


EFL teacher agency in the era of digital transformation: A multiple-case study in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: teacher agency, digital transformation, ecological model, EFL teachers

The purpose of this case study was to explore how EFL teachers in Vietnam enacted their agency in the digital transformation era. Drawing on the ecological model of teacher agency, this study employed a qualitative multiple-case design with the participation of three teachers and the data sources of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The study shows that the teachers' agency was influenced by their past experiences, current conditions and aspirations for the future. Their early challenges with digital tools, professional identities, and the Covid-19 pandemic hindered their technological adoption while peer support and reflective practices enabled them to develop their digital competence. The teachers adapted their textbooks, utilized digital platforms (e.g., Quizlet, Padlet, Kahoot) and shifted their roles from knowledge transmitters to facilitators in their teaching practices. The adaptations made by the teachers also created more active, collaborative, self-directed and learner-centered practices among the students. These findings illustrate important implications for teacher agency in the era of digital transformation, highlighting the active roles of teachers in adopting technologies to improve students' learning outcomes.

Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of digital technology has drastically reshaped the practices of teaching, learning, and institutional management (Alenezi, 2021). Teachers, therefore, have to quickly adapt their pedagogical roles, improve their pedagogy, and adopt innovative technological approaches to enhance learning outcomes (Major et al., 2020).

In the digital transformation era, EFL teachers are expected to integrate digital platforms into their lessons and maintain students' level of engagement in their learning while adhering to departmental curricula and institutional policies (Biesta et al., 2015; Luu, 2023). This educational shift provides interesting insights into the concept of teacher agency in digital technology integration (Biesta et al., 2015). Edwards (2015) similarly asserts that the digital era has redefined teachers' roles in education, resulting in significant innovations in their

teaching practices.

To conceptualize how EFL teachers at Ton Duc Thang University enacted their teacher agency in digital technology integration, the researcher decided to conduct this study.

Literature Review

Definition of teacher agency

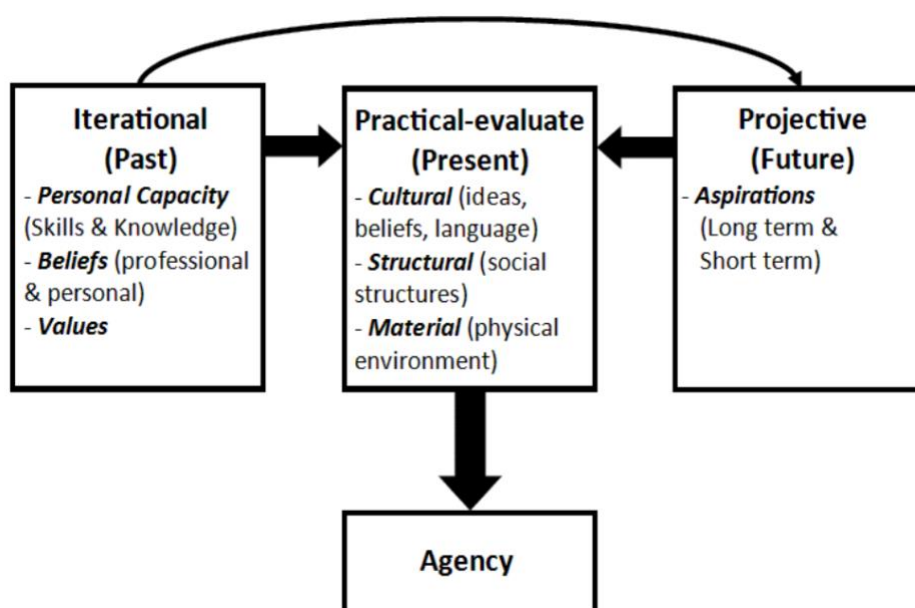
Teacher agency is defined as a teacher's ability to make educational changes to their practice through social interaction (Priestley et al., 2015). According to Lasky (2005) and Jenkins (2019), a teacher's intention, professional identity, and personal circumstances are crucial components of their agency, which are inextricably linked. Emans et al. (2025) identified three factors that influence teacher agency, namely teachers' motivation, attitudes, and structural resources. Jenkins (2019) therefore argues that the notion of teacher agency provides valuable insight into the driving force behind their striving for prompt modifications to teaching strategies.

Models of teacher agency

One of the most common models of teacher agency is the ecological model proposed by Priestley et al. (2015). This model shows how teacher agency is defined in terms of three major constructs: relevant histories (past experiences and identity), future (intentionality), and present (resources, constraints, and possibilities). The model emphasizes that agency is not a personal characteristic but a product of an active process that involves both the person and their environment. In other words, the model illustrates how teachers work with structural conditions to enact their pedagogical goals. This ecological model is briefly summarized below.

