Teacher agency in the ESOL classroom: the intersection of policy and practice

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This study explores the extent to which teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) feel they have agency, how they negotiate it and what influences their decision making. While teacher agency is an emerging field, there are only a few explorations of ESOL teacher agency to date. Therefore, this underexplored area merits a deeper understanding of whether, and how, teachers achieve agency. The study draws on data from semi-structured interviews (n=9) with individuals who have considerable experience of ESOL teaching. I used content analysis to uncover insights from teachers' self-reported perspectives. The resulting themes from the data are discussed using the lens of Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015) ecological approach to teacher agency. While my findings support this approach, they also go beyond it to introduce interdisciplinary concepts. I argue that psychological safety in the workplace – a popular concept in organisational psychology (Edmondson, 1999) – influences agency through the level of trust and freedom that ESOL teachers experience at work. My data show that teacher–manager relationships are instrumental in creating psychological safety and that, where strong relationship ties are lacking, this hinders teachers' comfort in trying new ideas and making decisions. This new, interdisciplinary perspective adds to the existing literature and suggests that teacher agency is mediated predominantly by their external contexts. While all research participants reported feeling able to take action and make decisions to some extent, workplace culture (e.g., the type of organisational hierarchy and degree of trust in individuals) is, it seems, key in either promoting or hindering agency. The findings emphasise that agency is not solely an inherent personal characteristic, although teacher cognition (e.g., personal reflections and experience) also contributes to their classroom policies, such as encouraging the adoption of other languages to support learning. In summary, a complex web of internal and external factors creates an environment which either encourages or limits individual agency.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The origin story of this research project begins just before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. When Covid-19 struck and the UK government mandated a nation-wide lockdown in March 2020, I was in the middle of completing a part-time Certificate in Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) at York St. John University. After some adjustments, the course moved online, and I successfully achieved the CELTA qualification in May 2020. My interest in linguistics, language learning and multilingualism motivated me to study for the CELTA, although I was not looking to pursue English teaching as a career. However, I wanted to use my newly acquired skills by volunteering in the local community. Shortly before the first lockdown in 2020, I attended Refugee Council training to provide English language support to refugees and asylum seekers. While I could not volunteer face-to-face due to pandemic restrictions, I taught English online with a weekly class from 2020–2021. I also volunteered online with Paper Airplanes, a non-profit organisation which matches conflict-affected individuals with tutors.

Through my ESOL volunteering, I became interested in the issues involved with teaching ESOL and individuals from refugee backgrounds. For refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, ESOL courses are considered to be vital for their integration to the community. English allows access to "education, the labour market, goods and services – all factors which promote wellbeing" (Thondhlana and Madziva, 2017: 64). My experiences of conducting needs analyses with refugee-background students reflected this. When I asked them to identify specific goals in learning English (e.g., finding a job, sitting an exam or helping their children with schoolwork), the most common answer was that it is important for everything in their new lives. Despite this being the case, government funding for ESOL declined sharply between 2010 and 2016 (Refugee Action, 2017). Even where funded classes are available, there are often multiple obstacles, such as long waiting lists; a lack of options to learn English for specific purposes (e.g., industry or employment-related language); difficulties accessing

classes at appropriate times; and an insufficient number of hours in class per week (Refugee Action, 2017, 2019). Consequently, I became interested in exploring how ESOL teachers negotiate the lack of funding and policy and what shapes their decision-making in the classroom.

As I discuss in the Methodology chapter, I had originally aimed to include learner voices in my project and focus on the agency of students from refugee backgrounds. However, due to ethical concerns about interviewing potentially vulnerable individuals, I shifted the study's focus to ESOL teacher agency: a little-explored area of research which has become more prominent in the literature in recent years. The critical need for practitioner-focused ESOL research is also foregrounded by the fact that forced displacement hits new records every year, with 100 million displaced people around the world in 2022 (United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 2022). So, it is important to consider the increasing demand on ESOL services in an under-funded and under-researched sector.

While there is a growing body of research on teacher agency outside the ESOL sector, this type of agency – defined broadly as the freedom and capacity to act, dependent on factors in the environment (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015) – is still an emerging area of exploration. A search of the literature revealed few studies which focused specifically on ESOL teachers' decision-making processes and what shapes their pedagogy and practice. As Ng and Boucher-Yip (2016: 1) point out, a lot of previous research has focused on top-down language policy, but the focus on agency at the micro level is growing. My research draws on the only detailed conceptualisation of teacher agency thus far: the ecological framework developed by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015). This framework draws on Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and views agency as a phenomenon which is influenced by both the individual's capacity and the surrounding context.

In order to address ESOL teacher agency, I developed the following two research questions:

To what extent do ESOL teachers feel they have agency?

How do ESOL teachers negotiate agency and make decisions about language practices, teaching methods and class focus?

The first question is intentionally broad. It takes the approach that agency is not an absolute and that, instead, it likely exists on a spectrum where teachers may have more agency in certain contexts than others. The concepts of agency vs. structure have shaped my research project throughout its evolution, in the sense that structure refers to the macro-level frameworks such as government funding policy and potential restrictions on what teachers can and cannot do in the classroom.

The second question aims to explore the processes through which agency is enacted, cognitive and otherwise. The ecological approach is based on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) work, which puts forward a concept of agency that includes several dimensions. This leaves room for the exploration of "the dynamic *interplay* among these dimensions and of how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 963). The idea of agency as dynamic suggests that there are many potential variables which influence it and that these variables may become more, or less, salient depending on the context. Consequently, my second research question seeks to explore the variables which may influence teacher agency, such as teachers' identity and beliefs; their experience and confidence in the classroom; and the level of support they receive from their manager.

I aimed to ground this research in the perspectives from teachers themselves. The findings are based on interviews with people with ESOL teaching experience and their *reported* accounts of what they do. This study generates fresh insight into how teachers negotiate agency in the ESOL sector. The originality of this work is that language teacher agency is, so far, little explored and even less so in the context of ESOL. Therefore, it is hoped that this initial research will contribute to expanding the understanding of how ESOL teachers apply agency and negotiate the intersection between policy, pedagogy and practice.

Following this Introduction (Chapter One), the rest of this thesis comprises five chapters. Chapter Two begins by exploring and critiquing previous research. I begin with a broad review of the existing body of literature related to agency and structure, followed by the concept of agency in applied linguistics. Then, my focus narrows to explore agency in adult ESOL teaching and a discussion of the influential factors and limitations on agency in the classroom.

Chapter Three describes the methodological precedents for my research and justifies the qualitative approach I decided to take. I discuss my research design and rationale, including the journey of collecting data and finding participants to interview, as well as the limitations of this work. This chapter also describes the pragmatic decision to change the focus of the research from students to teachers, based on ethical considerations and advice from the University ethics committee and my supervisory panel.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the research and analyses the results of interviews undertaken during my period of data collection in 2021. This chapter focuses on key qualitative themes that emerged from the data. Throughout the results, I draw on the ecological approach to agency as a framework.

Chapter Five explores the outcome of my results and what they suggest, with reference to my research questions and the literature. This chapter explicitly foregrounds the ecological model in relation to the findings, and I present a discussion of my research mapped to the themes under each dimension of the model.

Finally, in the Conclusion (Chapter Six), I show how this project has contributed to addressing some of the gaps in ESOL teacher research. I also suggest some areas for future research and include general recommendations for the ESOL sector, based on my findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The issue of structure (Lévi-Strauss, 1963) and agency is a recurring problem in social science, especially the central problem of explaining how agency operates when people are bound by pre-existing social structures but also have the capacity to change such structures (Archer, 2002). This is a major theoretical debate which has dominated the field for decades, and many theories have been proposed to explain how structure and agency interact. Agency itself has a variety of definitions and these are often somewhat imprecise.

Bearing in mind the relationship between agency and structure as well as the varying interpretations of each term, this chapter begins by surveying existing definitions of agency while contextualising them within key movements such as structuralism and post-structuralism. Subsequently, the focus of the chapter narrows to analyse the concept of agency in applied linguistics. Again, this is contextualised within recent trends in applied linguistic research, such as the 'social turn' (Block, 2003) and the revival of Vygotskyan social theory (Lantolf, 2000; Baynham, 2006). Following this section, I introduce key questions relating to teacher agency in the ESOL sector.

In exploring the ESOL classroom, the chapter reviews teacher agency and identity alongside a discussion of professional agency. It is only recently that a detailed conceptualisation of teacher agency has emerged, with the ecological approach developed by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015). Therefore, this part of the chapter draws on the existing scholarship to highlight the key theories and conceptualisations of teacher agency, while also situating it within the broader context of research related to teacher cognition, beliefs and identity. The rest of the chapter draws on this research to explore potential facilitators of and barriers to teacher agency. Finally, I conclude by discussing work related to the theory–

practice gap between in-class practice vs. the policy recommendations made by language teaching researchers.

2.2 A brief history of the emergence of 'agency' and its varying definitions

At a fundamental level, 'agency' could be defined as a person's ability to make decisions and choices. However, it can be argued that it is not the same as having free will (Ahearn, 2001). While we all have a certain degree of agency, it is not an absolute, and viewing it as synonymous with free will ignores the complexity of cultural and societal influences on our freedom to act and make decisions. Drawing on the said premise, Ahearn (2001: 112) defines agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act". She expands on her definition by stating that agency depends on a multitude of factors, such as socioeconomic status, place of residence, linguistic repertoire, gender and employment. Thus, agency can be viewed as dependent on our embodied social and cultural knowledge, conceptualised as the *habitus* by Bourdieu (1977).

There would appear to be a contradiction between the idea that individual agency originates solely from previous experiences and socialisation (e.g., Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus*) versus the idea of agency as something that is dynamic and subject to an individual's personal choice. As a researcher, my position throughout this research project views agency as being situated in a middle ground between the two extremes: neither purely deterministic nor subject to free will. The analysis of *how* people go about making decisions, which I explore in my second research question, offers an opportunity to investigate some of the factors which influence agency. While some of these factors may be deterministic and, indeed, it is probable that prior experiences and social norms *do* affect how we choose to behave, individuals often have a range of options from which they can choose. Therefore, in choosing one course of action over another, I argue that this is surely an example of personal agency. While the range of actions may be shaped by external structures, e.g., governmental or institutional policies,

the fact remains that individuals can choose which course to take or, indeed, choose *not* to take action. The latter is, in itself, a form of agency.

Conceptualisations of agency are often bound up with societal issues such as equality and cultural capital. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the emergence of agency as a concept across a range of disciplines – including anthropology and sociology – stems from the post-structuralist, socio-political movements of the 1970s and remains a central theoretical issue in the social sciences (Ahearn, 1999; Bakewell, 2010; Block, 2012, 2013; Elder-Vass, 2010). In the 1960s and 1970s, post-structuralist discussion primarily centred on responding to structuralism's lack of focus on individual action (Ahearn, 1999). In terms of human agency, this triggered questions about the room that structuralism allowed for the individual's capacity to act. The question of structure vs. agency is an ongoing debate in the social sciences and one that has been central to the field for over a century. One critique is that arguments are often ideological rather than empirical: "perspectives on the question of structure and agency cannot be falsified – for they make no necessary empirical claim" (Hay, 2002: 93). This is exemplified further by Sewell (1992: 3) as follows:

> "A social science trapped in an unexamined metaphor of structure […] tends to make structural transformations appear as mysterious events occurring offstage, outside the realm of human action."

Sewell's use of words and phrases such as "mysterious" and "outside the realm of human action" suggests that a social science which emphasises structure removes the possibility of human agency entirely. Structural changes are abstracted from the social world and seem to occur by themselves without human involvement. This abstraction is a key critique of Lévi-Strauss's notion of structuralism (Clarke, 1981), with a counterargument that societal structure is created by the groups who have power and the interactions between individual people in these groups (Elder-Vass, 2010). From this perspective, structure emerges through "the interaction of *both* structural and agential causal power" (Elder-Vass, 2010: 4).

Another critical perspective on Lévi-Strauss and structuralist notions of agency comes from the sociologist Giddens (1979). Giddens critiques Lévi-Strauss for his focus on deep structure at an ideological and unobservable level and, instead, prioritises compatibility with a "realist epistemology" (Giddens, 1979: 63). Giddens' (1984) development of structuration theory focuses on a duality between agency and structure, in the sense that social systems influence people's agency through their actions within the context of social structures. As a result, these actions serve to maintain and reinforce the social system:

> "According to the notion of the duality of structure, rules and resources are drawn upon by actors in the production of interaction, but are thereby also reconstituted through such interaction" (Giddens, 1979: 71).

However, we encounter more issues related to individual agency here. If individuals are bound to keep repeating and upholding societal structures with their actions, this limits the scope and potential for social change and does not explain how such changes can occur. Similarly, Bourdieu's (1977) notion of the *habitus* – the "internalised structures" (Bourdieu, 1977: 86) which shape one's worldview and social practices – has also been criticised for a lack of consideration of the scope for social change. While structuration theory and the concept of the *habitus* are beneficial concepts in that they link agency to structure and acknowledge the impact of pre-existing structures, Ahearn (2001) critiques them for being too focused on social reproduction without questioning how social change and transformation can take place. If actions are reproduced in a "recursive loop" (Ahearn, 2001: 117), this does not explain how the cycle of repeated actions can be broken and how, or whether, people can truly act with agency. This exemplifies "the perennial paradox of agency versus social determinism" (Joseph, 2020: 108).

This question has been taken up by scholars such as Ortner (1984, 1989), who is among those who outlined 'practice theory'. Practice theory, an alternative view of the interplay between structure and agency, seeks to address "the relationship between the structures of society and culture on the one hand and the nature of human action on the other" (Ortner,

1989: 11). Drawing on Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1979), as well as Sahlins (1981), Ortner's post-structuralist conceptualisation of practice theory highlights that agency and structure should be considered *together* in the context of culture. Agency is not "a kind of freestanding psychological object" (Ortner, 2006: 134) which can be considered on its own – it is through the process of agency that structures can be changed and remade. There are strong theoretical underpinnings to assume that questions of agency are tied closely to themes of sociocultural power. As Ortner (1984: 149) says in her review of anthropological theory and the turn towards practice theory, the latter involves looking at "human action, but from a particular—political—angle".

2.3 The concept of 'agency' in applied linguistics

In the field of educational research, the turn towards studying learner agency in second language acquisition (SLA) reflects the 'social turn' (Block, 2003) in applied linguistics over the past two decades. In the context of ESOL, Sutter (2012: 190) suggests that ESOL pedagogy is also undergoing a social turn towards an acknowledgement of the "interactions and relationships which are 'enacted' through language". As Sutter (2012) highlights, the focus on relationships emphasises the collaborative nature of language learning and the way that teachers can use resources in the surrounding environment to aid learning. This moves away from pedagogies that approach language learning as a system or a set of rules, e.g., learning grammar in isolation, and towards a more holistic, meaning-led approach.

Consequently, this trend situates language teaching and learning in the context of social factors – countering psycholinguistic approaches which focus on the cognitive processes involved in language learning – and brings in a more interdisciplinary approach. Indeed, many of the concerns of social theory overlap with applied linguistics, especially in terms of structure and agency, and social theory offers a useful framework through which to view these concerns (Carter and Sealey, 2000). The social turn in SLA can also be seen with the interest in applying the theories of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978) to SLA, a

trend which is currently ongoing (Baynham, 2006). According to Lantolf and Beckett (2009), the Vygotskyan trend began with the publication of Frawley and Lantolf's (1985) article on sociocultural theory and SLA. More recent research (e.g., Cross, 2010; Edwards, 2019) has also begun to explore themes connected to agency, language teacher identity and teachers' inner lives, drawing on Vygotskyan concepts such as 'tools', which refer to the psychological and physical resources that "facilitate a person's relationship with the environment" (Edwards, 2019: 143).

2.4 Introducing questions of teacher agency in the ESOL sector

Previous research indicates that there is the potential to examine teacher agency in greater detail. According to Peutrell and Cooke (2019: 232), ESOL teacher perspectives are "increasingly marginalised". It appears that most studies have focused primarily on learners. Therefore, there is an opportunity to explore agency among ESOL teachers. Hunter (2003) also argues that questions about professional agency have been overlooked, suggesting that "an [...] important goal is to examine the identifications of those in positions of relative power in relation to policy making" (Hunter, 2003: 8). This is especially relevant when considering the "dichotomy between care and control" (Hunt, 2008: 290) that teachers may experience: a conflict between a desire to care for the needs of the individual students which clashes with the 'control' of bureaucracy. While Hunter (2003) and Hunt (2008) write from the field of social policy, their points hold true for teacher agency, which has also been "under-theorised" (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015: 191).

