strategic decision to advance the development of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA). On February 18, 2019, the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council issued the "Outline of Development Plan for Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area". Since the strategic goals were set for the development of the Greater Bay Area, the Chinese government has set up goals of educational and economic development of the Greater Bay Area. In this context, focusing on the professional context and agency of K-12 education EFL teachers in the Greater Bay Area concerns extensively with the professional identity and well-being of EFL teachers. However, despite the large number of teachers in China's K-12 education, there is limited research on the professional agency of K-12 EFL teachers, especially in the context of the Greater Bay Area. Therefore, studying the professional agency of K-12 EFL teachers, particularly on how they exercise their agency in the professional context of the Greater Bay Area, is both urgent and important from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this study explores the ways in which primary school EFL teachers practice their professional agency and the mechanisms that influence teachers' exercising their agency. It also investigates the interactive relationship between teachers' career development and the social environment, explores strategies and methods to enhance teacher agency and enriches research in the field of teacher agency.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, study on agency, professional agency, and teacher agency has become the focus of research in teacher development. Diverse perspectives have emerged in this field, particularly in the realm of teacher education research, including emotional engagement and teacher identity. Xu and Long (2020) conducted a

comprehensive review of foreign language teachers' agency, defining agency, reviewing on theoretical perspectives and research methods on agency, and suggesting on future research directions. Wei and Liu (2022) explored the status quo and influencing factors of agency in online teaching for university EFL teachers. Their findings suggest that while university EFL teachers generally have positive agency for online teaching, in practice they exert passive agency. Furthermore, perceptions of online teaching efficacy and active behavior outweigh the level of emotional identification with online teaching. Ruan (2020) discovered that university EFL teachers demonstrated active agency, beliefs and acted as mediators in EFL classroom teaching. The agency of teachers is closely related to individual and environmental factors. Tao and Gu (2016) found that teacher agency consists of choice and compensation capabilities. Teachers primarily practice agency in two ways: setting career development goals and corresponding action strategies and compensating for the negative impact of failed practices through cognitive and behavioral adjustments. Gao et al. (2018) interpreted how teachers exercise agency, making "choices" related to teaching and research and taking corresponding "actions" to facilitate their career development suited to their individual characteristics. Wang (2018) reviewed "Teacher Agency and Policy Responses in EFL Teaching" edited by Patrick C. L. Ng and Esther F. Boucher-Yip. The selected literature indicates: firstly, academia widely acknowledges the interplay between teacher agency and foreign language education policies; secondly, the book primarily employs the Ecological theory and Sociocultural theory to interpret how EFL teachers exercise agency; thirdly, action research, setting up teachers' communities of practice, and improving the sociocultural environment for education are effective ways to stimulate teacher agency. Liu & Chao (2018) studied the process of how teachers promote learner agency in language classrooms. Based on van Lier (2008), they constructed a technologically mediated classroom ecosystem framework through classroom observations and interviews.

However, up to the present, scholars in China have predominantly focused on the professional agency of university EFL teachers (Tao & Gu, 2016; Gao, 2018), with very limited research on the agency of K-12 EFL teachers in China. Given the unique characteristics of the professional environment, K-12 EFL teachers face distinct survival and developmental challenges compared to other teacher groups. How they exercise agency and enhance their professional identity amid professional challenges is an urgent and practically significant topic.

Teacher agency research has also become a hotspot in the field of international teacher education and professional development, particularly in countries like the United States and Finland (Billett, 2014; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Lasky, 2005; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; März & Kelchtermans, 2013; Priestley, Edwards, & Priestley, 2012; Haneda, Teemant & Sherman, 2017). Scholars have continuously explored and researched teacher agency, with a focus on how teachers use agency to enhance their professional development amid teaching reform (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Priestley et al., 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Priestley et al. (2015), Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto (2015) found that teachers' perception of agency has a positive impact on shaping their professional identity and promoting professional development. Emirbayer & Mische (1998), Eteläpelto et al. (2013) analyzed the attributes of choice and practice in agency, exploring how individuals influence their life trajectories and environment. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) summarized the continuous characteristics of agency as the "chordal triad of human agency". Edwards (2013) examined the interpersonal aspects of agency, and eventually proposed the concept of "relational agency". Goller & Harteis (2017) explored the multifaceted attributes of agency, including competence, beliefs, and personality. Priestley et al. (2015) and Varghese et al. (2015) contended that teacher agency is at the core of teacher career development and learning, representing the cognitive beliefs and concepts that teachers, as agents, continually develop in the process of educational practice. This process involves proactive engagement with the educational environment, influencing teachers' individual teaching activities, research endeavors and professional growth.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is based upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. The Ecological Systems Theory serves as a model for individual development, emphasizing that individuals are nested within a series of interconnected environmental systems. In these systems, interactions between systems and individuals influence personal development. The innermost layer of the environmental hierarchy is the microsystem, followed by the mesosystem, which refers to the connections and relationships between various microsystems. Bronfenbrenner suggests that if there are strong positive connections between microsystems, optimal development may be achieved. The outer layer of the mesosystem is the exosystem, representing systems that indirectly impact individuals' development, even though the individuals are not directly involved. The outermost layer is the macrosystem, encompassing the cultural, subcultural, and societal environments present within the three aforementioned systems.