Figure 1.

The ecological model of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015)



Aside from the ecological model, other models focus on various aspects of teacher agency. The psychological model introduced by Bandura (1997) highlights the internal characteristics, such as self-belief, motivation, and perceived control, in determining teacher agency. With this model,

it is postulated that teachers with high self-belief are more likely to act and persevere in the face of challenges. The sociocultural model, on the other hand, promotes the action of professional collaboration, discourses, and institutional histories, policies, and norms to understand the agency of teachers in their professional endeavors (Lasky, 2005; Priestley et al., 2015). In more recent times, the structural-interactionist model has been added, elaborating on how agency is negotiated within power relations and as part of policy. There are both structural constraints and enabling perspectives on agency within institutional structures and in the learning paths taken by teachers. This model draws attention to features of professional autonomy and voice in curriculum reform (Poulton, 2020).

This study adopted the ecological model of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) as a theoretical framework because it comprehensively captures how teachers enact their agency in the era of digital transformation based on their past experiences, future aspirations, and present conditions, which align with the aim of the study - to understand how teachers adapt and innovate digital technology.

Digital transformation

Digital transformation in EFL education has been characterized by a significant pedagogical change from traditional teaching styles to the integration of digital technologies (Zhang, 2023). As Vial (2019) describes, transformation involves revolutionary changes made possible by computing, communication and connectivity that transform instructional designs, students' interaction, and teachers' scaffolding methods. Godwin-Jones (2018) claimed that digital technologies provided greater instructional support and increased engagement to support differentiated instruction in the classroom and increase EFL learners' engagement. Zhang (2023) emphasized that access to technology, attitude, and skills with technology were critical in developing strategies to integrate technology in teachers' instruction, which is closely linked to their digital competencies. Zou and Wang (2024) emphasized that digital transformation in EFL education, in addition to the technology itself, requires a marked change in educator's psychological and pedagogical approaches.

Roles of EFL teachers in the age of digital transformation

In the age of digital transformation, teachers have been evolving from traditional transmitters of knowledge to active facilitators of learning (Luu, 2023). This transition has reformed their instructional practice and professional identity, as noted by Ng et al. (2023) who claim that teachers are now expected to be digitally competent, possessing the ability to use new technology to enhance engagement, relevance, and usefulness for learning. Moreover, Pham and Nguyen (2024) emphasized the vital roles of educators in maximizing the usefulness of ChatGPT in supporting learners' language acquisition and autonomy. Nguyen (2026) further highlighted the shifting roles of teachers in education in the digital age, indicating the teachers' needs for adoption of AI tools to enhance students' self-regulated learning. Essentially, these findings mean teachers are not only mentors but also act as instructional designers and digital pedagogues who can effectively use online platforms and AI technologies in virtual or blended classrooms.

However, teachers also face certain challenges in adopting digital technologies. These challenges include inadequate training, lack of functionality of digital tools, and pressure to prioritize entertainment over educational engagement (Selwyn, 2022). As digital transformation is in progress, teachers adapt to new technologies and also adjust their pedagogical approaches that support digital engagement and active learning.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the study sought to answer the following research question:
How do EFL teachers in Vietnam enact their agency in the era of digital transformation?

Methodology

Pedagogical Setting and Participants

The research site chosen for the study was a public university located in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

The participants were three EFL teachers from different departments at the site. As the study employed a qualitative case study design, the number of participants was reasonable for an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in a particular context (Yin, 2018). According to Creswell (2013), qualitative case studies require a small number of participants, typically from three to five cases, for detailed analysis.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling to meet the following criteria: they were Vietnamese teachers teaching EFL courses, had experience using AI tools in their teaching, and were willing to participate in the study. These criteria helped ensure that the data collected from participants were relevant and informative for the study. To reach them, emails were sent to the teachers' groups at the university, explaining the purpose of the study. Four recipients responded to the invitation via email, but one later declined to join the study for personal reasons. As a result, three participants across different age ranges (20s to 30s) officially participated in the study.

Design of the Study

This study employed a qualitative design with multiple case studies. A case study design is a thorough investigation of a specific case aimed to providing detailed information about a phenomenon in an actual environment (Yin, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this research design helps researchers gain in-depth insights into participants' experiences and practices in reality. For this reason, this design was well-suited for the study, as its aim was to explore how teachers enact their agency in the context of digital transformation at the research site.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two main research tools were used in the study, namely semi-structured interviews and classroom observations.