Firstly, it is important to attempt to define teacher agency. As Teng (2019) points out, it has not been given much attention in the literature thus far. Even less attention is paid to teacher agency in an ESOL capacity. While Cooke and Peutrell (2019) focus on the issue of teachers as agents, this largely concerns teachers' actions in 'brokering' citizenship with ESOL students as opposed to a wider consideration of other aspects of agency. There is a lack of clarity about what teacher agency is and whether it "refers to an individual capacity of teachers

to act agentically or to an emergent ecological phenomenon based on the quality of teachers' engagement within their contexts" (Teng, 2019: 72). Therefore, a key question relates to whether teacher agency is individual or ecological (i.e., related to the teacher's context and surroundings). Priestley et al. (2012) and Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) take the ecological stance of viewing agency as influenced by both capacity *and* context. One view of teacher agency, therefore, is that it is 'emergent' (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015), with teachers acting *"by means* of an environment rather than simply in an environment" (Biesta and Tedder, 2007: 137). In a sense, this brings us back to Ahearn's (2001) concept of agency as being the capacity to act, mediated by the external context in which the action takes place.

This complex view of teacher agency – as something that is shaped and influenced by multiple factors, including teachers' own intrinsic interests and motivations – is also supported by Teng (2019: 72), who defines it as "an interplay of individual efforts, available resources, institution system, and contextual and structural factors". Other research supports the ecological perspective on agency (Biesta and Tedder, 2007; van Lier, 2007; Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015; Liddicoat, 2019; Leijen, Pedaste and Lepp, 2020). This research from the past two decades steers away from "one-sided points of view" of agency, as critiqued by Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 963). Instead, ecological perspectives posit that agency involves a process of "dynamic *interplay*" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 963) between different factors. This begs the question of which factors have the strongest influence as drivers of teacher agency and what underpins it, including whether it is an individual or collective phenomena. I explore these factors in Section 2.6.

2.5 The basis of the ecological approach to agency

When creating the ecological approach, Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) and Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) drew explicitly on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) concepts of three dimensions of agency: the iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions. A simple mapping of the dimensions to temporal constructs means that, broadly, the iterational

dimension refers to the influence of the past, the practical-evaluative is situated in the present, and the projective concerns the future (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). In creating the ecological framework, Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) expanded on the three original dimensions and placed several additional aspects under each one (see Figure 1). Below, I summarise each dimension in turn.

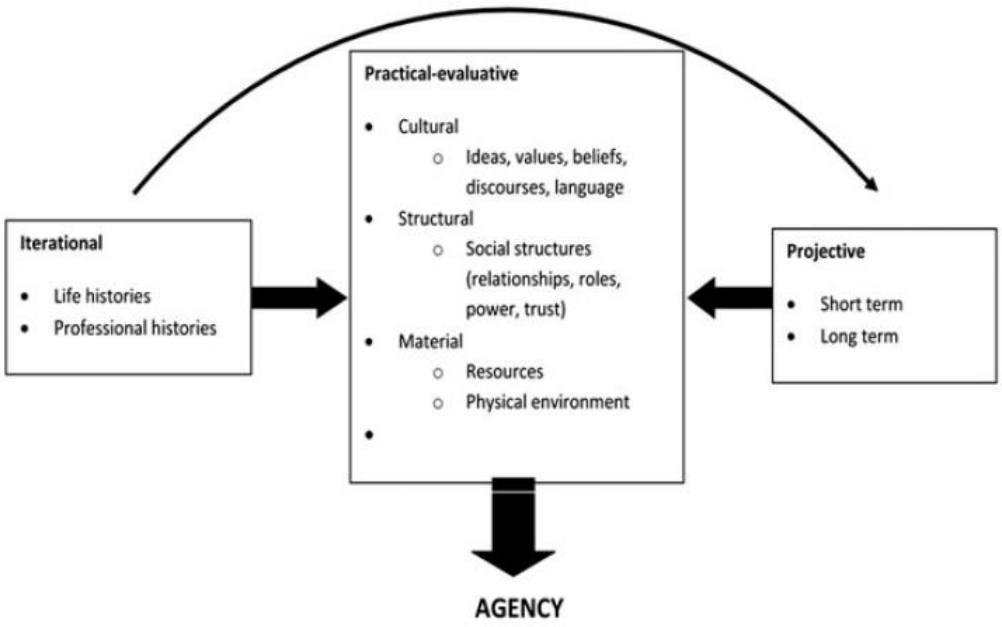

Figure 1: A model for understanding the achievement of agency (Biesta, Priestley and Robinson, 2015: 627).

The iterational dimension is "the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). This acknowledges the influence of past experiences on shaping our behaviour and actions. As Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2021) discuss, this dimension bears a resemblance to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of the *habitus*. As a tangible example, this may mean that teachers draw on their personal and professional histories when choosing between different paths of action.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) put forward the practical-evaluative dimension as “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). This posits that present action is contingent on the context surrounding the situation and the individual actor. As Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2021: 6) point out in their discussion of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) as applied to language planning and policy, the practical-evaluative component is fundamentally “dialogic”, either internally between the individual actor and themselves, or between the actor and their colleagues.

Thirdly, the projective dimension encompasses short- and long-term aspirations. This dimension could be viewed as a response to the limitations of previous concepts of agency. Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 983) criticise Bourdieu and Giddens for presenting concepts of agency which do not offer possibilities for change. The idea of the projective dimension refers to “the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). In practical terms, this means coming up with new ways of thinking and acting based on conscious reflection about previous patterns. This offers a potential response to the structure–agency problem which I discussed earlier in the chapter: the projective dimension offers scope for change, in which actors are not bound to repeat the same social patterns, i.e., “received structures” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971).

Although the dimensions appear to follow a linear, time-bound sequence of past, present and future, and I presented them sequentially, all three dimensions may play a varying part in shaping agency at any one time. Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 972) conceive of the dimensions as “a chordal triad of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones”. This could be viewed as a metaphor of mixer volume dials: sometimes the projective-evaluative dial may be turned up, with the iterational and projective dimensions at lower volumes.

2.6 Perceptions of teacher agency as individual vs. collective

In the relatively small body of literature on language teacher agency, the general trend is to position it within a collective view, acknowledging the external influences of macro-level policy and the meso-level (e.g., school or college) environment. As Kayi-Aydar (2019a) points out, the ecological approach (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015) is frequently used in studies of teacher agency due to its notable position as "perhaps the first and most comprehensive framework to conceptualize teacher agency" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019a: 11). Two other theoretical approaches that Kayi-Aydar applies to agency are social cognitive theory and positioning theory, both of which assert that agency is not simply a personality trait that some individuals possess and others do not. However, neither is it purely external – some individuals will feel more able to exercise agency than others, e.g., due to experience, confidence or seniority.

Social cognitive theory, developed by the psychologist Bandura (1986), acknowledges the role of environmental factors. But Bandura (2006) also supports a conceptualisation of intentional agency whereby individuals are proactive. Bandura (2006: 164) argues that "there is no absolute agency" due to the impact of other agents (i.e., external influences), but his theory places more emphasis on agency as a cognitive process which involves intentionality and self-reflection (Bandura, 2006: 164–165). He also distinguishes between different types of agency: personal, proxy and collective. These modes vary depending on the power held by the individual. When they need to seek support from another or a group, this becomes proxy agency; for example, a teacher may ask for help or approval from the school head to enable them to act. When individuals act together in pursuit of a common goal, this becomes collective agency. The three modes operate interdependently, as human behaviour does not exist in a vacuum, although the salience of each mode will depend on any given interaction and sociocultural setting. An institutional leader would likely need to use less proxy agency than an individual with less power or status, which is where positioning theory (Harré, 2012; Kayi-Aydar, 2019b) can be usefully applied. While Kayi-Aydar (2019a: 14) acknowledges that agency is not the primary focus of positioning theory, it is connected through the different roles

that individuals take, or are assigned, in discourse. As Kayi-Aydar (2019a: 15) highlights, “certain positions may allow individuals to exercise agency in certain contexts or prevent them from doing so”.

Taken in conjunction with an ecological perspective, Bandura’s conceptualisation of agency offers an interpretation of human agency that achieves a balance between agency as an internal cognitive process and agency as mediated by the environment. In Kayi-Aydar’s (2019a) conceptualisation, which blends perspectives from ecological, social cognitive and positioning theories, agency has individual *and* collective facets. A key question that she identifies is how individual agency interacts with collective agency, as well as the role of context. This remains a gap in the knowledge, which presents an opportunity for empirical studies to focus on the interplay between different types of agency.

The idea of teacher agency as an individual capacity is arguably more beneficial for government-led policy, considering the apparent reluctance to develop an ESOL strategy for England, despite lobbying efforts from the language teaching body, the National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) (2016). Scotland and Wales have produced ESOL strategies and policies aimed at promoting inclusion (e.g., Scottish Government and Education Scotland, 2015), but the continuing lack of a strategy in England puts the onus on teachers to act instead of government support to make more fundamental shifts in the environment, e.g., by investing in the sector. In Badwan’s (2021) study of agency in language planning in Tunisia, one of her interviewees (a university lecturer who is asked about educational language policy) argues: “They [politicians] don’t want to change because change costs money” (Badwan, 2021: 111). Badwan argues that this response shows the lecturer declining the possibility of taking agency herself, as she passes the responsibility for determining language policy to “politicians, not educators” (Badwan, 2021: 111). This suggests that a reluctance to act at the micro level, driven by a belief that top-down policies enable greater cross-institutional consistency, could be a barrier to classroom agency.

As Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015: 197) highlight, the influence of “contexts may disable individuals with otherwise high agentic capacity”. This is likely to be the case in the example above, where the lecturer is reluctant to act at the micro level and prefers to follow decisions and/or policy made at a higher level. As Badwan (2021: 111) suggests, putting the emphasis on individuals to make language decisions at the micro level (i.e., acting with agency) can create “confusion, inconsistency, and uncertainty” in the perceptions of her interviewees from an academic setting, some of whom would prefer decisions to be made by government rather than educators. This is seen to be a negative aspect of teacher agency at a local educational level, with the main concern relating to perceptions of inconsistency, e.g., between different institutions, if agentive action is taken at the micro level.

According to Liddicoat (2019: 149), “the micro-level has often not been seen as a level at which language policies are created”, with most previous research focusing on how teachers interpret macro-level policies. This puts the emphasis on top-down structure rather than agency but, as Liddicoat (2019) argues, agentive action can take place at the micro level too. Furthermore, even where there are constraints, teachers can find creative ways to innovate, with a study by Yang and Clarke (2018) demonstrating an example of a teacher showing “considerable agency in enacting transformation within a constraining context” (Yang and Clarke, 2018: 199). In the context of top-down EFL curriculum reform at a national level in China, a case study showed how a teacher enacted micro-level agency by “reflecting on her teaching, designing various teaching activities, and persuading the students to accept her beliefs in order to achieve her teaching goals” (Yang and Clarke, 2018: 198). Interestingly, they noted her frequent use of “reflect” and “reflection” when she discussed her teaching style.

As Leijen, Pedaste and Lepp (2020: 306) posit, reflective practice which explicitly focuses on building the right foundations for agency can be viewed as “micro-level tools” at an individual level. Leijen, Pedaste and Lepp (2020) emphasise three types of teacher reflection in building agency: reflection on action and principles for educational practice, on a teacher’s own pedagogical practice and behaviour, and critical reflection on social justice and

how educational practices can challenge or perpetuate inequalities. Thus, research suggests that conscious reflection in the context of ongoing professional development is part of building and strengthening teacher agency even when teachers must follow prescriptive macro-level policy. Despite seeming to be a contradiction in terms, it appears possible that "regulations can contribute to agency" (Erss, 2018: 6).

Furthermore, as Canagarajah (1999: 211) argues, power does not have to be structured in the idea of a traditional hierarchy: "institutions like the school may serve to reconstitute power relations bottom up". While one argument may be that contesting power and acting with individual agency is futile in the face of unbending bureaucracy and inflexible government structures, Canagarajah vigorously rejects this view, arguing that in the classroom, both "teachers and students enjoy some agency to question, negotiate, and resist power" (Canagarajah, 1999: 211). This can be through simple steps such as ESOL teachers promoting translanguaging, for instance, encouraging students to use their first language(s) in the classroom to support their peers with interpreting lesson instructions.

2.6.1 Influential factors and limitations on teacher agency

While much of the research thus far has examined agency at the micro level and put forward encouraging suggestions about teachers' ability to challenge barriers, it must be acknowledged that there are some limitations. Despite Canagarajah's support for micro-level agency, he states that "the possibilities of local resistance and agency shouldn't be exaggerated" (Canagarajah, 2006: 162). In the face of state-mandated policy, sometimes the only option for teachers is to find small ways of acting out their own agency even if wider policy is not conducive to it, as Yang and Clarke's (2018) case study of a Chinese teacher illustrates.

Just as the ecological approach suggests that different factors contribute to *building* agency, a combination of factors can also *limit* agency in an "ecology of forces" (Glasgow and Bouchard, 2019: 16). There are many potential variables which affect teacher agency,

including teacher cognition; their experience and confidence in the classroom; whether the curriculum is flexible; management and institutional norms; and levels of psychological safety. The following sections explore sequentially the impact of these variables on teacher agency.

2.6.2 The development of teacher cognition and its impact on agency

Teacher cognition – i.e., their "mental lives" (Borg, 2006: 35), beliefs, thoughts and inner reflections on teaching and learning – develops over time as teachers gain experience. However, the field of teacher cognition is fairly recent, and there is more to explore in relation to its connection to agency. Perceptions of teacher cognition have developed significantly since its origins in the 1970s and, as Borg (2006: 9) points out, although it seems clear that teachers' beliefs influence their behaviours, early research in the 1970s was just beginning to explore the impact of teacher cognition. In Shavelson and Stern's (1981) review of teacher cognition research from 1976 until the early 1980s, they highlighted the need to investigate a "link between intentions and behaviour" (1981: 455), which had not been conceptualised previously. Early models of classroom teaching, such as Dunkin and Biddle (1974), followed a behavioural tradition which omitted the potential for differences in teacher behaviour due to individual pedagogical goals and styles. As Borg (2006) discusses in his critique of this model, it follows a process-oriented approach which prioritises the 'product', i.e., learning outcome. Thus, "[l]earning was seen to be a product of teaching, and teaching was conceived of as behaviours performed by teachers in class" (Borg, 2006: 6).

This perspective of "process–product research" (Kagan, 1990: 419) was common in the 1970s. Subsequent models and reviews of the existing research, however, began to develop a more sophisticated approach that acknowledged the impact of teachers' beliefs (e.g., Clark and Peterson, 1986; Richardson, 1996; Borg, 2003). Borg's conceptualisation (see Figure 2) includes the key labels relating to the different areas of teacher cognition, and this model has been widely cited in language teacher cognition research during the past decade. It remains an influential framework which has contributed to the development of the field, as

perspectives on teacher cognition have widened to encompass not only beliefs but also philosophies, emotions and identities (e.g., Crookes, 2015; Golombek, 2015).

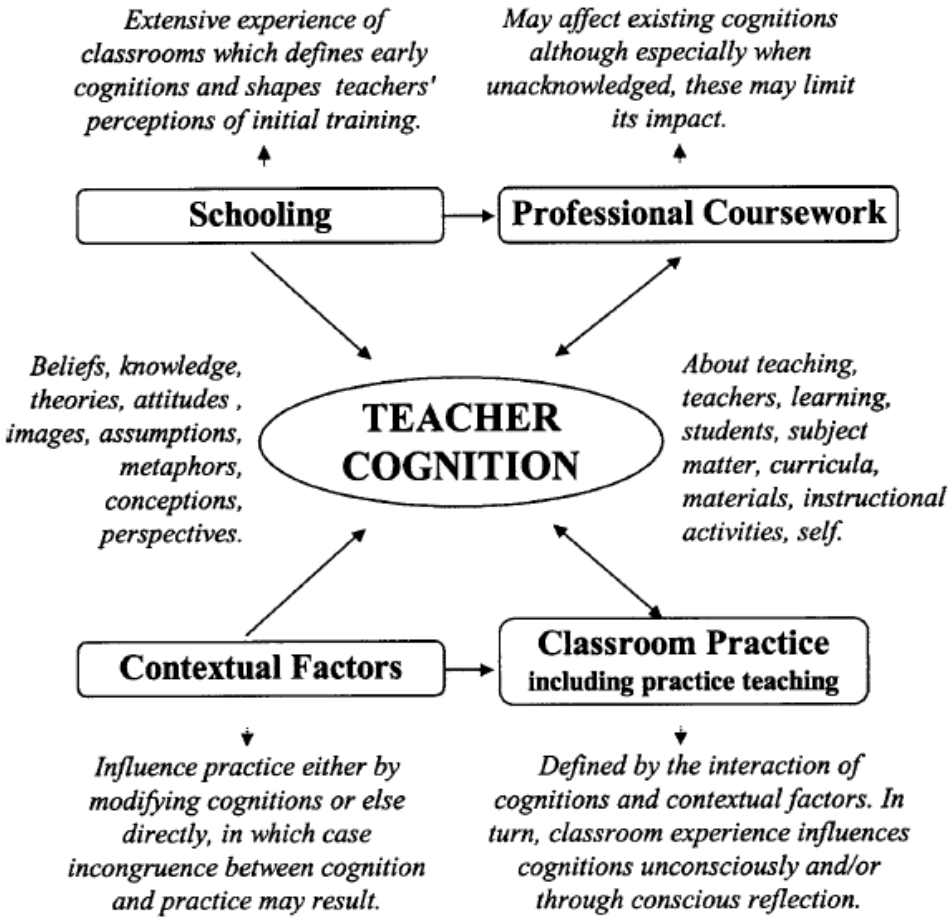

Figure 2: Teacher cognition, schooling, professional education and classroom practice (Borg, 2003: 82).