4. Research Methods

4.1 Research Site and Participants

W Primary School (pseudonym hereafter) was chosen as my research site out of two reasons. Firstly, two teachers from the school were my former students in G University. I had built up trustworthy relationships with them, which in qualitative research proves to be vital (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Secondly, W School has started its initiative in drama teaching ever since 2017, which is obviously a pioneer in the local district. And the students in W School are known for their outstanding performance in English dramas.

As early as 2014 the school started its first drama contest in order to encourage the students to develop their performance skills and language proficiency, which echoed with the school's motto to cultivate students with international awareness through various activities. Ever since then, almost all the EFL teachers in the school have been working together as the drama teaching team, and studied on drama relevant pedagogies, together with training programs by experts in drama education and multiliteracies pedagogy. With three years' teaching and research practice, a school-based teaching curriculum was set up, and the school officially incorporated English drama teaching into its curriculum in 2017 and the drama course became a school-based subject for students from the first graders to the sixth graders. With course consultancy and assessment from drama education experts and professors, discreet and serious selection of dramas and scripts together with repeated research on teaching pedagogy and learning from other schools and symposiums on dramas, the school finally officially took the initiative of teaching English drama to primary students.

In this research, the student participants were fifth graders from the school, who had learned English for at least four years. Since the drama teaching reform was mandatory in W School, with a greatly increased workload in class preparation, teachers had a long and hard time overcoming the difficulties. The teacher participants Yvonne and Lily had been in the teaching profession for over ten years and joined the drama team since 2016. In addition, Lily was the English team leader of Grade five, and head teacher of the student participants. The dramas were selectively chosen, and the scripts were kept original with minor adaptation to facilitate students' understanding, with the guidance of overseas teachers from North America.

Table 1. Demography of participants

Name	Gender	Degree	Years of teaching
Yvonne	Female	Bachelor	17
Lily	Female	Bachelor	15

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

I observed the participating teachers and their classes from September 12th, 2022 to December 15th, 2022, which covered three months, including observing daily classes in the classroom and the demo classes in the school auditorium, as well as the drama shows held by the school. The data collected include class observation and interview narratives of the participating teachers, journals from students as well as pictures together with videotapes and documents from the school. Certificates of honor and awards, together with documents were all together provided for triangulation. There were 39 and 36 students in each of the participating classes. I took class observation notes, did interviews with the teacher, had a brief interview with the vice principal who was held responsible for drama teaching and collected eight journals from the students. The classroom observation notes and interview narratives together with other data were transcribed word-to-word and were sent back to the participating teachers for double-check.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discusses the outcomes of semi-structured interviews conducted with the two EFL teachers Yvonne and Lily, analyzed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, in order to explore the teachers' perceptions of professional agency and the various ecological factors that influence the teacher's professional agency within the context of language education.

5.1 The Stories of the Two Teachers

After graduating from university, both Yvonne and Lily became teachers in their local public schools. Yvonne, after working for eight years, came to G province for a better future in her career. Firstly she worked in a private primary school in another city, and then moved to W School till today. Lily also began her career in a local public school, then she quickly developed from a novice to a promising experienced teacher in the school.. Seven years later, she moved to W School, and gradually became an expert teacher over the past years.

5.2 Teacher Agency in the Microsystem

5.2.1 Teacher-Student Interaction

The participating teachers also encountered a lot with their students in the working place. And they had experienced complicated feelings when dealing with critical incidents like conflicts with students. The participants' description shows that they exercised agency to adapt their practices through unreserved and uncritical adoption of management techniques (Lai, Li & Gong, 2016) and styles of interaction with students.