First, semi-structured interviews were used, as this tool is considered one of the most effective instruments for gathering comprehensive information about participants' experiences and viewpoints (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this study, interviews were conducted with the three teacher participants to explore their past experiences, current teaching practices, and future intentions regarding the adoption of digital technologies. The interview questions were formed based on three major constructs of the ecological model of teacher agency developed by Priestley et al. (2015), as discussed in the Literature review. The interviews included eight open-ended questions to investigate teachers' teaching practices and how they demonstrated agency. Each interview session lasted 25-35 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to allow participants to express their ideas more clearly and comfortably.

For data analysis, the researcher applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic

analysis. The six phases include (1) getting familiarized with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) writing up the report. In detail, the researcher began by reading the interview transcripts multiple times to understand the participants' responses. The researcher then systematically developed the initial codes for the research question. Next, the researcher analyzed the codes and created groups that contained possible themes. The following phase involved reviewing themes that required refinement to gain accurate data representation. Then the researcher established theme definitions, or main ideas, from the interview content. The researchers finally presented the results in a theme-based organization, using relevant interview excerpts as supporting evidence.

Second, classroom observations were conducted to provide a clear picture of how teachers exercised their agency in practice. Observations are used to obtain first-hand evidence of how participants behave in their natural environments, providing essential contextual details that support other data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Yin (2018), the use of multiple observations allows researchers to establish the credibility of qualitative findings because this instrument enables them to detect patterns in the participants' real practices. For this reason, in this study, the researchers conducted classroom observations to examine the teachers' instructional methods, which would serve as an additional source of evidence to support the interview findings. Accordingly, the researcher conducted three observation sessions in each teacher's class, each lasting five periods (four hours and ten minutes). During these observations, the researcher recorded field notes on the teachers' teaching methods and how they used AI platforms to organize classroom activities.

To assess trustworthiness, triangulation was used by comparing teachers' interview responses with classroom observations. Moreover, member checking was used to confirm participants' responses after data analysis had finished.

Findings

Iterational dimension: Past histories and experiences

The teachers' responses from the interviews showed that their early experiences, professional values, and personal pedagogical beliefs strongly influenced their agency during the era of digital transformation.

The teachers shared their initial hesitation in using digital tools in their teaching practice for a variety of reasons. T1 reported that he was resistant at first to using digital platforms due to his prior familiarity with traditional teaching, with *"merely chalk and blackboards."* However, because the department required the use of the LMS and Google Classroom, he had to learn to use the tools and gradually developed proficiency with them. T2, in contrast, admitted a generation gap and explained that her students were all "Gen Z" and generally better at using technology than she was, which made her uncomfortable using digital platforms in class. T3, on the other hand, pointed out that his previous experiences with technology as a part of his postgraduate study had eased the transition into his teaching practice:

"I found using online forums and other digital platforms very useful during my Master's program, so I believed that technology can also really help with learning." (T3)

The teachers also related their current digital practices to their professional histories and identities. For one teacher, the transition to digital pedagogy was a complete change of his identity as a teacher:

"I have had more than 15 years of teaching experiences with textbooks and a blackboard."

The transition into the digital age completely changed me as a teacher” (T1).

Another teacher mentioned his early struggle with teaching using digital tools, which resulted in his more reasonable decision on choosing the tools in his lessons:

“In my first lesson with digital tools, I was so ambitious to use too many apps for different purposes, which confused the students and stressed me out afterwards. After that, I knew that I had to be more selective when choosing the tools for my lesson” (T3).

Interestingly, this teacher also explained his drive towards the adoption of digital technologies. It was the Covid-19 pandemic, in his opinion, that caused a significant change in his agency:

“The COVID-19 pandemic forced me to make use of digital tools in my online classes during lockdown back then. I still keep the habit of using them now for their benefits and convenience” (T3).

The findings also indicated that the teachers’ adoption of digital platforms was to adjust and modify their existing teaching practices. As one participant shared:

“In the past, I always started my lessons with a short paper vocabulary quiz. Now I do the same activity on Quizizz” (T1).

Another teacher similarly described a shift in the use of brainstorming in writing lessons, stating:

“In writing lessons, I would have the students work in groups, and I previously gave them large sheets of A3 paper to brainstorm. It is now more convenient with Padlet. The students can post their ideas directly on the platform, where everyone can see them and provide immediate feedback” (T2).

T3 further provided one striking example of his adaptation of groupwork games. In his sharing, he used to organize games in which students worked in groups and wrote answers on mini boards, competing to be the first group to write the correct answer.

Practical-evaluative dimension: Present conditions

Although all three teachers demonstrated awareness of their departments' policies, they expressed a sense of flexibility in adapting lessons and teaching practices. One teacher justified:

“We are required to follow the syllabus, but I do think just following it is not effective, so I often select the core outcomes to teach and add other extra activities” (T1).