It appears that there is an increasing trend towards acknowledging ecological influences on teacher cognition and agency, with an approach that emphasises the environmental variables as opposed to previous, more individualistic perspectives. A parallel could be drawn between the idea that agency is not a fixed internal characteristic and the development of the concept of “situated cognition” (Robbins and Aydede, 2009). The theory of situated cognition has developed in cognitive science in recent decades and originates from a study by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), who emphasise the connection between

knowing and doing. They believe that knowledge cannot be separated from activity; for example, if a learner is presented with an isolated word from a dictionary, it will make less sense than hearing or seeing the word contextualised in a sentence. While this is an example of a learning environment, it can be argued that it also applies to teacher cognition in the sense that it is embedded in the real-world environment. Thus, to Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989: 4), "[a]ll knowledge is, we believe, like language".

Riveros, Newton and Burgess (2012) develop this view by arguing against an individualist view of cognition that separates internal processes from the external environment:

> "…teachers in schools are situated beings because they make constitutive part of their environment as they actively construct it" (Riveros, Newton and Burgess, 2012: 210).

As cognitive science is a fairly new field and the concept of situated cognition even more so, relatively little research examines the implications of this perspective for teacher agency. However, the idea of teachers as being situated in their environment and creating it through their actions is compatible with Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015) ecological approach. Indeed, Robbins and Aydede (2009: 7) describe aspects of situated cognition as an "ecological perspective on the mind", namely, the theory of embedded cognition which seeks to highlight "the complex interplay of processes spanning mind, body, and world" (Robbins and Aydede: 2009: 7). The argument that human cognition cannot be separated from the sociocultural influences in the surrounding environment is critical to this theory (Hutchins, 1995), and this perspective is reminiscent of Ahearn's (2001) definition of agency.

As well as reflection and action in the present, there is an argument that having a clearly defined long-term vision – oriented towards the future – is important for agency, as it offers a way of conceptualising the future and positions teachers' practice in context. It also provides a basis for decision-making, as decisions on a day-to-day basis can then be considered in view of how they contribute towards the long-term vision. Indeed, as Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014: 24) suggest, having this outlook shapes teacher cognition and growth,

as “teachers’ vision of themselves in the future plays a central role in how they engage with new ideas and, consequently, how they grow as professionals”. To develop this outlook, teachers – especially those who are new to the profession – need to have the opportunity to engage with different professional discourses and find their own philosophy of teaching. Having an individual philosophy of education also helps guide teachers (e.g., Dörnyei and Kubanyiova, 2014; Crookes, 2015) and provides a framework for developing awareness of different ideas and beliefs. Otherwise, as Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) discuss, a narrow outlook will constrain future possibilities and action. Consequently, it can be suggested that an awareness of one’s own beliefs and long-term aspirations is part of being agentive as a teacher.

I argue that teacher agency cannot be considered without thinking about how they have arrived at their chosen methods and approaches. How they make decisions is inevitably linked to their beliefs, understanding and perceptions. I view this as an accumulation of layers of knowledge and beliefs, which stem from multiple sources, including prior experience, training and observation. If we start to peel back the layers – to use a somewhat onion-like metaphor – teacher cognition underpins agency because it influences the actions they take and the decisions they make (even if their decision is to take no action). To summarise, agency and the decision-making processes involved stem partly from teachers’ beliefs and prior knowledge, i.e., cognition.

2.6.3 The influence of teachers’ ability and experience on agency

Key questions about teacher agency concern the parameters within which teachers can act, as well as their identities and motivations which result in action or, indeed, inaction. Priestley et al. (2012) view these questions from an ecological perspective, drawing on Biesta and Tedder (2007), who conceive of agency as part of an ecology. An ecological perspective asserts that “agency is a matter of personal capacity to act, combined with the contingencies of the environment within which such action occurs” (Priestley et al., 2012: 196). This approach

also considers language teaching to be collaborative, with teachers responsible for foregrounding learner agency by finding opportunities for affordance-based teaching (van Lier, 2007). The notion of 'affordance' (Gibson, 1966) relates to the learning opportunities offered by the environment; for example, in an ESOL setting an 'affordance' could be taking a question that a student has raised and using it to explore and expand on the topic. Thus, agency is closely tied to spotting learning opportunities in the environment. However, as Teng (2019: 55) points out, while teachers have the same affordances in any given environment, the choice of whether to use them or not depends on several factors, including their agency, ability and level of experience:

"…different teachers may perceive [affordances] in different and diverging ways due to disparities in their prior education experiences, knowledge, and understanding, a perceived sense of agency in taking control of teaching, identity recognition, and personal goals in work".

As acknowledged earlier, every classroom or learning environment has potential affordances for learning and these are the same for each teacher, but it depends on whether they feel able to exploit these affordances fully with their students. For instance, one theoretical example of an affordance offered by the environment could be the use of technology in classroom activities, such as a collaborative research project where students use their mobiles to find information to prepare a group presentation. This may subsequently lead to new affordances, for example, if the students discover new information to explore, or if the presentation topic sparks a new area for discussion. As Liu and Chao (2018) illustrate in their case study of an experienced English teacher in Taiwan, using different affordances in the classroom depends on the teacher's confidence and knowledge. In their case study, the teacher, Lillian, freely exploits technological affordances, such as encouraging the use of learner dictionaries, group brainstorming sessions using an app where students play a word association game, and individual research for a history project. As they point out, Lillian's agentive actions also promote greater student agency: "the best-case scenario occurs when

a teacher's practice goes hand in hand with learner agency in the classroom" (Liu and Chao, 2018: 16).

However, where teachers perhaps have less experience, they are likely to be less agentive. Freely identifying learning opportunities and affordances may be challenging for new teachers who are still discovering their teaching style. As Soini et al. (2015: 641) state, professional agency "is not a fixed individual disposition" which is set at the time of learning how to teach; it progresses throughout the teacher's career and is influenced by current settings and past experiences. Soini et al. (2015: 642) also highlight the importance of "efficacy beliefs" in developing agency, especially for student teachers. While they do not provide an exact definition of what these beliefs are, the concept of "self-efficacy" was originally developed by Bandura (1977) and refers to people's internal belief that they have the skills and ability to be successful in a situation. The beliefs that teachers hold about themselves and about learning also, therefore, affect the behaviours they display. Kayi-Aydar (2019a: 11) argues that perceptions of efficacy are "the core element of human agency", drawing on Bandura (2001), who posits that without the belief that people can achieve results from their actions, they have little motivation to be agentive. Agency, therefore, is closely tied to some form of outcome, although this does not necessarily have to be a substantial change. It can be argued that an intentional decision *not* to act also counts as being agentive.

Consequently, for learner teachers, they must first develop self-efficacy beliefs, which contribute to their motivation to act (or not) and their subsequent decisions about which path of action to take. Some research (e.g., Turnbull, 2005; Yuan, Liu and Lee, 2019) suggests that a supportive relationship between student teachers and their senior counterparts is one of the aspects that underpins the development of professional agency. Learning by observation and having effective role models is an important part of student teacher development, with research suggesting that teacher educators and their beliefs about teaching exert considerable influence on their students (e.g., Izadinia, 2012). However, not all ESOL teachers have completed formal training courses and/or have access to continuing professional

development and mentorship. A lack of support and networking opportunities could potentially hinder teachers' development of their professional identity due to a lack of role models and mentorship from more experienced teachers. As Teng (2019) suggests, developing one's professional identity contributes to agency, and having this sense of identity is important for being able to make decisions and choices about the curriculum and class focus.

2.6.4 The flexibility of the ESOL curriculum

As well as teachers' level of expertise, a constraining or liberating factor for achieving agency is whether teachers must follow a specific curriculum (i.e., the overall framework for the course of study) or meet certain requirements. This is a particularly pertinent issue in the field of ESOL, where a large volume of research cites an "audit culture" (Cooke and Simpson, 2008: 39). As Cooke (2006) discusses in her analysis of ESOL needs, there may be a tension between teachers' freedom to get to know their students' individual lives, so they can help their learners to access the right linguistic resources, while also following a curriculum which prioritises "product rather than process" (Cooke, 2006: 59). The Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (Department for Education and Skills, 2001) was developed by the British government's education department as part of Skills for Life and, before this, ESOL provision had been informal (Foster and Bolton, 2018).

However, while the introduction of a standardised curriculum to address core skills may have the advantage of aiming to ensure that new users of English receive provision of an equal standard and making it possible to benchmark ESOL provision, it has also been criticised for attempting to cover too much and trying to be "'all things to all people'" (Cooke, 2006: 59). As Cooke (2006) argues, the diversity of need among ESOL students cannot be covered by a single curriculum. The intensive focus on "survival English" (Cooke, 2006: 70) means that it provides a basis for low-level learners, but that it lacks opportunities to cover English for Specific Purposes. As well as constraining learners, who may not be able to access

the specific type of ESOL they want or need, it also restricts teacher agency in terms of finding out about the lives of their students outside the classroom and what their specific needs are.

While the curriculum aims to be student-centred with the use of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), empirical findings from teachers suggest that it is debatable whether ILPs are effective or merely another addition to the paperwork and target-setting (e.g., Cooke, 2006; Hamilton, 2009; Isaku, 2014). According to Hamilton (2009: 225), many tutors feel they are acting as a "broker or mediator between student aspirations and demands, and system requirements". This imposes a further restriction on professional agency to make decisions and shape classroom practice, as it "[allows] tutors to make only a limited range of procedural decisions" (Hamilton, 2009: 225). The need to meet specific requirements and provide evidence of this to receive funding is also mentioned as a hindrance to professional agency, when tutors must fill out forms in the language of the funding bodies to "match the curriculum description and meet the auditors' requirements" (Isaku, 2014: 55).

However, to put forward a counterargument, at times there appears to be too little guidance and teachers are left to find their own way, especially with pre-literate learners and those from refugee backgrounds. According to Chamorro, Garrido-Hornos and Vázquez-Amador (2021: 5), nine in ten teachers in their survey of seventy-two ESOL teachers said they had to create their own materials due to a lack of specific guidance for refugee and asylum seeker ESOL learners, which points to a need for a tailored curriculum for students' needs and more opportunities for teacher education. ESOL teachers play a vital role and as Chamorro, Garrido-Hornos and Vázquez-Amador (2021: 5) suggest, they are not just teaching language but also acting "as facilitators echoing and managing real everyday situations in the lives of refugees in the UK". Therefore, as the findings from Chamorro, Garrido-Hornos and Vázquez-Amador (2021) suggest, it seems that having too little guidance and structure could be just as challenging as having too much.

2.6.5 The impact of psychological safety on professional agency

Research in the field of organisational psychology suggests that when individuals feel supported and able to take risks in their teams without fearing the consequences, they have greater freedom to innovate. The term ‘psychological safety’ was developed by Edmondson (1999: 354) to describe “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking”, indicating that teams who feel psychologically safe have high levels of trust in their members. In such teams, people feel able to challenge constructively, put forward their own views and ask for help when they need it. While much of the literature on psychological safety focuses on organisational psychology and workplace culture, the concept can also be applied to the context of education. The key question is whether the norms in educational institutions promote psychological safety and, thus, the freedom to take risks and act with agency or not.

As Wanless (2016) suggests, having a strong sense of psychological safety is potentially a key driver of agency and the ability to choose courses of action.

> “When individuals and contexts come together to generate a greater degree of psychological safety, they may be more free to engage in ways they choose, without restraint” (Wanless, 2016: 1).

However, when it is lacking and individuals are constrained by hierarchical institutional norms, a lack of support and/or the fear that speaking up will result in negative consequences, this could be a barrier to making decisions in the classroom. For example, as Liddicoat (2019) shows in his case study of an Australian school, a project between teachers in two different subject areas – Languages and Humanities – in the school was flawed by communication issues, compounded by a hierarchical decision-making structure. The result led to the Humanities teachers feeling “disenfranchised” (Liddicoat, 2019: 161) by a top-down decision for Languages teachers to participate in teaching the Humanities curriculum. Although the project was designed to promote collaboration between the two disciplines, it resulted in conflict in the sense that Humanities teachers resisted the change. It is a clear example of

how a lack of open discussion, due to the school's institutional norms of hierarchical decision-making and communication, can prohibit psychological safety and result in conflicts of agency.

Other research that applies the concept of psychological safety to the classroom indicates that it tends to increase according to seniority: "teachers with more experience feel more psychologically safe than more novice colleagues" (Edmondson et al., 2016: 75). As status and role differences affect psychological safety, this could also be a barrier to agency. Consequently, this suggests that school principals and managers have an important role to play in supporting teachers to develop and encouraging them to experiment and take reasonable risks. An extract from an interview with a senior school manager interviewed by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013) demonstrates an attitude of psychological safety in practice:

> "…if you are encouraging staff to do things that are a wee bit different or to not always follow things in a mainstream way, there is much more chance that they will develop as teachers, as professionals and as members of staff. So when someone comes with a crazy idea and says 'I want to try and do this with the second year class', okay, have a go at that … If they make a mess of it and it does not work, well that is okay. 'You tried, it did not work, we will try something different next time'" (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2013: 162).

This approach promotes a culture of continuous improvement which, critically, avoids blame if a particular idea does not come to fruition. As Kahn (1990) suggests, building this type of culture, where individuals feel able to be themselves "without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990: 708) may also lead to greater engagement with one's work. Consequently, it can be suggested that interpersonal team relationships and professional development networks are key to developing a sense of psychological safety. Teachers need the support of their peers and seniors to be agentive, and these support networks are especially critical in the early years of a teacher's career. As Brannan and

Bleistein (2012) found, novice teachers have a range of support needs, including pragmatic aspects such as practical mentorship on different teaching approaches as well as affective support such as active listening and encouragement. These needs are best met by “a web of supportive individuals” (Brannan and Bleistein, 2012: 19), which points to the need for teachers at all stages of their career, but especially novice and pre-service teachers, to have access and encouragement to join a psychologically safe network.

2.7 The gap between language teaching ‘experts’ and classroom practice

A common theme in research on Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is the discrepancy between researchers who create textbooks and make recommendations about teaching methodologies vs. the actual classroom practices and challenges which teachers experience first-hand. It appears that there is a tendency for high-level research to make idealistic recommendations without acknowledging the barriers to carrying them out. Research from the past few decades acknowledges this discrepancy, e.g., Nunan (1988) and Hayes (1996). Hayes’ (1996: 173) call to action is to prioritise “voice” over “vision”, as he argues that “ESOL teachers remain at the mercy of pronouncements from others superior to them in the professional hierarchy”. He points out that there has been sparse change since Nunan (1988: 174), who discusses the multitude of classroom approaches and methodologies that emerged due to a “lack of systematic study of classroom learning and […] classroom-centred research”.

Fast-forward a decade or so after Hayes (1996) published his argument for listening closely to what ESOL teachers have to say, and there are some signs of change in the field. Cross (2010) draws on Borg’s (2003) review of teacher cognition to develop a framework that places “what language teachers think, know, and do” (Cross, 2010: 449) at its heart. The developing field of teacher cognition research appears to be answering Hayes’ call to action and, at last, focusing on the teachers’ voices rather than abstract pronouncements which are not based on empirical evidence from practitioners. However, there is still more work to do to

foreground teachers' pedagogical practice in the classroom and build a bridge across the theory–practice gap, as discussed in the volume published by the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) (Mackay, Birello and Xerri, 2018). Hall (2018) argues that time is a fundamental barrier to teachers' and practitioners' access of academic research; their already heavy workload of curriculum design, lesson planning, marking and policy adherence prevents many teachers from being able to explore the latest theoretical research and think about how they can apply it in practice. It takes time and energy to read, reflect and evaluate sometimes competing and contradictory theories and methodologies. In conclusion, Hall's argument is that there needs to be a collective effort by all researchers and professionals involved in English language teaching to support teachers to "navigate the links between theory, theories and practice" (Hall, 2018: 40). Xerri and Pioquinto (2018) support the concept of "research literacy", i.e., enabling teachers to interpret and engage with academic research and, when they wish, to carry out their own action research which is firmly rooted in their practice. While greater awareness is being drawn to the importance of involving frontline practitioners in research, this should not stop there: ensuring that practitioners can utilise the output of language teaching research is equally important as receiving their input.