I teach students of Grade Five, and the children are more mature than the younger kids, with them I will communicate with a more equal attitude. And they are willing to accept my suggestions and care about me. Of course, that's also associated with my devotion and love for them, which is also a teacher's responsibility. The children in my class are actively engaged in activities and can always bring out the best of themselves. I'm still proud of that. And some children are also very sensible, when I am sick and couldn't speak, some children will be very concerned about me, either bringing me some laryngeal tablets, or writing me a note. That's the value and pride of being a teacher. Of course, things don't always go right. There are children who are naughty and troublesome and sometimes pushed me crazy. (Yvonne, September 24, 2022)

Yvonne's experience demonstrated that as students of their age were generally in bad need of equality, respect and democracy, treating them equally and respecting them would earn respect and care for her from students as reciprocal act, as illustrated by expressions like "sensible", "treat...equal attitude", "sensible" and "love".

The participants were in consensus in their perceptions of a healthy teacher-student relationship, especially after attending more teacher development workshops and lectures in the past few years and realizing the importance and benefits of building a student-teacher relationship based upon respect and trust.

5.2.2 Interaction between Colleagues

The participating teachers tended to have complicated feelings towards their relationship with colleagues, which involve both cooperation and competition in their teaching and working environment. The following examples well illustrate how the teachers enacted teacher agency within the relationship with colleagues.

For some friendly colleagues, I am easy-going and glad to communicate and learn from them; while for some hostile colleagues I won't cooperate with them unless required. Colleagues are the people with whom you can either make friends or simply keep acquaintance with. Some colleagues regard me as a rival because I take the position that they had thought of taking, so I need to keep a low profile at school. What I have to do is to teach well, do my job well and work together with my colleagues to achieve win-win results.

I hope I can gain support from my colleagues and work in a friendly environment. Generally speaking, I am satisfied with my relations with my colleagues. (Lily, September 22, 2022)

From the accounts of Lily, we can tell that the complicated feelings and relationships between colleagues like "friendly" and "hostile", "respect", "cooperate" and "win-win" co-existed and exerted great influence on the teacher's agentic enactment. They may work hard to face the challenge and competition in work, especially under the strict evaluation system, for which directly leads to a promotion in ranking or salary. In such circumstances, Lily enacted her agency to win the recognition of colleagues, as well as to play the best of her talent to ensure that she deserved the position she held within the community.

5.2.3 Parent-teacher Interaction

The result demonstrated that the relationship between teachers and parents of the students were somewhat complex, yet most of the encounters with parents are pleasant. Yvonne described her encounter with the parents as "(parents) cooperative, willing to follow the teachers' advice and communicate appropriately with teachers".

Most of the parents in our class have good self-cultivation and are very cooperative and willing to follow the teachers in their children's study. And they are engaged in competitions and activities in the class and the school. Like the English Drama Show this year, our class's PTA helped to cope with a lot of things, such as preparing for props, clothing, and makeup. Working with all these parents and students, I feel that what I do is worthwhile. I feel motivated and prospective about my students and the class. There are also exceptions, like the parents who are busy working all day long and couldn't make it to attend any activities. However, most of the parents would cooperate very well with me and my colleagues. Anyway, as a teacher, I always do my best because I believe in doing what I can with integrity. (Yvonne, September 22, 2022)

In this example, Yvonne's accounts of agentic encounters like "motivated and prospective", "worthwhile", "worried and anxious" together with her interplay with the often "cooperative" and "engaged" parents or uncooperative and non-participating parents shaped her with the belief of "doing what I can with integrity".

However, the fact that the actively agentic devotion of the parents greatly motivated the teacher manifested the mutual enhancement of the teacher-parent interplay.

5.2.4 Interaction Between Superiors and Subordinates

Teachers' agency towards their interaction with the administrators is the most subtle and changeable. It is important to point out that teachers may swing out of different reasons. Still, the research showed that the teachers felt both encouragement and pressure from administration at school.