Another participant also concurred with this, stating that: *“I have to teach from the textbook, but I often change the tasks and how they are done” (T2).*

One example given by this teacher was the Reading exercise. She shared that the reading comprehension questions in the books were mostly True/False, but the actual test consists of multiple-choice questions in the Reading section. The solution, according to this teacher, was to redesign the book's questions while keeping the same reading text. The other teacher also admitted to skipping certain textbook tasks, describing them as *“unnecessary”* and *“extra”* (T3). From these findings, it can be seen that the teachers all made appropriate decisions for their teaching practices based on the present conditions.

Observations of the classrooms provided further evidence of this finding. The participant teachers consistently modified the tasks in the department-provided textbooks and handouts, replacing them with various activities. For instance, in one lesson, T2 replaced the book’s matching exercises with Quizlet Live activities to promote vocabulary learning and review. She first presented the words to students with picture flashcards, then had the students practice matching them individually, followed by collaborative group work on their devices. Another

example is from T3, who replaced the textbook's unit opener activity with a game-based activity. In this sense, instead of introducing the topic of the unit and letting the students work in small groups to discuss a quotation on the page, the teacher decided to skip this activity in favor of a game-based activity, where students worked collaboratively to guess the hidden words from pictures that introduced the key vocabulary for the lesson topic.

Peer support was also a key factor for teachers' enactment of their agency in present conditions. For example, one teacher noted,

"I didn't know about Padlet until a colleague recommended it and showed me how to use it step by step. Once I tried it in class, I realized how helpful it was, and ever since I've had the habit of using it in my writing lessons" (T2).

Adding to the point, another teacher mentioned the value of informal sharing:

"During breaktime, we teachers often gather at the teacher's room, and sometimes we share about useful platforms we often use. Many of the tools I use now started from my colleagues' recommendations" (T1).

It was also shown that the teachers' selection of digital tools was based on the current learning objectives and their pedagogical intentions. As one participant explained:

"When I plan a lesson, I first consider what I want students to achieve. For vocabulary, I often choose Quizlet, and for brainstorming, I prefer Padlet" (T2).

Another participant similarly stated a preference for game-based applications such as Blooket, Kahoot, and Gimkit when teaching vocabulary. He explained that their interactive design supports repetition and review, which could enhance the students' retention of the words (T3):

"I like to use Blooket, Kahoot, and Gimkit for review when teaching vocabulary; the students see and repeat the words many times, so they can learn and better remember them".

Strikingly, the popularity of digital technologies substantially modified the roles of teachers and students. As one teacher stated, *"Digital tools have changed me from a lecturer to a facilitator"* (T1).

Another teacher shared the same view, explaining, *"with digital apps, I don't need to explain everything step by step. I just need to monitor and guide my students only when they get stuck"* (T2). The last teacher also added that his talking time had decreased considerably since he integrated digital technologies into his classrooms. He described his role as *"motivate, monitor, and give feedback when students need it"* (T3). In his opinion, the students took on a more active role in their learning compared to traditional classrooms. In fact, he had his students prepare for lessons at home using his materials on the Edpuzzle platform. He created slides, videos, and other media that covered the lesson content, and students were supposed to review the materials before the lesson. He also included quick-check activities so students could review and confirm their understanding before class.

The shifts in roles were further confirmed by classroom observations, which showed that students worked collaboratively in pairs or groups, both through digital platforms and during in-class activities. In certain games and quizzes on platforms such as Kahoot, Gimkit, or Blooket, students had numerous opportunities to work in groups to complete tasks. These activities encouraged collaboration, discussion, and peer support as they negotiated answers and shared strategies to achieve success.

Projective dimension: Future aspirations

The interviews indicated that the teachers' agency was strongly shaped by their intentions, hopes, and future goals. All of the teachers claimed that they have aspirations for creativity and confidence in their use of digital technologies in the future. One teacher stated,

"I used to be a little bit nervous when using digital technologies in my teaching, but I am becoming more confident in using digital technologies. I hope to have full confidence in every lesson" (T1).

Another teacher added the elements of efficiency and creativity in using digital platforms, stating:

"Thanks to digital tools, I can now design a lesson plan in less than an hour. In the near future, I would like to be faster and more creative when designing my lessons" (T2).

The teachers also shared their aspirations for their students' future learning, envisioning technology as a means to foster their independence and the development of lifelong skills.

"I hope that digital platforms can shape my students to be independent learners. By engaging with the digital platforms, they will have opportunities to learn and explore independently outside the classroom" (T3).