2.8 Conclusion

In light of the literature review, it appears that questions about professional agency have been largely overlooked thus far. Previous research about ESOL and agency has mainly focused on learner agency and how students can enact agency in the classroom. Much less is known about the processes which are involved in teacher agency, which is an "under-theorised" area of research (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015: 191). The ecological model developed by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) is the first complete conceptualisation of teacher agency, which leaves many possibilities to examine the specifics of agency among ESOL teachers.

The role of being an ESOL teacher is arguably somewhat unique compared to other teaching professions, as it is frequently politicised and connected to issues of social justice, and some teachers go beyond the practicalities of teaching English to give their students pastoral and practical support. Therefore, this presents an opportunity to explore whether and how ESOL teachers can act with agency. The originality of the current study is that it is one of the first investigations of ESOL teacher agency to draw on the ecological model.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological approach adopted in the study, alongside the rationale for the research design. I will begin by setting the background for the study with a discussion of key literature related to qualitative research in applied linguistics. After reviewing the methodological precedents, the chapter details the research process, including ethical issues, interview question design and the sampling method for recruiting participants. A summary of participant demographics that comprises references to the professional and academic backgrounds of the participants as well as their career trajectories follows. Next, I discuss the transcription and analysis procedure and conclude the chapter by reflecting on my position as a researcher.

3.2 Research methods in applied linguistics

Applied linguistics is a field that benefits from input from several disciplines, including psychology and education (Phakiti and Paltridge, 2015: 5). Therefore, applied linguists have recourse to a variety of research methods, depending on what best suits their research aims. These include qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods approaches as well as data collected in a short period of time (cross-sectional research) or across several months or years (longitudinal research). However, researchers of language learning and teaching frequently select a qualitative approach. This allows scholars to explore the “subjective opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals” (Dörnyei, 2007: 38) as opposed to collecting numerical data with a larger sample size, e.g., in quantitative studies. Within qualitative studies, the use of semi-structured interviews to collect data is a well-established method. As Dörnyei (2007: 243) mentions, qualitative analysis is almost always a “language-focused analysis”, with the rare exception of images. Therefore, this method of analysis appears to be a natural fit for interview data.

As mentioned in the literature review, the present study draws on Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015) research on teacher agency in the Scottish education system. While their research focuses on primary and secondary schools and not on ESOL specifically, it is relevant nonetheless as it is the first comprehensive model of teacher agency in an under-researched area. Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) used an ethnographic approach, incorporating semi-structured interviews with six teachers and three senior managers as well as classroom observation and field notes. Although the scope of the present study did not allow for classroom observation, the use of semi-structured interviews in Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015) research design shows that it is possible to generate rich and insightful data from a fairly small number of in-depth interviews. As they describe, their methodology allowed them to examine how teachers speak about their role and whether their discourses have a divide between "personal/professional" aspects of their role versus "the particular ecologies in which they work" (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015: 70). Therefore, their study serves as a methodological precedent for my research on teachers' lived experience of agency in the classroom.

Several recent studies on teacher agency have used semi-structured interviews (e.g., Ashton, 2021; Liu, Wang and Zhao, 2020; Pappa et al., 2019) and serve as methodological precedents for the current study. In those examples, the researchers described interviews as a way of collecting detailed data and eliciting teachers' thoughts with open-ended questions. The recency of these studies suggests a growing interest in teacher agency around the world, from the Finnish context of Pappa et al. (2019) to perspectives on English language policy in China (Liu, Wang and Zhao, 2020) and explorations of novice English teachers' experiences in multi-level language classrooms in New Zealand (Ashton, 2021).

3.3 Research design

The rigour of qualitative research is largely dependent on its design and methods. The trustworthiness and credibility of the research hinges on the decisions taken throughout the

methodology; for example, participant selection, data collection and the approach to analysing the data. As Nowell et al. (2017) discuss, qualitative researchers must prove their research is trustworthy by disclosing the methods they adopted and being sufficiently transparent so the reader can understand how they arrived at their findings. I conducted this study with integrity, in accordance with the university ethics process and Code of Practice, striving to ensure that my methods and research decisions are clearly stated and with the mindset that another researcher should be able to replicate the study. Additionally, while the sample size is often small in qualitative research, findings gain credibility when the same / similar themes emerge across participants; this shows that themes are recurring and valid, and that the researcher is not attempting to make claims about broader findings from only one or two participants.

This study draws on teachers' reported experiences from their careers. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. While transcribing and analysing the large volume of data was a time-consuming process, it gave tremendous richness to the findings as the participants spoke freely and openly, often for an hour or more. Transcription is considered to be a key aspect of the data analysis process. Listening to and transcribing interviews allows the researcher to become very familiar with the data (Lapadat, 2000) while the thought processes about the findings and results begin to take shape. By using qualitative analysis, I attempt to address the key research questions below:

1. To what extent do ESOL teachers feel they have agency?
2. How do ESOL teachers negotiate agency and make decisions about language practices, teaching methods and class focus?

At the beginning of my research journey, I oriented my questions towards exploring learner perspectives. However, due to ethical issues involved in collecting data from ESOL classes, the development of the research questions has been an iterative process and they have changed since the outset of the project. These questions emerged from the literature – there

is a growing interest in exploring how teacher agency is formed but little empirical research on agency at a micro level (Liddicoat, 2019). While more researchers are looking at the issues which affect ESOL provision, there is still a scarcity of research in this area. Considering the political context in which ESOL is situated, it is becoming an increasingly pertinent issue. Government funding for ESOL lessons dropped from £203m in 2010 to £90m in 2016 (Refugee Action, 2017), and supply falls short of demand. Considering the announcement that the United Kingdom plans to accept 20,000 resettled Afghan refugees over the next five years (Schraer and Barrett, 2021) and refugee crises resulting from global geo-political issues, investigating issues related to ESOL teaching will be a continuing concern.

3.3.1 Ethical issues

Before starting to collect data, the study and proposed methods were reviewed by the ethics panel at the School of Education, Language and Psychology at York St. John University. The application for ethical approval involved the preparation of a data management plan which stated clearly how data would be obtained, where it would be stored and what would happen to it after the research. As part of this, I completed a Data Protection Impact Analysis (DPIA). This was required because my interviews involved collecting personal information such as participants' professions and length of time in role. I was also mindful of the possibility of participants disclosing personal information during an interview. Therefore, to maintain confidentiality, I gave careful thought to the data collection and processing methods. This included the preparation of participant information sheets and consent forms (Appendices I and II), which were included with the ethics form for approval by the panel.

Initially, when planning this study, my intention was to include participants who are refugee-background ESOL students. The aim was to foreground learner voices from an often-marginalised population in society and explore their agency as well. However, the ethics panel considered this proposed research to have an increased level of risk and suggested removing the interviews with refugee-background English users and ESOL classroom observation. As I

was waiting on ethical approval to start collecting data, I made the decision to alter the focus of the study, in accordance with the advice of the ethics committee and my supervisory panel. This compromise enabled me to begin collecting data from ESOL professionals soon after I received approval.

I recognise the gap in perspectives due to the inability to observe or speak with ESOL learner groups, but I also realise that it could have presented several issues, such as obtaining informed consent and potential difficulties due to language barriers, especially as personal funds for this project would have inhibited the use of interpreters or translators. However, while I recognise that these are knotty ethical issues, I also suggest that not giving the chance to ESOL learners to be involved in contributing to academic research could exacerbate power differentials in research and lead to a one-sided perspective of the issues being studied. There is not a single, clear-cut solution as both approaches – either excluding or including marginalised populations – involve multiple ethical questions. This highlights the complexity of the issues to consider when carrying out research with any participant group.

These issues include “macro-ethical and micro-ethical concerns” (De Costa et al., 2019: 123) which applied linguists frequently encounter. As the name suggests, macro-ethics refers to overall ethical guidance, e.g., from an ethics committee or organisations such as the British Association for Applied Linguistics, whereas micro-ethics relates to interpreting and shaping ethics at an individual level, i.e., “practices that are customized to manage ethical dilemmas in an emergent manner, as opposed to subscribing to a one-size-fits-all approach” (De Costa et al., 2019: 123). Micro-ethical concerns are particularly relevant for researchers working with vulnerable populations and where there may be an imbalance of power between the researcher and participants.

My research follows the macro-ethical guidance from the University. This includes an awareness of participants’ rights (e.g., to confidentiality, informed consent, the confidence that their data will be held securely and opportunities to withdraw their consent if they wish) and

my responsibilities as a researcher (e.g., following best-practice ethical guidelines, complying with data protection laws and carrying out research with integrity).

There is also the consideration of reciprocity and giving back in recognition of participants' time and contribution to the research, as their voices are the foundation of the study. It is important to debrief after the project and share the outcomes of the research with participants. Failure to do so can leave people feeling exploited, for example, if they have told their stories to the researcher but do not receive any acknowledgement after their participation. In my information sheets, I stated that participants will receive a copy of my final thesis after it has been published in the University's e-theses repository. I closed each interview by reiterating that I will keep participants informed about the outcomes of the research.

3.3.2 Participant recruitment

Since the data I used were collected from a group of nine participants, I cannot claim that the findings are representative of all ESOL professionals involved in teaching in the UK. However, the small sample size allowed me to engage carefully with the data and to interpret it in detail. At the outset, I did not set a specific target for the number of participants or the interviews I wished to complete. I was guided partly by the responses to my call for participants via email. Network sampling was the main way of recruiting participants, also known as "snowball" sampling (Milroy and Gordon, 2003: 32). This involved circulating a call for participants among an online ESOL teaching network as well as emailing the leads of schools, organisations and charities. This recruitment method has some advantages, mainly the fact that the response rate from potential participants I approached was high. Most contacts responded and all of those who responded were happy to participate in my research, with several forwarding the invite to people they thought would also be interested. Milroy and Gordon (2003) acknowledge the advantage of network sampling, pointing out that it builds familiarity and positions the interviewer as "more in the role of a 'friend of a friend'" (Milroy and Gordon, 2003: 32). Another advantage of this method is that, through referrals from known contacts, I was able to reach

participants whom I might otherwise have been unable to interview. It was also quick; I was able to arrange several interviews within two weeks of issuing a call for participants.

However, as with all research methods, network sampling has some limitations. It is not a random sampling method and, therefore, it is harder to generalise the findings (Buchstaller and Khattab, 2013). There is also the risk of contacts only recruiting participants who are similar to them, as they are from their social networks. In qualitative research in social science, snowball sampling is used widely (Noy, 2008) and is especially useful for gaining access to participants who may be hard to reach (Browne, 2005). The 'echo chamber' effect, whereby people's networks tend to consist of others who have similar opinions and points of view, is the main disadvantage of recruiting participants by referral. I sought to mitigate this in part by reaching out to an active online mailing list whose members are from different backgrounds and ESOL teaching experiences, from teachers who work solely in classrooms to those who also carry out academic research and volunteer as tutors. It is perhaps impossible to ensure a complete absence of bias in qualitative research sampling, especially as the sample size is generally much smaller than large-scale quantitative research methods (e.g., surveys and questionnaires).

As stated previously, I did not set out with the goal of recruiting a specific number of participants. However, throughout the process of interviewing, I kept in mind the principle of "saturation" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is an important term when considering qualitative sampling. The approach I adopted for recruitment and sampling can be described as "iterative" (Dörnyei, 2007: 126), i.e., keeping the call for participants open and flexible and collecting data until the researcher reaches the point of saturation. It would often be possible to continue collecting data and, indeed, several interested participants contacted me to enquire about interviews or offered to put me in touch with others when I was nearing the end of my data collection process. However, at some point, the researcher reaches saturation, defined as the judgement to stop collecting data at the point when you see the same or similar themes repeated in the data by different participants (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 6). Of course, real-world constraints such as the researcher's funding and project timelines also apply and are

often influential in setting parameters for sampling decisions and data collection. With this in mind, but chiefly the criterion of saturation, I completed eleven interviews in total with a range of research participants. Initially, my call for participants included those from ESOL support backgrounds as well as teachers, for example, people involved in working with councils and other organisations. I completed two interviews with people involved in ESOL from a regional co-ordination perspective, but neither of them had any experience of teaching ESOL. As a result, I made the decision to remove these participants from the study as my research questions focus specifically on teachers and neither participant featured in the Results. Consequently, while I collected data from eleven interviews in total, the following demographics and findings are based on nine interviews with ESOL teachers.

3.3.3 Participant demographics

All participants completed a follow-up questionnaire about their professional and academic backgrounds and their experience in the ESOL sector. The categories I used in the questionnaire specified a distinction between academic qualifications (e.g., a B.A. in English Language) and a professional qualification related to English language teaching (e.g., CELTA or DELTA). All respondents have professional teaching qualifications, such as the CELTA and diplomas in teaching English as a foreign language to adults. Six of the nine respondents also stated that they have academic qualifications such as a B.A. in Languages. With a collective total of more than 250 years' experience of teaching English, they brought a wealth of knowledge with them. All of the participants had taught ESOL for at least fifteen years.

The participants had various motivations for developing ESOL-related careers, which included finding a path that suited their interest in languages and cultures. While there is no doubt that the job can be demanding, there is a sense that it is fundamentally rewarding and that this drives their intent to stay. In the words of one participant, "I needed a job and this was the obvious one for my situation at the time. I stayed because I enjoyed it in all its aspects". Participants talked about their "love of languages", enjoyment of "interaction with the students"

and their drive to offer “a welcoming and supportive environment” to counter some of the negative political rhetoric surrounding immigration and new users of English. Their responses suggest an almost unanimous focus on teaching as an act of promoting connection, with some participants explicitly referencing social justice, an interest in working with people from refugee backgrounds and reciprocity in the community.

As mentioned earlier, I will introduce the participants using pseudonyms. Any personally identifiable information, such as specific locations, has been deliberately removed to maintain anonymity. Table 1 presents a summary of the participants’ professional and academic experience, which they supplied in a post-interview questionnaire. The participants are presented in the order of their experience (classified as number of years / months in practice), from most to least senior. This is followed by an individual profile for each participant. In regard to socio-cultural backgrounds, all participants except one are UK-born.

Table 1: Summary of participant profiles

Pseudonym	**Academic qualifications**	**Teaching qualifications**	**Numbers of years / months in practice**	**Teaching experience outside UK**
Anna	Not specified	RSA Dip TESL/FACE	45 years	Yes (Afghan refugees for seven years – country was not specified)
Oliver	PhD in English as an International Language	DELTA	40 years	Yes (country unspecified)
Aimee	BA French, MA Applied Linguistics	RSA Dip. TEFLA	2 years (EFL), 29 years (ESOL)	Yes (2 years teaching adults at a British

				Council centre in Poland)
Sadie	BA (Hons) Language and Linguistics	CELTA Teaching Basic Skills to Adults	30+ years as an ESOL teacher and manager	No
Lauren	MSc French and German (Hons)	RSA Dip. TEFLA MSc Teaching English Grade 4 Teaching Certificate for ESOL	14 years (EFL), 11 years (ESOL), 5 years (EAP)	Yes (university students in France and Cyprus; language assistant in Italy, France and Poland)
Emma	Not specified	CTEFLA	25 years (ESOL and EFL)	Yes
Lucas	Not specified	CELTA DELTA	3 years (EFL), 19 years (ESOL)	Yes (primary, secondary and adult)
Peter	Advanced Diploma in Education: Applied Linguistics (Open University)	Trinity TESOL Cert, DTLLS (ESOL)	15 years (ESOL), 18 months (EFL)	No
Alice	BA (Hons) Education	CELTA DELTA	10 years (EFL plus freelance ESOL), 5 years (ESOL)	Yes (Italian state schools; Japanese university; placement year in Brazil; two months at an NGO primary school in Ethiopia)

Anna

Anna has taught English in a variety of roles for forty-five years, including ESOL, English as an Additional Language (EAL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). She reports of having direct experience of teaching Afghan refugees for seven years, as well as teaching learners with low levels of literacy. In addition to her extensive teaching experience, she has continued learning and developing her experience by attending regular Continuing Professional Development (CPD) events.

Oliver

Oliver began his English teaching career as he was looking for employment and the job suited his circumstances at that time. He discovered that he greatly enjoyed teaching and, therefore, decided to pursue it as a career. He has taught English, including EFL and ESOL, for forty years. He has experience of working abroad and, following a DELTA qualification, he completed several CPD courses. Most recently, he has been working as a volunteer ESOL teacher to support refugee learners of English in the UK.

Aimee

Aimee has a total of thirty-one years of teaching experience, beginning with two years of EFL teaching in Poland before teaching ESOL in the UK for twenty-nine years. She has completed extensive qualifications and CPD, including CELTA tutor training, courses related to the mental wellbeing of refugees, action research, training to be a coach, and some management qualifications. She began her ESOL career working for a refugee charity in the UK.