I can understand that the principals and leaders are having a difficult time motivating everyone to follow the rules and join the reform. For us teachers, particularly for old folks likes me (laugh), what we can do is to teach well, and help the young teachers as they are having a hard time as well. If I can't do my job well, it'll be a big trouble for both myself and the administrators. I don't want trouble for myself. Of course, the evaluation system for teachers every year applies to every teacher, including the so-called senior teachers like me. And in every semester, we host the teaching contests in the school and research seminars are given to help teachers learn to do research. For some of the teachers, I know it's demanding for them, so I would volunteer to give a demo class to the new teachers since I know that's what I can do for the school. I felt really rewarded and fulfilled when I was told that they indeed learned a lot. (Lily, September 24, 2022)

In the example, Lily showed strong empathy with the school administrators which is demonstrated in the expressions like "having a difficult time", "demanding" etc, indicating the difficult situation the school administrators, particularly the principal faced. The strong empathy made it possible for her to actively join the school reform, volunteered to give demo classes to the young colleagues. Lily's outstanding English proficiency and teaching competence together with her strong empathy and sensitivity earned her respect from her colleagues and the administrators and reward as well.

5.3 Teachers' Agency in the Mesosystem and Exosystem

Beyond interactions with students, parents, colleagues and leaders, teachers also have extensive interactions with peers from other schools or authorities from the local bureaus of education, which also influence their agentic interplay within the system.

During the past few years, the school has invited a couple of experts in English teaching and drama education to deliver lectures and workshops; besides, we have invited a lot of pedagogical experts and English discipline leaders to help with our English curriculum design. These experts have been so helpful that we've invited some to come for several times. They solved our puzzles, supported us with new trials in teaching practice, and helped some teachers with enhancing classroom teaching and class design. Their generous help had greatly encouraged us. For me, I really felt grateful to Ms. C for her help with my project. From then on, I became more confident and enthusiastic in trying teaching innovation because I know the experts are there to support us. (Yvonne, September 24, 2022)

In Yvonne's accounts, expressions like "support", "help", "experts", "confidence", "confident and enthusiastic" manifested her strong agency towards the further training programs for the teachers. Her role as an expert teacher offered her the perspective to see the benefits and strengths of training programs better and more profoundly.

The mesosystem, which involves the interconnections between microsystems, revealed the importance of collaboration between teachers and school administrators. Yvonne noted that supportive relationships with administrators encouraged her and she also showed strong agency in initiating positive teacher-student, teacher-colleague and teacher-administrator interactions. Lily also demonstrated similar positive agency while showed concern and empathy with novice teachers in their interaction in the professional context.

Both teachers recognized the impact of external factors, such as policies and societal norms, on their professional agency. Yvonne and Lily mentioned the constraints imposed by standardized testing systems, which made their endeavor difficult in certain professional contexts.

5.4 Teachers' Agency in the Macrosystem

The macrosystem, representing broader cultural and societal values, played a significant role in shaping the teachers' agency. Both teachers acknowledged the emphasis on exam-oriented tradition in the current context. This influenced their strategies, with Yvonne seeking to incorporate various creative activities within the exam-driven curriculum, and Lily introducing programs based on PBL to balance traditional practices.

To be honest, I didn't pay much attention to national policies and the current affairs. I don't think they have much to do with me right now. In addition to preparing the materials to be used in the class, because we need

to use supplementary materials in English, I feel that I really don't have much time to pay attention to many policies every day. Unless it's related to the teacher's work, I may read a little bit when I read news in moments of WeChat, such as raising teachers' income or granting teachers the right for punishment. But in fact, some people have talked about it for many years, and I don't know whether it will be implemented. This is not something that ordinary people can care about. I will care more about the school's policies. After all, this is directly related to my work. (Lily, September 24, 2022)

Lily's accounts showed that the remote factor in the ecological context doesn't really have any direct impact on the participant but rather the more familiar and direct factor tended to have more direct and immediate consequences on the participants, as demonstrated in the expressions like "not have much to do with me", "ordinary people can care about", "more concerned about the policies in the school".

Based upon Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory, the semi-structured interviews reveal the dynamic interplay between various ecological factors and the professional agency of EFL teachers in South China. The microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem all contribute to shaping teachers' perceptions of agency and their strategies for navigating challenges.

6. Conclusion

The findings align with Bronfenbrenner's theory, showcasing the complexity of the ecological systems and how they interact to influence teacher agency. The teachers' narratives highlight the importance of acknowledging the multi-layered influences on their agency, from classroom dynamics to societal expectations. This analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of factors that impact teaching practices and professional agency in their professional contexts.

In summary, the study underscores the significance of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory in comprehending the factors that shape the professional agency of EFL teachers in South China, while highlighting the unique characteristics of teacher agency in the stream of educational reform initiatives. The theory offers a holistic framework that illuminates the interplay between various levels of influence, highlighting the intricate nature of agency and the strategies teachers employ to assert their autonomy in the context of language education.

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