Another teacher believed that education in the future might be entirely digital, completely replacing conventional classrooms:

"I see the possibility that within the next couple of years we could enter 100% online learning where neither teachers nor students have to be present in the classroom every day." (T1)

Last but not least, the teachers expressed a strong desire for ongoing professional development, especially in emerging technology. One teacher said:

"I am curious about AI and its potential to support teachers in their teaching practice, so I would like to explore more of it and keep up with its emerging trends to enhance my teaching practice" (T2).

Another also mentioned the need for teachers to be *"digitally competent"* in the future so that they would not fall behind their students (T1). He noted: *"Technology is advancing so quickly, so I feel like we have to be one step ahead of our students."*

These insights indicate that the teachers highly value digital competence and consider professional development essential for education in the technology-driven world.

Discussion

The findings of this study largely confirm the key concepts of teacher agency presented in previous studies, while also offering new insights into teachers' enactment of agency in the digital transformation of EFL education.

First, in line with the ecological model presented by Priestley et al. (2015), the findings revealed that teachers' agency was shaped by the interplay of their past experiences, present conditions, and future aspirations. The teachers' reluctance and confidence in using digital tools were largely shaped by their biographical trajectories, which are connected to the iterative dimension of agency discussed in previous research (Jenkins, 2019). However, this study also highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the transition, an underexplored topic in earlier literature.

Secondly, consistent with Lasky's (2005) sociocultural framework and the practical–evaluative dimension of agency by Priestley et al. (2015), it was found that the teachers made situated decisions under cultural and structural constraints. The participants reorganized the mandated syllabus and materials to better suit their pedagogical intentions, consistent with previous findings that teacher agency is driven by institutional structures and policies (Priestley et al., 2015; Poulton, 2020). However, this study also captured new ways in which informal peer support, such as sharing tools during breaktime, prompted teachers to take agency. This is an interesting finding because it extends previous studies that highlighted only professional collaboration.

Thirdly, this study's findings on the projective dimension align with prior assertions that the digital age has significantly influenced teachers' enactment of agency in their teaching practices (Biesta et al., 2015; Edwards, 2015). Similar to the findings of Ng et al. (2023), the teachers in this current study identified their roles in fostering students' independence through technology in their practice. Some teachers even envisioned completely online classrooms in the future, moving beyond blended learning. This extends the research of Zou and Wang (2024), which focused on teachers' psychological and pedagogical preparation for the digital transformation. In addition, the teachers' interest in exploring AI features as part of their teacher identity in this study offers a new insight into a form of agency that was not widely discussed in prior research.

Last but not least, the results confirmed previous research showing that teachers are becoming facilitators rather than knowledge providers in the digital age (Ng et al., 2023). The findings of this study were consistent with this claim, indicating that teachers now focus on guiding, monitoring, and providing feedback rather than simply lecturing. The students also become more engaged and independent learners, which supports previous research on learner autonomy and engagement (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Zou & Wang, 2024). However, the study also adds new insights: the teachers related this role to their developing professional identity, while the students demonstrated teamwork and pre-class preparation of lessons using digital tools.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate how EFL teachers at Ton Duc Thang University enact their agency during the era of digital transformation. Grounded in Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of teacher agency, the findings showed that teacher agency is constructed through the interplay of teachers' past experiences, current conditions, and future aspirations.

In particular, early experiences, professional identities, and even the Covid-19 pandemic led teachers to adopt digital tools. They also attempted to adapt the textbook to support their digital teaching practices, selected suitable digital platforms such as Quizlet or Padlet to support their learning objectives, and built confidence and competence in digital literacy through informal peer support. The teachers anticipated becoming more confident, efficient, and creative in using digital tools in the future, with some envisioning full online classrooms or improvements in their teaching with the emergence of new AI features. These changes also reshaped teachers' roles in the classroom: teachers became more active facilitators and guides in their teaching. In other words, the digital transformation of education is changing teaching practices in EFL contexts.

However, this study does have three main limitations. First, the small sample of three teachers from a single setting limits the generalizability of the findings to other EFL contexts or universities. Second, although classroom observations were conducted, they were limited in number and scope and thus may not be representative of the whole range of teachers' digital

teaching practices. Third, the study focused mainly on teachers' views, without insights from students, which made the findings less comprehensive.

Given these limitations, three recommendations are offered for future studies. First, larger-scale studies should be conducted across institutions and contexts to validate and extend the findings. Second, mixed-methods studies should use more instruments to ensure the reliability of the findings. Moreover, it is recommended that students' perspectives be included to yield more comprehensive findings of the topic.

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Biodata

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