Sadie

Sadie’s teaching career began as a part-time job when she was bringing up a family. She is not a tutor at present but has experience of teaching ESOL in the UK for more than thirty

years. She has now moved into ESOL management, where her responsibilities include co-ordinating a team of ESOL teachers. Therefore, she has direct experience of both teaching and managing, as well as numerous CPD courses to develop understanding of learning and teaching.

Lauren

Lauren has a total of thirty years of English teaching experience, with fourteen years of EFL teaching, eleven years of ESOL and five years of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). She has completed an MSc in Teaching English and a certified course to become an ESOL teacher trainer. She began her English teaching career abroad as a language assistant in France and Poland, before returning to the UK.

Emma

Emma initially entered the English teaching profession to work abroad. She has taught EFL and ESOL for twenty-five years. Her EFL teaching experience abroad involved providing adult evening classes and in-company tuition for businesses. In the UK, she teaches ESOL to refugees, most recently with online classes during the pandemic. She has not completed further training after her initial teacher training qualification, but she has extensive ‘on the job’ experience of teaching on a paid and voluntary basis.

Lucas

Lucas has taught English at all levels (primary, secondary and adult). He began his career with three years of EFL, which included teaching in Southeast Asia, before moving into ESOL teaching for the past nineteen years. A fascination with cultures, languages and people motivated him to join the English teaching profession, and he has completed CELTA and DELTA qualifications.

Peter

Peter joined the ESOL profession after experience of teaching EFL. This was a career change as he had previously worked in IT, but his interest in languages and language learning led him to study for an EFL qualification (an intensive one-month Trinity TESOL Cert). He continued his training with a part-time Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS, ESOL). After eighteen months of working as an EFL teacher, he took up an ESOL role and taught for fifteen years until recent retirement, after which he is teaching ESOL on a voluntary basis. He also attended numerous CPD events and completed further training (a diploma in ESOL) throughout his teaching career.

Alice

Alice initially completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) before completing CELTA and DELTA courses. She has taught English for fifteen years, with ten years of EFL teaching combined with freelancing as an ESOL teacher. For the past five years, she has exclusively taught ESOL students. She has a keen interest in teaching refugees and has completed CPD courses online and ESOL training in participatory teaching methods.

3.3.4 Procedure and interview protocol

The interviews were all conducted online using Microsoft Teams video meetings. This allowed for greater flexibility for researcher and participants, due to not having to travel, and many people are familiar with video meetings following increased online contact due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, interviewing a stranger online via video call may seem more impersonal than the traditional qualitative research method of meeting face-to-face and using a recording device. Video meetings lack eye contact and the nuances of non-verbal communication; according to Rettie (2009: 422), “face-to-face copresence […] affords thicker information, body talk and communication efficiency”.

Considering the importance of developing rapport between interviewer and participant in qualitative interviews (Kubota, 2017; Prior, 2018), I sought to put participants at ease by opening each interview with introductions and a friendly greeting. Although participants all signed a consent form which included consent for the interview to be recorded, I offered them the choice to be audio-recorded without video. Microsoft Teams recordings include video as well as audio, unless participants switch their camera off. However, all participants were happy to be recorded and only one chose to turn their camera off. After introductions and checking consent for recording, I chose to open the discussion with a broad question. In the following section, I discuss the rationale behind my interview questions.

3.3.5 Development of interview questions

The interview questions (see Appendix III) were designed to encourage participants to share their thoughts about ESOL policy, how they describe their position on teaching approaches and policy, and how they respond to students' needs. In total, I developed seventeen questions but, as the interviews were semi-structured, I did not ask all questions in a single interview. Instead, I selected the most relevant questions and aimed for conversations to be led primarily by participants.

As an interviewer, I was aware of the need to use questions as prompts, but I wanted to remain as unobtrusive as possible and encourage conversation by nodding and using discourse markers, such as *oh* and *really?*, to signal interest. Jucker and Smith (1998: 174) classify this type of discourse marker as "reception markers [which] signal a reaction to information provided by another speaker". Reception markers are also important for facilitating conversation when both speakers are strangers to each other. As Jucker and Smith found, these discourse markers occur more often among conversations between strangers than among friends, which highlights the use of reception markers to indicate that information is being heard and "integrated into the receiver's state of knowledge" (Jucker and Smith, 1998: 197).

While the theme of agency is central to my research, I chose not to foreground the word ‘agency’ in my initial interview questions, as I wanted to avoid priming participants if they held specific opinions about agency. As discussed in the literature review, the concept of agency has multiple interpretations; therefore, if I asked a question such as ‘*Do you think teachers and students have agency in the classroom?*’, it would be difficult to compare data from multiple participants as each individual’s idea of agency may differ. Consequently, I chose open-ended interview questions which aimed to elicit participants’ stories and experiences rather than theoretical ideas about the notion of agency. For example, one of the questions asks what a participant would do if a student wanted to diverge from the plan (e.g., ‘*How do you respond if students have pressing concerns or questions outside the lesson plan or lesson topic?*’). Responses could be indicative of agency if they have the freedom to change the plan.

Also, I aimed to phrase the questions to avoid bias. Themes related to ESOL provision are often linked to political issues and, indeed, Peutrell and Cooke (2019: 232) assert that teaching ESOL is “inescapably political”. However, I wanted to begin interviews neutrally. While most participants shared political views and opinions related to ESOL, I felt that my position as an interviewer should primarily be impartial. Nonetheless, it is important for researchers to be reflexive and ask themselves questions about their perspectives. This reflective practice is a core component of qualitative research that is carried out with integrity (Mann, 2011; Berger, 2015; Mann, 2016; Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

I began each interview with an open-ended question: ‘*What does the word ‘policy’ mean to you?*’. While some participants sought clarification about what type of policy the question references (e.g., in an ESOL context or immigration policy context), I emphasised that it was an open question. The aim of this interview question was to collect data about participants’ experiences of policy in their role or, alternatively, their interpretation of the meaning of ‘policy’ in a lexical sense. The choice of phrasing in the opening question is purposefully broad, which allowed participants to use their own interpretation of ‘policy’. In some cases, this also involved follow-up questions on both sides, from myself as the

interviewer and from the participants. Reflecting the conversational nature of semi-structured interviews, the interviews included ad lib questions as well, such as '*Is it very much a hierarchical culture then?*' (following up on a participant's observations about her experience of teaching in colleges) and '*So it's really about developing your own identity and sense of who you are as a teacher?*' (probing further about a participant's development during their teaching career).

3.4 Data analysis: transcribing the data

The process of transcribing oral data is arguably one of the most labour-intensive aspects of a qualitative research project and, for many, it is not especially enjoyable as Dörnyei (2007: 246) states. However, the process does allow the researcher to immerse themselves in the data and to begin to spot recurring themes across the transcriptions. At the outset of transcribing data, it involves making more decisions, chiefly how much detail to include in the transcriptions (Hughes, 2015). The decisions taken will depend on the type of analysis to be carried out on the transcriptions and what features are salient. A researcher who is interested in discourse analysis will usually need to transcribe their data in much finer detail, extracting salient features such as pauses, fillers and repetition, than one who is investigating the content of what is said.

As my research goals focus on content analysis, I chose to transcribe my interviews without including the length of pauses, stress or non-verbal communication such as facial expressions. As Dörnyei (2007: 247) discusses, it is acceptable to make the decision to "edit out" these conversation features if the researcher is focusing on content. There are multiple transcription conventions, and the choice of which one to use also depends on the type of research being undertaken (Edwards and Lampert, 1993). When transcribing my data, I chose to reproduce verbatim the interview responses. Laughter, transcribed in my data as [laughs], was the only non-verbal aspect of communication I chose to include. Although it does not form part of my analysis, it signals moments of rapport between myself as the interviewer and my

participants. I was also mindful of confidentiality and as several participants mentioned the names of people, cities or places where they have worked, I chose to omit these and specify them as '[name]' or '[city]' in my transcriptions.

3.4.1 The data analysis process

Content analysis is my chosen method of exploring the data, due to its flexibility and the ways in which it allows the researcher to build meaning directly from the data. However, although content analysis is a widely used approach in qualitative research, the approach can vary, with some researchers choosing to incorporate aspects of quantitative methods such as counting keywords or beginning with a top-down theory to apply to their codes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). I chose to ground my analysis directly in the data, which is classified as "conventional content analysis, [where] categories are derived from data during data analysis" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1286). I used the software programme NVivo to import my transcriptions and begin the process of coding the data into themes. The advantage of NVivo is that it increases efficiency and allows for sections of data to be coded under multiple categories. It is an electronic way of coding data that could also be carried out manually, perhaps with a set of colour-coded highlighters for each theme as Dörnyei (2007) suggests. With NVivo, the researcher can highlight relevant passages and assign codes. The choice of which codes to assign involves making more research decisions, primarily whether the research approach is inductive or deductive.

As discussed above, my approach meant that codes emerged during the analysis, "allowing the categories and names for categories to flow from the data" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1279). One consideration is the reliability of the coding scheme. To add robustness, I chose to take a "broad-brush" (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019: 69) approach at first before taking a second look to re-code and narrow down the themes. This allowed me to code each section of the data in an iterative approach, moving from achieving a sense of the overarching themes to "a second-level coding process" (Dörnyei, 2007: 252).

However, developing the codes is only the first stage. My aim was to go beyond merely identifying themes. I aimed to reach a deep understanding of the data, enriched by references to the literature. According to Bazeley (2009), it is a common issue for qualitative studies to present a few themes and summarise them without diving deeper into the analysis. The risk in being led entirely by the data is that it leads along a meandering route, nicknamed the 'garden path analysis' by one of Bazeley's colleagues:

> "My colleague, Lyn Richards, often talks about 'garden path analysis' when she is teaching about qualitative analysis, as a way of showing how thematic 'analysis' can take the reader along a pleasant pathway that leads nowhere: 'Here are the roses, there are the jonquils, and aren't the daffodils lovely today!'" (Bazeley, 2009: 9).

Therefore, in my Results and Analysis chapter, I seek to first present the initial results before expanding into a detailed view of how the themes are connected in the Discussion chapter. The main goal of my analysis, which I kept in mind throughout the process, was to develop results which are grounded in teachers' experiences and lead to some practical suggestions for actions to be taken in the ESOL sector.

3.4.2 Presentation of data

The data presentation approach is structured by research question. In the following chapter (Results and Analysis), I present an overarching summary of the results under each research question before introducing the most prominent themes (codes) that help address each question. The benefit of this approach is that it is sequential and systematic; I chose this approach with the aim of representing my findings in a way that answers each research question and tells a clear story for the reader. The use of selected quotes to support each theme also adds credibility and richness to the data presentation.

While presenting the data thematically in categories, with evidence from participants and a summary, is a common way to engage in qualitative content analysis (Drisko and Maschi, 2016), a disadvantage of this approach is that it is descriptive and limited to each theme. Presenting by theme means there is limited scope to show the relationships between themes. Furthermore, it may oversimplify some of the complexity in the data, as the sheer nature of qualitative content analysis "reduces data by forcing the researcher to assign each coding unit to one subcategory only" (Schreier, 2013: 181). This is the main drawback to the data presentation approach I chose, as it means that certain aspects cannot be included.

3.5 Positionality and reflexivity in qualitative research

A growing body of research is considering how the scholar's positionality, defined dually as their world view and their approach to a research project (Holmes, 2020), is integral to qualitative research. Stemming from Alcoff (1988), the concept of positionality is often applied in gender and feminist theory. However, it can be argued that a researcher's positionality is critical to interpreting any research in the social sciences. Hall (1990: 18) goes so far as to say: "There's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all". This perspective suggests that it is impossible to achieve objectivity in social research as, in order to be able to interpret the data collected, the researcher cannot be a neutral bystander. Research is an active process and the researcher's position will inevitably shape each decision, for example, the choice of research question, the method of analysis and the supporting literature.

Consequently, the ability to be reflexive is closely linked to positionality. One cannot consciously situate oneself as a researcher without an awareness of how the lens through which we view the world may influence our research. Thus, reflexivity can be defined as "the researcher's ability to be able to self-consciously refer to him or herself in relation to the production of knowledge about research topics" (Roulston, 2010: 116). I was aware of the need to be reflexive throughout my research, especially when I began the data collection

process and interviewed participants. As our discussions often involved thorny political issues, many of which were raised by participants, I questioned my own responses and started thinking about whether I should appear neutral to avoid unduly influencing participants. This gave rise to the question of whether it is possible and, indeed, realistic for any qualitative researcher to remain neutral and objective.

According to Holliday (2015: 49), a postmodern approach to qualitative research believes that "the outcomes of the research will always be influenced by the researcher's beliefs". Rabbidge (2017) takes a similar perspective in his argument that such factors will influence interactions in qualitative interviews. His call for scholars to embrace reflexivity in their research projects, without trying to sanitise the data and 'hide the mess', challenges traditional ideas about the creation of knowledge. The question is how to achieve greater reflexivity in research, which also involves acknowledging that another person's perspective on the same research may be entirely different (Rabbidge, 2017). For example, I am a white, British, university-educated, cisgender woman without direct experience of teaching ESOL in a classroom, other than completing a CELTA in 2020 and volunteering to teach a group of refugees and asylum seekers online during the Covid-19 pandemic. If another researcher from a different background – perhaps a teacher with many years of ESOL experience – undertook this project and interpreted the same data, the findings in the analysis that are salient to them may differ from mine. We each see the world and our experiences through different lenses.

Part of my reflexive practice for this project involved taking notes after each interview. In my transcripts, there are subtle but noticeable changes in my interviewing style as I became more comfortable over the course of the project. For example, in my initial interviews I tended to ask more questions rather than leaving the space free for participants to respond. However, I learned that it was more productive to use non-verbal communication such as nods and smiles. This helped to develop a friendly rapport while also ensuring that the participants' voices were the most prominent ones.

As well as reflecting on my interview style, I was cautious about injecting too much of myself – as the researcher – into the discussions. During my interviews, I was conscious of

not wanting to ‘sway’ my participants. I felt that my personal ideologies and political views were mostly irrelevant to our conversation. However, it can be challenging to remain neutral as a researcher. Even when remaining silent, it may be possible for non-verbal communication or body language to indicate a position (e.g., by nodding, laughing, smiling etc.). Given the nature of the discussions in the interviews, where all participants brought up issues related to politics, funding and immigration, I found myself being drawn into the conversation as ESOL is a personal interest of mine and, as mentioned earlier, an “inescapably political” field according to Peutrell and Cooke (2019: 232). As my participants were all involved in ESOL teaching or service provision, I also wanted to create rapport as someone who also has some, albeit limited, experience of ESOL rather than presenting myself as a completely neutral outsider. The aim was to create a sense of shared understanding, in the hope that my participants would be open to discussion.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the methodological precedents for the current study, beginning with a summary of popular qualitative methods in applied linguistics. The focus then narrowed to examine some of the previous work on teacher agency and the methods in those studies. The chapter also covered ethical issues in the research design. After justifying the methods used, I described the research design and sampling method, followed by a description of participant demographics. Next, I described the interview protocol. This was followed by examples of interview questions and a discussion of the considerations involved during the data analysis process. Finally, I presented some of my reflections as a researcher.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on presenting and analysing the results in the form of the primary themes identified from the interview responses. As discussed previously in the Methodology chapter, the themes that are presented in this chapter were identified using content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Dörnyei, 2007). The goal of this analysis was to categorise the data and, therefore, to identify the overarching themes across participants. In the initial rounds of coding, I used the software programme NVivo to group the data into categories. After developing a substantial list of themes, the second round of coding resulted in a list of the most prominent themes, i.e., those that appeared most frequently and consistently across multiple participants. In this chapter, I present relevant segments from the interview data under these themes. Throughout the results and analysis, I refer to the participant profiles presented in the Methodology chapter to contextualise relevant data excerpts within the analysis.

Throughout the Results, I draw on the three components of agency put forward by Emirbayer and Mische (1998): the iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions. I introduced these components in the literature review, and they underpin the ecological model of teacher agency (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015). I explore this framework further in the Discussion chapter. The three dimensions reflect the argument that agency is a "temporally embedded social practice" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 963), which is subject to multiple influences such as past experiences, present relationships and future aspirations. While I have chosen to draw on this framework, the three dimensions cannot necessarily be separated into compartmentalised themes. As Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015: 29) state, "neat separation is not always possible empirically". Therefore, where I mention the dimensions in relation to my results, I have made a judgement about which dimensions appear to be the most salient.

4.2 Results for Research Question 1 (RQ1)

RQ1: ***To what extent do ESOL teachers feel they have agency?***

The overall findings suggest that all participants felt able to take agentive action, such as making decisions about pedagogies (i.e., their teaching approaches) and practices. However, in most cases, external factors related to the context mitigated the extent of this agency. The three themes that address my first research question sit primarily below the practical-evaluative dimension. The first two themes relate to the influence of workplace relationships and hierarchy on the capacity to act, which brings us back to the idea of the practical-evaluative dimension being "mediate[d] by their [actors'] social worlds" (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech, 2021: 6).

The first theme that is presented below explores the influence of a workplace culture of trust and communication, which is role-modelled by management teams. A common view among at least half of the participants was the instrumental role of workplace management and how it could either obstruct or promote individual agency. Relatedly, the second theme that emerged was the impact of institutional hierarchy on teacher agency. Where a top-down structure exists, for example, senior managers setting the policy that teachers must follow, this has an ensuing influence on their freedom to make decisions (a key aspect of agency) in the classroom and to be guided by learner-generated content. This, and the influence of macro-level policy, are explored as the final themes which help to address RQ1.

4.2.1 The influence of workplace management, trust and communication on teacher agency

According to the responses from participants, several factors influence ESOL teacher agency, including the freedom to create materials and make decisions about their lessons and class focus. However, the level of agency appears to be partly dependent on the context in which they are working and the relationship between managers and teachers. It also seems that this

varies on the basis of whether they are employed by a school, Further Education college or other organisation (e.g., a charity which provides access to ESOL education). Lucas, an ESOL teacher who has nineteen years' experience of ESOL teaching at a Further Education college, describes the flexibility of his workplace and the absence of pressure from the management, provided his classes meet the standards set at a national level. His words below were in response to a question about the level of freedom he felt he had to create course plans and whether he felt supported in his workplace to do so:

> *"Just very trusting management as well so they just leave me alone and twice a year I just need to go to a meeting with management, and we just need to talk about numbers, retainment, success rates, and you know as long as it's roughly in line or slightly above the national average, they're perfectly happy and I'm happy"* (lines 231–234).

The themes of trust and feeling supported, without being under pressure to adhere to a rigid scheme of work, recurred throughout our discussion. The level of trust that Liam experienced in his workplace appears to stem from the senior management at the college and could be due to his years of professional experience in the sector. While he referenced the need to follow specific Further Education (FE) policies, e.g., on safeguarding, he told me explicitly that there were no specific ESOL policies that he was required to follow. When I conducted the interview, the management at his college had recently introduced a policy of having one-to-one reviews with students each term, but unlike some other participants, he was not under pressure to complete multiple forms for each student.

Several participants describe having a supportive experience of the management team at their workplace. Managers are perceived as being crucial to either fostering or hindering ESOL teachers' agency (e.g., freedom to make decisions within their role) in the classroom, depending on their approach. Aimee, a teacher with twenty-nine years' ESOL teaching experience, two years' EFL experience, and some management qualifications herself, reports

that "*it comes down to whether the managers are looking over your shoulder and trusting you*" (lines 456–457). This suggests that a relationship of trust between managers and teachers is a deciding factor in how teachers feel about their working environment and their ability to make decisions. Aimee elaborates by saying that having managers who are "*open to dialogue*" (line 277) is perceived to be an important foundation for trust.

Other participant responses suggest that management styles vary, from being quite hands-on to taking a more relaxed approach in the confidence that their teaching teams have the knowledge and experience to make decisions. However, it should be noted that all participants had decades of experience, with the least experienced interviewee still possessing fifteen years of classroom experience. As responses suggest, there is a willingness to challenge management, which may not be present among a more junior group of teachers who are less certain of their own identity and role. It was also suggested that management styles are instrumental in supporting teachers to act with agency. In response to a discussion about flexibility in the curriculum, Anna's perspective was that "*a lot comes down to the confidence of the managers*" (line 205). This suggests that, in order for teachers to be able to act with freedom and flexibility, managers need to have the confidence to trust their teams will make the right decisions.

Trust is an important part of strong relationships between management and teachers, as Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) discuss. Furthermore, numerous scholars highlight the importance of trust in creating a supportive culture in organisational and education contexts (e.g., Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008; Lee, Zhang and Yin, 2011). When managers demonstrate they trust teachers to make decisions, this may also empower teachers to innovate and try out new things, as they have the safety to do so. As mentioned in the literature review, trust and the quality of interpersonal relationships play an instrumental role in increasing teams' psychological safety (e.g., Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson et al., 2016; Wanless, 2016), which is defined as having the freedom and safety to take appropriate risks within a team. Psychological safety means being able to be oneself at work, make appropriate

decisions, ask questions and pose challenges without fearing negative consequences for one's image or career. As a result, this can promote possibilities for greater agency and scope to make choices. However, it can be argued that psychological safety cannot exist without trusting relationships, a hypothesis that is supported by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015) discussion of the importance of relationships in their ecological model of teacher agency. According to their findings, "the domain of *social structures*" (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015: 85) in education incorporates several variables, including the type of network tie (e.g., whether it has a formal or informal structure), the approach of school management and the types of interaction that take place.

The findings from participants in my interviews are consistent with those of Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015), which suggest that several relational components work together to enable teachers to act with autonomy, i.e., being able to act independently and with agency. These components comprise the degree of trust in teacher–manager relationships, having an open dialogue between managers and teachers, and being able to experiment with different teaching approaches where appropriate. In all cases – including the data excerpts cited in this section – teachers are working within the context of a team, with top-down coordination from senior management. Consequently, this raises a question about how to achieve a balance between encouraging agency while still maintaining a cohesive team environment where teachers are aware of collective goals and requirements. While outside the scope of the current study, this could be an area to explore in future research.

4.2.2 The influence of institutional hierarchy on teacher agency

As mentioned in the preceding sub-section, while teachers appear to have some degree of agency, the data suggest that it is restricted in some settings. A key factor behind this difference is the type of hierarchy that exists. As Hepworth (2019: 105) points out, schools and colleges have complex hierarchies and power dynamics, in which teachers have power over

their classrooms but are also “subject to the authority of managers and government policies”. Participant responses suggest there is a degree of passing documents ‘up’ the hierarchy to managers (e.g., teachers sharing their schemes of work as evidence) with documents also coming ‘down’ (e.g., managers communicating institutional policy). According to the data, the most frequent documents that managers cascade to teachers relate to policy. In response to a question about the nature of the hierarchy in her school, Lauren (a teacher with thirty years’ experience of English teaching, including eleven years of ESOL) reported that “*it’s the managers* […] *that pass down the policy that we are supposed to abide by*” (lines 81–82). The policy she discussed related to setting targets and evidencing them for each student, which suggested that her institution prioritised a performance-based culture.

Lack of understanding among management may contribute to a disconnect between managers and teachers in the organisational hierarchy. Lauren also commented somewhat critically about her perceptions of ESOL teams being managed by people without teaching experience. Her response was in the context of answering a question about what the word ‘policy’ meant to her in an ESOL context: “*a lot of colleges are managed by people who concentrate on becoming managers, not on having been good ESOL teachers*” (lines 60–61). This suggests that there may be a gap in understanding of the teacher’s experience on the ground and the managers higher up. Other participants also shared this perception, with Aimee referencing her experience of ESOL teachers whose direct managers were managed by people without teaching experience in the ESOL field:

> “[…] *they felt they were under pressure you know maybe from other managers who were not even education teachers or whatever you know*” (lines 486–487).

Aimee’s response, in the context of discussing fundamental changes at the college where she worked, suggested that the managers in her department became part of the ‘squeezed middle’ and were caught between the demands of their superiors at the top of the chain and the teachers on the ground. This appears to show an example of how insufficient two-way communication, dialogue and trust can limit ESOL teachers’ agency, and she went on to

discuss how a lack of knowledge and understanding at a senior management level resulted in the apparent deterioration of psychological safety in the workforce. While teachers' immediate line managers were sympathetic and open to discussions, they were ultimately bound by the need to follow institutional policy set by senior managers, which resulted in tension between teachers' desire to act at the micro level in the classroom and the macro environment of the school or college. This appears to be a longstanding issue, as Hayes (1996: 173) argues that "ESOL teachers remain at the mercy of pronouncements from others superior to them in the professional hierarchy". This suggests that although teachers have the most practical, hands-on knowledge of their cohorts, they are obliged to follow the rules of the hierarchy. In so doing, this maintains and reinforces the hierarchical structure, as discussed in the literature review (e.g., Giddens, 1979). While the data in the current study suggest that teachers and learners are closely involved in negotiating the curriculum, the choices that teachers can make are often subject to "influences from institutional and cultural contexts" (Wette, 2009: 355), such as exams and assessment requirements.

In some cases referenced in the data, managers appear to pass down not only institution-level policy but also make decisions about topics in classes where the teacher is preparing students for exams. Peter is an ESOL teacher with fifteen years of experience, whose interest in languages led him to join the ESOL sector after working in IT. Although he retired recently, he has continued teaching ESOL on a voluntary basis. During our discussion, he described his experience of teaching exam-focused classes at a particular college where he did not have the agency to decide on the topics, despite having a more in-depth knowledge of the requirements of his cohort:

> "[…] *in that college the managers decide what the exam topic's going to be and the exam topic, well one of them was sport, which is not obvious to me that that's going to interest the clientele that we've got frankly*" (lines 185–188).

The example above was in the context of a discussion about participatory methods in ESOL

teaching, which Peter aimed to incorporate into his classes. However, in the environment he described, there was little possibility for either the teachers or students to have agency in selecting the topics of study. According to Peter, having a rigid set of topics which were pre-determined by senior managers had a strong impact on students' motivation in the classroom and his own motivation towards teaching. In his words, *"if you've got somebody telling you 'well we're going to do this subject for the exam' and it happens to be a no-good subject, bang you just don't want to be in the classroom frankly*" (lines 201–203). While he reported that he still aimed to make the lessons interesting even when constrained by an exam focus, his responses suggest that having teacher input to the syllabus – and the flexibility to change topics – is important for maintaining the enthusiasm of teachers and students.

However, despite some mentions of top-down decision-making, responses that are critical of management are in the minority. Several participants did not mention management at all or only included a brief reference to the supportiveness of their managers, with most speaking favourably about their experiences of being able to be flexible in the classroom and adapt their teaching methods to the needs of their students.

4.2.3 Agency in the context of macro-level policy and funding

While government policy was mentioned occasionally in the interviews, discussions chiefly related to the link between policy and funding as opposed to any specific policy that dictated the content teachers must use in the classroom. Considering the background of the participants and their extensive experience in the ESOL sector, some referenced macro-level policy which was produced earlier in their careers and which has changed since then. For example, in a response to a question about what government policy has been developed, Aimee talked favourably about the Skills for Life curriculum. This was introduced by the British government in 2001 and included the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (Department for Education and Skills, 2001):

> "*…it was really welcome at the time because it was the first time there was actually a structure and defined levels and so on on a national basis. So there was suggested topics in that and there are suggested topics and themes that come up in the kind of you know nationally available resources but they're not always what people want to teach by any means. There's a lot of people developing their own stuff and now there's a lot more of that being shared*" (lines 118–123).

Aimee's response suggested that there appears to be no current restrictions or policies imposed at a macro level about topics and curriculum requirements. The reference to teacher-developed materials being shared widely also appears to show possibilities for agency depending on teachers' individual preferences and the fact they can reject the suggested topics in national resources if they wish. However, it is important to reiterate that all responses are from the perspectives of experienced participants with a wealth of ESOL knowledge. Therefore, achieving flexibility and being able to adapt student-generated content into a syllabus may be partly dependent on the experience and confidence developed during a long teaching career.

Previous research has shown experienced teachers to have more awareness of how learners are responding in class and, as Wette (2010) discusses, teacher cognition develops over time. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that teachers with years of experience in the classroom have had more opportunities to be exposed to different contexts of learner needs and differing classroom dynamics. Gatbonton (2008) found that novice teachers (defined as those undergoing training, recently qualified or with fewer than two years' classroom experience) had similar levels of theoretical awareness as their more experienced counterparts. However, they were less likely to be able to apply this knowledge practically in the classroom. Other studies support the suggestion that more pedagogical experience allows teachers to be more responsive (e.g., Richards, Li and Tang, 1995; Akyel, 1997; Tsui, 2003). While teacher education at novice level can highlight "the fundamentally organic, relational and contextualized nature of second language teaching" (Wette, 2010: 570), the symbiotic

combination of “theoretical knowledge and practical experience” (Wette, 2010: 570) can only be acquired over time. Consequently, my results must be viewed with the caveat that novice or early-service teachers may find it somewhat more challenging to be as responsive and learner-oriented as their more experienced counterparts.

While the results suggest that topics and other classroom practices are open for teachers and learners to negotiate without significant policy restrictions, being able to act with agency in regard to enrolment practices is somewhat limited. Several participants mentioned concerns that funding policy is used as a gatekeeper to determine who can and cannot access English lessons and support. While teachers’ responses suggest that they have agency in the classroom, this does not extend to enrolment, with one participant mentioning the difficulty in turning away students whom they could not enrol: “*I couldn’t enrol students who were illiterate and that was just you know painful*” (Lucas, lines 91–92). This example illustrates the personal challenges that tutors face when their hands are tied by bureaucracy, as in such cases they cannot act with agency to admit people who need ESOL support and tuition.

The decreasing budget available for adult ESOL is a further constraint and appeared as a frequent theme in the interview data, with references to funding policy being applied restrictively or varying from area to area. In the eyes of Peter, a participant who spoke about his experience teaching ESOL in colleges: *“Funding is almost the start and finish of everything isn’t it really?*” (lines 116–117). However, as Simpson (2021) points out, despite government rhetoric about English being a key part of social integration, there is very little funding available for ESOL and no strategic direction at a national level. This was a key challenge that several of my participants cited.

To summarise, the data suggest that influences on teacher agency come from a variety of sources. Chief among them is the nature of the relationships that teachers have with the management staff. When they feel trusted and have psychological safety in their workplace, i.e., the encouragement and freedom to share views and opinions, this appears to lead to greater possibilities for agentive action and decision-making. The findings also suggest that,

in most cases, teachers do have the freedom to guide their students and develop their own activities without top-down policy guidance, with the exceptions being some cases where managers select the exam topics. I did not find any evidence that government-level policy restricts the content that teachers can select. The only restriction appears to be in relation to funding and that it is sometimes used to gatekeep English provision, with some individuals who need ESOL provision being unable to access it. In such cases, the potential for teachers to act is extremely limited.

4.3 Results for Research Question 2 (RQ2)

RQ2: *How do ESOL teachers negotiate agency and make decisions about language practices, teaching methods and class focus?*

Turning to the results that address my second research question, they focus on the practical aspects of enacting agency and what teachers *do* in the classroom. I begin with an exploration of the most salient finding that appeared to influence teachers' decision-making: being guided by the learners and their requirements. This leads into a discussion of how teachers' attitudes shape their informal classroom policies, followed by an exploration of how improvisation and flexibility can also affect agency. The fourth and final theme examines some limitations on ESOL teacher agency, with reference to a lack of role-specific training, especially in relation to low-literacy learners from refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds. These themes relate to the practical-evaluative dimension, as it focuses on action in the present, and the iterational dimension which encompasses the influence of teachers' professional histories and past experiences.

4.3.1 The influence of learner-specific needs on shaping teachers' decisions

As mentioned in the literature review, when teachers have agency in the classroom, this has an ensuing impact on learner agency. However, it must be pointed out that all interviewees

are ESOL professionals and, therefore, these results explore agency from the self-reported perspectives of teachers. We cannot use this data to explore learner agency directly from the perspective of the ESOL learners. Nonetheless, it does allow us to explore teachers' approaches to meeting the individual needs of their students and how they make related decisions. The aim of the data presented below is to explore the impact of teachers' agency on promoting a classroom environment where learners also have the potential for agency.

Overall, the interview responses suggest that learner needs largely determine the syllabus, with most teachers reporting that they felt confident to create lessons which are shaped by learner input. One of the participants, Anna, taught English for forty-five years in a variety of contexts, including ESOL classes with refugee-background and low-literacy learners. In the extract below, she describes her experience of designing the curriculum using input from her students:

> *"*[…] *just for them to have more ownership of the next three months, the next 12 weeks, we would do something like a pyramid activity so we would give them loads of paper and ask them to write down topics or areas you know situations in which they would want to use English more confidently.* […] *And then of course it was the teacher's job to put that into a syllabus. You know, with learning outcomes and weekly aims and so on"* (lines 174–183).

The above description of an activity where the teachers would provide the students with materials and elicit topics for teaching from them suggests that this approach works in tandem with the learners. The teacher's expertise here is utilised to design activities and formalise a syllabus, but the key foci are determined by the learners. This appears to be an example of a syllabus with a "negotiated" element (Breen, 1987; Clarke, 1991), where teachers prioritise content based on the learners' interests and needs. Other participants also spoke about the possibilities they had to develop the curriculum based on their learners, for example, Sadie described using topics which were specific to the learners' local area: "*things like local*

transport and local employers" (line 59). Similarly, Emma discussed her approach to teaching refugee-background students, which aims to be topical and include "*language that they will hear in certain circumstances*" (line 185). These responses share a common theme in their aspirations to focus on language that is relevant to learners' day-to-day lives and their local contexts.

The results across several interviews suggest that learner needs strongly influence the syllabus at multiple levels. This includes choosing relevant topics at the start of a term as well as influencing it at a more granular level, with teachers being prepared to "*exploit the language that's emerging*" (Anna, lines 124–125). Several other participants also indicate that the language elicited from learners is a primary determiner of classroom activities. Their responses foreground the learners and suggest a willingness to adjust lesson plans if there is a particular need. As Wette (2009: 339) discusses, this approach signals "a strong focus on explicit negotiation between teachers and learners and on language learning processes as the main focus of curriculum content as the course progresses". My participants described having a large amount of flexibility to diverge from a plan in the classroom and orient their teaching towards learner needs and interests, as Emma – a teacher with twenty-five years' of ESOL and EFL experience – describes:

> *"I think I'd rather address something that they have found interesting or confusing or you know they want to be able to use an expression but they're not sure about it, than say today we're going to do this part of grammar and we're going to talk about pets we own or something"* (lines 138–141).

Her approach suggests that this way of selecting topics increases student engagement in the class if the activities are relevant and learner focused. Other participants also mention the importance of activities and materials which are applicable to learners' daily lives and contexts in which they need to use English. While the teacher is responsible for material design and assembling a syllabus, one participant suggested that student-generated language content

gives learners more "*ownership*" and "*motivation*" (Lucas, line 128). This student focus, with teachers working with the language that learners have at their disposal, is seen as a core part of an ESOL teacher's role. However, as Oliver pointed out during a discussion about drawing on learner feedback, this will also depend on their language level: "*the problem is of course the extent to which they are equipped, linguistically equipped, for that level of discussion*" (lines 43–44). This participant seems to suggest that teachers' ability to incorporate learner-specific content in the class may be partly contingent on students' communicative competence.

While being guided by students' individual level of English is a core part of being an ESOL teacher, some of my participants had formed their own informal policies towards using other languages in the class. The following example from Alice references an informal policy that she co-created with her class:

> "[…] *sometimes we've done like having a bit of a chat about expectations at the start of the term and like what people want. They kind of come up with things that you would normally expect, like people should turn off their phones* […] *oh they tend to say speak English and join in, but it's not from a point of view that you can't speak your language, just kind of participate as much as you can I suppose. And that involves speaking English but certainly you can also speak your own language*" (lines 385–393).

Alice's teaching style appears to be one that encourages full participation in the class and invites students to join in where they can. This indicates an openness to using other languages in the classroom and moving fluidly across languages, i.e., translanguaging (García, 2009). Use of translanguaging strategies to draw on students' linguistic resources places value on other languages (Simpson, 2020). Later in the interview, Alice described using an advanced ESOL student as an interpreter in a mixed-level classroom, showing that she recognised the value of drawing on the multilingual skills of her students. Similarly, Lucas discussed his encouragement of peer-to-peer support in his classes, for example, putting students with the

same first language in pairs so they can translate instructions for each other. While this was not explicitly mentioned as a classroom policy, the data suggest that several teachers developed informal ways of being and acting in their classroom, for example, through the encouragement of multilingualism. These implicit expectations could be seen as a type of policy which supports learning outcomes and aspirations.

Several other participants referenced their openness to students using languages other than English in the class, with one interviewee (Aimee, a teacher with twenty-nine years of ESOL experience) questioning a narrative about a reported one-language policy in some ESOL research she had read:

> "*I've a few times flinched when I've read research about ESOL saying this happens in ESOL classes or teachers do this, and generally the things that irk me are not referenced as well so it's kind of assumptions not based on research. And it's things like there is predominantly a one-language policy in the classroom and I don't think that's true at all. It's certainly never been in my classroom*" (lines 265–269).

This runs counter to the monolingual approach seen in government policy and discourse, where an 'English only' approach is prevalent (Simpson, 2020). The examples above show that several participants recognise the value that drawing on other languages can add to the classroom. However, this view was not shared by all, with Sadie suggesting that a mixed-language classroom is better because "[the students] *definitely can't get away with speaking Arabic because there's people that don't speak Arabic in the class, which is a real problem when they're all together*" (lines 263–265). Although the predominant view among contemporary linguists is that translanguaging benefits students, this extract suggests that she aims to maintain a predominantly monolingual approach among the classes she manages. The description of a multilingual classroom as presenting an issue is reminiscent of the "monolingual ideology" that Blackledge (2005: 38) describes, in which multilingualism is seen as a threat to social integration.

Consequently, despite a growing body of research that shows the value of translanguaging (e.g., García and Wei, 2014; Simpson, 2020), my data suggest that attitudes to it vary. It is likely that the influence of monolingual government policy influences assumptions such as those discussed by Cummins (2007); for example, the belief that languages should be separate, and that students should not be allowed to draw on their first languages in the classroom. However, the prevailing attitudes seen in my data suggest positivity and openness towards facilitating the use of multiple languages in the ESOL classroom. Further research with a larger sample of ESOL teachers from different backgrounds and tenures would be necessary to explore perceptions in depth.

In conclusion, the data suggest that all participants are aware of the need for lesson content to be shaped by learners and their individual contexts, for example, their location and the situations they experience in their day-to-day lives. The responses also indicate that the teacher's position is to be the "manager of a complex matrix of curricular events designed to open up [...] learning opportunities" (Wette, 2010: 570). This may include drawing on learners' other linguistic resources when possible. This differs from more traditional views of teaching where the teacher prepares a syllabus which is then taken into the classroom and administered. It appears that teachers can use their agency to negotiate a curriculum in collaboration with their learners but that there may be some external constraints, such as learners' current ability.

4.3.2 Teachers' attitudes to ESOL and their influence on classroom policy

The data suggest that many teachers develop their own informal policies over time. Informal policy refers to their approach to classroom practice and teaching methods, which may be shaped by their attitudes and the principles to which they ascribe. For example, Sadie, a participant with over thirty years' experience of teaching English and who now manages a team of ESOL teachers, described ESOL as being "*fairly common sense really in what you're teaching*" (lines 99–100). This suggests that her personal policy was to prioritise functional

skills, which reflects the focus on “survival English” explored by Cooke (2006: 70). Functional skills, such as booking appointments at the GP or asking for directions, are staples of the ESOL diet. However, applying this competency-based model in the classroom, which aims to “prepare [students] for situations they commonly encounter in everyday life” (Richards, 2006: 41), arguably does not provide much scope or agency for teachers to encourage their classes to explore their own interests.

However, the attitude towards ESOL as being “common sense” was not held by all of my participants. Alice described the feeling of being caught between students’ demand for functional skills and her own pedagogical preference for participatory methods:

> “*I was kind of torn in two directions because people want English because they want to be able to just use it in a functional way and be very practical. But also there’s you know all the other ESOL classes do that, so it’s like do we really need another class that’s doing the same thing as the others?*” (lines 112–115).

Her response suggests that the prevailing ESOL classroom policy in general is to teach functional skills, as “*all the other ESOL classes do that*”. However, she also recognised that because this approach is so ubiquitous in mainstream ESOL provision, many teachers and students may simply be unaware of the possibility of other approaches and policies. Furthermore, she highlighted that there may be some resistance among students who are used to or expect a more traditional classroom approach where the teacher directs the topic. When I asked her to provide an example of what a baby step from a policy of predominantly functional ESOL to using participatory methods would look like, she described an approach that still focused on practical topics but did so in a way that encouraged students to generate ideas:

> "[…] *perhaps to start with them* [the Entry 3 group] *to kind of do some brainstorming around local products and services, perhaps something like that and if we can find any common questions or any common complaints. Because we’re all living in the same city*

> *we probably use a lot of the same services and see what comes up from that, and if we can then support each other to find solutions to those.* […] *And then we could work together on getting the information or making a complaint or sort of see what comes up from the initial brainstorm really*" (lines 140–149).

This example suggests that a key element of Alice's policy in the classroom is to make the subjects relevant for students. Rather than being an abstract scenario from a textbook, this approach unifies the teacher and students in working on a common problem. In doing so, this has a tangible outcome through which the students learn many functional skills along the way, such as how to find information about local services and what to do if they have a problem with them. The aim of Alice's policy appears to result in even more practical outcomes than teaching functional skills through using generic examples which students are then intended to apply to their everyday lives.

Similarly, Oliver described how his classroom policy developed into a more flexible model. The following extract from the data describes his process of moving from a curriculum of functional themes to personalising the lesson for his students:

> "[…] *I found very quickly that there was a certain woodenness about this. You could role-play being at the dentist [but] I didn't recollect ever saying to the dentist the things on the curriculum it suggested that you say*. […] *I then actually used that experience to largely abandon what was there in this pseudo-curriculum and do things which I was much more comfortable with, which was to get the class members to talk about themselves*. […] *So, in a sense we're now back to my policy in the classroom which as you've heard is really about getting the learners to be themselves through English, rather than be a person going to the dentist, if you see what I mean*" (lines 158–181).

As Oliver's current ESOL role is a volunteer teacher for an organisation which supports refugee-background students, there are likely more opportunities for agency to be flexible with the curriculum topics. However, the above example is also indicative of informal classroom

policies which ESOL teachers in other contexts also mentioned, for example, developing conversational English skills tailored to students' interests.

In conclusion, the data suggest that the classroom policies adopted by teachers depend partly on their attitudes to ESOL, as well as their ideologies and identities as teachers. I explore the impact of teacher identities and aspirations further in the Discussion chapter.

4.3.3 The joint roles of improvisation and flexibility in the ESOL classroom

While most teachers start out with a lesson plan, the data suggest that diversions from the plan are a common occurrence. Indeed, Wette (2010: 576) goes as far as to assert that teachers see "all curriculum plans as provisional and alterable in response to classroom events". This emphasis on improvisation was also evident in my participant responses. In response to a question about developing course plans, Peter, an ESOL teacher with fifteen years of experience, referenced the need to improvise as being a key skill:

> "[…] *when I've been teaching online, sometimes I've chosen the topic and sometimes I've said, well, suggested topics where we pick one from that topic. Yeah I'm willing to digress because it's interesting you know, if it's interesting to them, and I think it's part of the skill of being an experienced ESOL teacher, you know how to improvise*" (lines 224–228).

This response indicates that he is willing to be flexible in the classroom and is open to being guided by the interests of his students, which is a common finding in my interview data. The perception that improvisation is an important skill for ESOL teachers is borne out in other responses, which reflect participants' predominant beliefs and attitudes towards ESOL teaching. For example, during a discussion about policy, Lauren spoke about the constraints of producing evidence of targets for each student:

> *"If you're a good ESOL teacher, you don't need that. If you're a bad ESOL teacher, then you do it perfectly because you're not actually doing what you should be doing in the classroom"* (lines 69–70).

Her opinion suggests that decisions on teaching methods and approaches should be characterised by flexibility and that where cultures of bureaucracy exist, they limit teachers from helping students to achieve their best in the classroom. In her view, a skilled ESOL teacher does not necessarily need to rely on form and structure. Anna also supports other participants' views that an ESOL teacher needs to arrive in the classroom with an open mind and the skill to identify affordances (Gibson, 1966) for learning in the environment around them. In our discussion, she referenced previous research by Baynham et al. (2007), who describe ESOL teachers as being like *bricoleurs* – defined as "a French handyman who uses whatever is at hand to do the job" (Baynham et al., 2007: 76):

> "*So it's like I think it's the French word for a handyperson who comes in with a toolkit and then will use whatever is needed to do the job. So, a general handyperson. So, you know we really as teachers we need to be really awake and present for the students and you know pull things out of our toolkit*" (lines 210–213).

Her emphasis on being "*awake and present*" highlights that no two ESOL classes are the same and that, while teachers may set a syllabus for one year, it will not necessarily be applicable or relevant to the following year's cohort. However, while participants unanimously emphasised the importance of having a student-centred approach to language generation and lesson content, their approach to lesson planning and developing schemes of work varies. Some teachers described a preference for detailed planning in order to have a clear framework for the academic year, whereas others were comfortable with developing lessons as they progress through the term or course even when preparing students for exams. In a response to a question about her approach to teaching, Lauren (a teacher with a total of thirty years of

English teaching experience, including eleven years of ESOL) elaborated on how she prefers to plan:

> "[…] *my schemes of work would have whole lesson plans in them. Not for the people reading them but for me, because it meant for the year on out, I would know what I was doing. But that doesn't mean to say that we couldn't go off on a tangent because that's what the students wanted to do*" (lines 316–319).

Her approach suggests that she negotiated agency within the macro environment of her workplace and the policies that she had to follow. In this extract, "*the people reading*" the schemes of work and lesson plans refers to inspections by Ofsted and the paperwork that it was necessary to compile as evidence of setting targets and objectives for each student. However, as she discussed, this was also related to her personal style; as a teacher, she felt more comfortable setting up a framework and making decisions about the class focus in advance, but she emphasised that content was ultimately learner-focused and there was still scope for student-generated activities. In contrast, Peter took a much more iterative approach and described his preference not to use schemes of work where possible:

> "[…] *schemes of work I don't think much of that really, because what I do is* […] *well when I was teaching exams I would have a very strong focus on the exam but we'd try to make it interesting as well so we would be* […] *I would gradually develop activities and resources as I went through the course rather than sitting down and 'here's the plan*'" (lines 219–223).

Peter's response suggests that it is possible to maintain a high degree of flexibility in his teaching, even in the context of guiding students towards a formal qualification. Other participants' responses also emphasise the importance of flexibility right from the start. For example, Oliver described his approach to walking into each new classroom with fresh eyes:

> "[…] *each time I meet a class or new students, I understand that it's fresh, that these are people who are trying to learn something, that I don't have all the answers, that we need to get together to sort things out, where we're going, how we're getting there, how quickly, how slowly, how to include everybody if it's a group of students, how to form an efficient and effective learning group*" (lines 91–95).

The excerpts above also point to the wide scope for teachers and students to be agentive, for instance, the many opportunities for questions and negotiations that Oliver points out. His use of the collective "we" suggests an openness to student input and that, as the teacher, he positions himself as working *with* the students.

The need for flexibility and improvisation is also apparent in teachers' discussions of how they approach sensitive topics. Regarding classroom policies, a key finding in the data is how teachers use their experience to negotiate potentially triggering topics together with their knowledge of ESOL students' backgrounds. ESOL classes generally contain students from a variety of backgrounds and often include refugees. Therefore, as several teachers highlighted in the interviews, it is important to keep in mind that certain topics, such as the concepts of 'home' and 'family', may be more likely to trigger anxiety and other difficult emotions. In the data, teachers' approaches vary, with the predominant response being to find a balance between avoiding topics altogether and adapting them in a sensitive, thoughtful way. For example, if a lesson focus is about family, Alice described her approach to adapting it:

> "*I tend to lump it together with friends and family because at least most people at least know someone so you can talk about someone you live with in your house or someone you play football with*" (lines 332–335).

This demonstrates a simple yet effective way of being flexible to changing the topic to be more appropriate for the audience. Other teachers also spoke about finding different ways of teaching topics which may be emotionally or culturally insensitive, with Emma describing her constant awareness that "*you've always got to have that sort of trigger warning idea*"

(lines 297–298) when preparing lessons for diverse cohorts of ESOL learners. Again, this highlights the key role of improvisation in being an ESOL teacher, as well as being observant and responding to student feedback. This also applies to TESOL and signifies that teachers must be aware of the heterogeneity of student demographics and be able to adapt when appropriate. However, as Oliver pointed out, this is partly contingent on teachers' level of experience:

> "[…] *if I was working with a group of teachers, especially teachers who haven't been teaching for very long, I would equally say to them "right, don't go there" because it's safer. Whereas, gosh, you know this is a typical example of "do as I say, not as I do", whereas for myself I feel I know how to do that*" (lines 218–222).

In his example, he described using photos of his family and his local area as props to talk about his daily routine. As an experienced ESOL teacher with forty years of practical knowledge, he was able to approach the topic with care. Talking about his own experience deflected from putting the focus on potentially sensitive information from his students' backgrounds. Instead, as he pointed out, it allowed them to gradually share as much or as little as they wanted to. As Vee (2021) suggests, exercises can be adapted to use fictional characters or cartoons to distance the topic from potential triggers. The teachers in my sample all had a considerable amount of experience and, therefore, had developed their own policies for tackling potentially sensitive or taboo topics. Palanac (2019) suggested that common ESOL tasks can be especially challenging for refugee students: "requiring students to talk about themselves and specific details of their lives, especially in front of others, can cause intense anxiety and risk re-triggering trauma in some students" (Palanac, 2019: 8). Therefore, giving students control and agency about what they want to share, as Oliver discussed, is one way of approaching sensitive issues. While a focus on personalising the lesson is the aim of many ESOL teachers, Palanac's example suggests that raising awareness of the specific needs of refugee-background students – for example, activities when personalisation may not always be appropriate – should be a part of ESOL teacher training.

My data suggest that experienced ESOL teachers feel capable of negotiating sensitive topics through careful adaptation and flexibility. However, further exploration would be merited into the reasons for some teachers' avoidance of certain topics, e.g., whether they feel unable to manage students with trauma that may arise in a classroom. While the role is as an ESOL teacher and not as a therapist, there are unique challenges involved in teaching refugee-background students. As Capstick (2018) suggests, "language learning classes are increasingly seen by many agencies as a potential space in which to deliver psychosocial support alongside or embedded in formal language learning" (Capstick, 2018: 60). My data support this point, with an example from Lucas in which he spoke about being asked by his local council to offer advice on a healthy diet and routine to support asylum seekers who had recently turned eighteen. This pastoral care was expected to be part of his ESOL instruction.

In conclusion, my interview data show that teachers are not simply "transmitters of written plans and prescriptions" (Wette, 2010: 569). Instead, they draw on their agency, professional knowledge, experience and the contexts around them to create a bespoke and adaptable plan for the needs of their classes. The results suggest that an approach for tackling sensitive issues is a part of experienced ESOL teachers' classroom policy, whether their policy is 'no questions asked' or whether they choose to introduce such topics slowly. As the global refugee crisis worsens, empirical research would be warranted on how to equip less experienced ESOL teachers with the skills they need to teach students who have experienced, or are experiencing, significant trauma and stress.

4.3.4 Insufficient ESOL training as a barrier for teaching low-literacy learners

While participants appear to be generally comfortable with improvising, several teachers mentioned the need for more specific training and development for ESOL teachers. This is primarily due to a lack of knowledge and support on how to teach pre-literate learners and those with a low level of literacy, even among experienced teachers. In a response to a question near the end of our interview, when I was probing whether there were any specific

points about teaching refugee and asylum seeker learners, Lucas referenced having to rely on online videos to teach himself on how to train learners to develop basic writing skills:

> "[…] *there isn't a great deal of material out there, and I think what we need is something at government funded and a bit more structured on presenting literacy at a very, very low level from the very beginning really. I mean I think we're basically left to YouTube on sort of cursive writing and how to direct the direction the pen needs to go in across the page. You know we need a bit more direction on the fine motor skills of holding a pencil and a pen, it's bizarre how so much attention is paid at the higher levels"* (lines 343–348).

This response indicates a feeling that teachers are largely left to decide for themselves on how to approach teaching low-literacy learners. Alice also called for "*some sort of pre-entry syllabus because* […] *as far as I can see nothing seems to exist for the pre-entry*" (lines 233–234). While this freedom likely allows teachers a high degree of agentive possibilities, the data suggest that more support is needed for teaching learners with basic skills. Other participants also mention having to train themselves to support pre-literate learners and related challenges, such as motivating learners who are struggling and may have no prior experience of formal education in their first language(s).

The current lack of government funding and support for ESOL teachers with low-literacy classes suggests that these learner populations are under-valued and under-funded. Sunderland and Moon (2009) argue that funding and government policy excludes these learners from accessing ESOL provision due to a focus on meeting exam targets and accreditations – something that low-literacy learners simply do not have the skills to achieve. When funding is tied to exam passes, this inherently discriminates against students who do not yet have the capabilities to progress to an accredited level. Furthermore, as Sunderland and Moon (2009: 188) identify, the ESOL teacher standards do not include guidance or advice on teaching this population of learners. As my data suggest, little has changed in the intervening years between their paper and the current context at the time of writing in 2022.

This appears to be a significant oversight in macro-level ESOL policy and planning, as many ESOL learners – especially those from certain asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds – may have low literacy levels in their first language and, therefore, need additional help and support to progress to literacy in English (Chamorro, Garrido-Hornos and Vázquez-Amador, 2021). Stevenson (2020) identifies the most vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, i.e., those fleeing the geopolitical situation in parts of the Middle East and North Africa regions, to be the population with the most acute needs. However, Sunderland and Moon (2009) made a striking point in their use of an example of an Ancient Greek course at Oxford University in comparison with an ESOL course for new users of English. As they point out, both courses can be for learners with no prior knowledge of literacy in that language; for example, students who are studying Ancient Greek or Classics can apply to the degree with no previous knowledge of Greek or Latin. However, much greater social prestige and status is applied to those who are becoming literate in Ancient Greek at Oxford University as opposed to those who are developing literacy in English.

This suggests that, while ESOL teachers likely do not ascribe to this perception themselves, there is still a prevailing 'deficit' view of ESOL learners (Conteh-Morgan, 2003; Simpson, 2011) in top-down policy. The 'deficit' extends to the available opportunities for ESOL teachers to develop, as Chick and Sidaway (2020) examine. They surveyed 209 ESOL teachers in England and Wales and identified the need for teachers to be offered greater support with teaching literacy skills. Teacher training courses such as the CELTA or similar qualifications do not cover these topics extensively, and yet many ESOL teachers come from CELTA backgrounds. Participant Sadie, who spent more than thirty years teaching English before moving into ESOL management, identified this as a potential issue during our interview. Furthermore, she pointed out that tutors who have completed the CELTA qualification may only have had exposure to teaching "*intermediate or slightly higher-level students*" (line 139), as students who are attending CELTA classes run by trainee teachers are unlikely to be very low-level learners.

This is not an issue that is exclusive to the UK. As Baecher, Kasper and Mincin (2019) identify, inadequate preparation of teachers to meet the specific needs of refugee-background students is a common problem in the United States. Research in the Australian context (e.g., Miller, Mitchell and Brown, 2005) and in Canada (e.g., Miles and Bailey-McKenna, 2016) also illustrates the unique needs of low-literacy refugees and asylum seekers and the challenges that teachers experience, such as the difficulty in sourcing appropriate materials. One of my participants, Emma, also mentioned this obstacle during our interview:

> "[…] *the materials available weren't appropriate in a lot of cases because they didn't match the students' experience when you were teaching refugees and asylum seekers*" (lines 243–245).

These responses suggest that developing appropriate policy to support ESOL teachers and students from specific demographic backgrounds is a global issue, reflecting the increasing trend of forcibly displaced people, which exceeded eighty-four million worldwide in 2021 (UNHCR, 2021).

4.4 Conclusion

The overall findings suggest that ESOL teachers do have a certain extent of agency. A surprising finding from my participants is the lack of top-down bureaucracy. Except for funding constraints, it appears that ESOL teachers can be largely flexible in making decisions about their teaching methods and class focus. Where possible, they seek input from their classes and see this as an opportunity to increase students' engagement and motivation with the topic. The findings suggest that teachers' ability to improvise and be flexible are key to spotting opportunities for agency and taking the decision to act, whether this concerns a change in lesson focus part-way through or updating the syllabus iteratively to reflect students' developing needs and interests. However, they also seem to indicate that when there is ample agency, this can be a constraining factor too. For example, although there is little available

policy on how teachers should structure the curriculum for low-literacy learners, some structured support and training is necessary to enable teachers to act. In a survey by Chamorro, Garrido-Hornos and Vázquez-Amador (2021), almost half of the teachers identified a lack of L1 literacy and lack of formal education as the main barrier for refugee and asylum seeker students in the UK. Consequently, this is a key issue for focus in future policy development.

Chapter 5: Discussion (an ecological model approach)

5.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is an exploration of what the results suggest, with reference to my research questions and the literature. The theoretical framework of Biesta and Tedder (2007) and Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015) ecological approach to teacher agency, which underpin this research, are discussed in relation to my research findings. The definition of teacher agency that I have adopted, based on the literature, is that it is an "emergent phenomenon" (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015: 20) which refers to teachers' freedom to choose and make decisions. The etymological root of 'agency' is from the medieval Latin 'agentia', meaning action or activity (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022). As the ecological approach posits, the action that teachers can take is dependent on the environment around them. When I refer to learner agency, this signals "the feeling of ownership and control that learners have over their own learning" (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021: 2).

The complementary nature of the themes in my results reflect the interactions seen in an ecosystem, which in this sense is intended to refer to the relationships between an individual and the surrounding environment **and** an interconnected network. As discussed in the literature review, several researchers (e.g., Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Teng, 2019) view teacher agency as being subject to multiple interacting factors. This "dynamic *interplay*" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 963), or "interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors" (Biesta and Tedder, 2007: 137), is visualised in the ecological model proposed by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015). This model builds on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) proposal of iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions of agency. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson's (2015) model was cited in the literature review and is repeated below (see Figure 3) for ease of reference in this chapter. Their model incorporates themes such as the influence of social structures (e.g., relationships and trust), the materials and resources available to teachers,

and their short- and long-term aspirations. Most of the dimensions in the model emerged as discussion topics in the interviews for the current study, which adds weight to the proposal of the ecological model to explain how teachers achieve professional agency.

In the following pages, I present a discussion of how my research contributes to our understanding of the themes under each dimension in Biesta, Priestley and Robinson's model (see Figure 3). I begin by drawing on participants' discussion of their careers and professional histories (the "iterational" dimension). Secondly, the discussion focuses on the themes under the "practical-evaluative" dimension (cultural, structural and material), which emerged as the most frequent themes cited by participants. Finally, an exploration of teachers' aspirations and goals sits below the "projective" dimension, which looks towards the future.

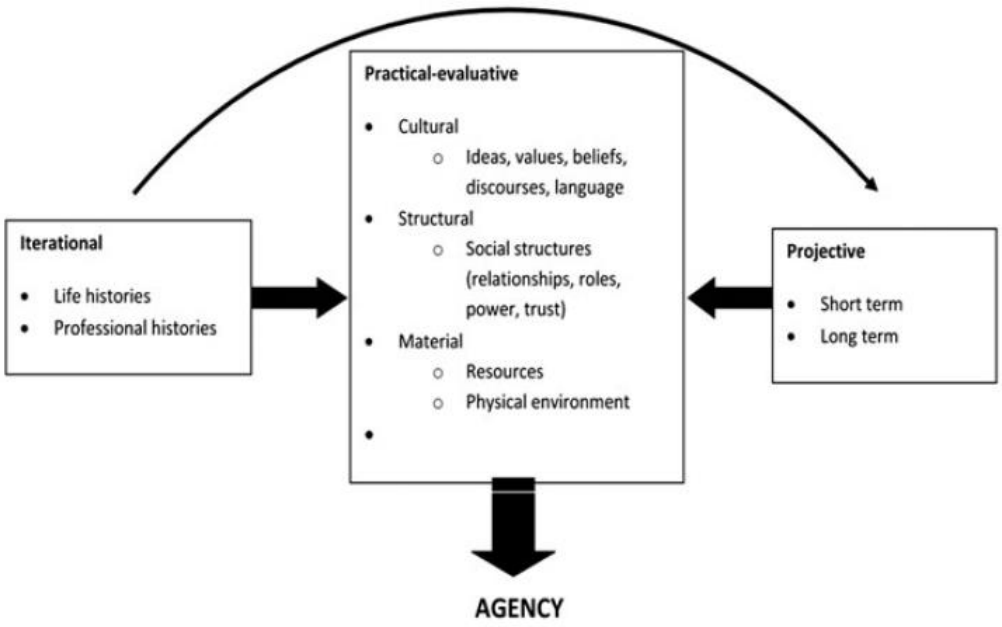

Figure 3: A model for understanding the achievement of agency (Biesta, Priestley and Robinson, 2015: 627).

5.2 The impact of professional histories and career experience on agency

In Biesta, Priestley and Robinson's (2015) paper, their model raises the question of "Where do teachers' beliefs come from (the iterational dimension)?" (Biesta, Priestley and Robinson, 2015: 627). While my interviews did not focus explicitly on teachers' professional experience, nonetheless this emerged as a frequent topic of conversation in relation to their teaching approaches. All interviewees had considerable levels of classroom experience and had developed their own approaches to teaching within the context of their institution, e.g., the specific exam topics they were required to teach. As Borg (2003, 2006) discusses, experiential knowledge is one contributor to teachers' beliefs, but these beliefs can have a variety of sources, such as teachers' own experience of learning a language themselves and how they apply their own beliefs about language learning in the classroom.

In connection with teacher agency, which in this sense refers to the ability to be active and make appropriate decisions in their roles, the teachers in this study all appeared to have confidence in their judgements and actions. They bring a wealth of experience to their work, and more than half of the participants had taught students abroad as well as in the UK. I did not ask my participants for detailed professional histories and, therefore, we did not explore the impact of living and working in a different culture. However, some research suggests that working abroad can contribute to changes in teacher cognition and their beliefs about language learning (e.g., Medina, Hathaway, and Pilonieta, 2015; Yazan, 2017). Such research frequently focuses on the impact of *studying* abroad, as opposed to working, which opens up a potential avenue for future investigation. As yet, there is little research which focuses specifically on how ESOL teachers' experience of working in locations outside their home country affects their approach to teaching.

Teacher education is one area that participants frequently mentioned as instrumental to their approach. My participants came from a variety of backgrounds, with some having completed teacher training courses such as the CELTA or equivalent and others having completed academic qualifications such as master's degrees and doctorates in the field of

language and linguistics. In some cases, this experience appeared to shape their perceptions of language teaching. For example, several participants mentioned the difference between learning on the job, honing techniques based on experience and "*finding out about how teaching actually works*" (Oliver, lines 110–111), compared to observations of teachers who had simply memorised the techniques which they learned in a foundation-level teacher training course.

Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015: 636) argue that "agency is highly dependent upon the personal qualities that teachers bring to their work". It appears that these personal qualities shape teachers' practices, for example, a teacher with greater self-awareness may use frequent reflective practice to build upon their understanding of students' needs and how they can adapt their practice accordingly. Research suggests that "the outcomes of teacher education vary across individual trainees, who make sense of the training programmes in different ways" (Morton, McGuire and Baynham, 2006: 37). It could, therefore, be suggested that there is a personality-contingent influence on how teachers interpret their previous training and how they develop over the course of their professional career. Some teachers, whose personalities are perhaps less risk-averse, may feel more comfortable arriving in class without a pre-set structure or agenda, whereas others who prefer to have everything mapped out for the year may be less comfortable with making agentive decisions. The findings in my data support this suggestion, with a variety of approaches to lesson planning depending on the personal preference of the teacher. It is likely that these teachers have arrived at their current approaches partly because of their cumulative years of experience. As Wette (2009: 360) discusses in her case study of seven ESOL teachers, it takes "skill and professional knowledge […] to realize or transform a planned curriculum into an instructional curriculum as a course unfolds in time". The element of time is critical here – my findings suggest that agency is developed over time as teachers develop a firmer sense of their identities and that their professional experience, which accumulates over time, underpins this. This is explored further in the following section.

5.3 Enacting agency in the present

The “practical-evaluative” dimension of Biesta, Priestley and Robinson’s (2015) model is arguably where the most tangible influences on agency lie. Whereas the others are more ephemeral and harder to observe in practice – for example, the influence of past experiences and people’s life stories, or projections into the future for short- and long-term goals – the “practical-evaluative” is firmly situated in the present. It is defined as “*the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations*” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). Consequently, it is dependent on the physical materials that teachers have at their disposal, the social structures that shape their daily interactions and behaviours, and the discourses that surround them in their professional networks and their place of work.

The responses from participants in this study focus mainly on these practical aspects of enacting agency. The key themes that I explored in the Results chapter relate primarily to the practical-evaluative dimension, as they concern cultural ideas and beliefs about language, the social structures and institutional hierarchy, and the material resources available to teachers in their environment (e.g., materials for teaching, the curriculum and government funding). The results suggest that these three aspects interact to either afford or constrain teacher agency in practice. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe, being agentive means being able to make choices between different courses of action. However, it seems that the social structures and institutional hierarchy will inevitably shape the types of action that can be taken, for example, Peter’s report of a college where managers chose the exam topics despite having little hands-on knowledge of the interests of the student cohort. In this case, Peter was still able to enact some degree of agency by attempting to produce engaging lesson content within the topic. Related aspects of hierarchy and social power were frequent themes in the data, with other responses suggesting that freedom to act is often dependent on managers and senior management teams. Therefore, it could be suggested that trust is a key

ingredient for teachers to be able to achieve agency, as several participants spoke about having managers who displayed trust in their ability to make the right judgements for their classes.

Enacting agency in the present is also contingent on the resources available in the physical environment and spotting opportunities to use them to students' advantage. As discussed in the literature review, identifying such affordances and then feeling able to utilise them is partly dependent on teachers' level of experience (Teng, 2019). My findings are all from experienced ESOL practitioners and, therefore, they expressed confidence in developing activities and using the environment around them as a learning opportunity. Alice's example of exploring local products and services in the city and finding solutions to common issues demonstrated the use of affordances. It is also an example of agency in practice, as she was able to make the decision to explore her own interests in participatory teaching methods by choosing an approach that suited both her preferred pedagogical style and encouraged her learners to develop their agency through generating their own ideas.

As well as the structural and material aspects of the practical-evaluative dimension, cultural aspects were a salient finding in my data. This includes teachers' beliefs about their identity, in connection with agency and the classroom policies that they developed and enacted in practice. The development of identity appears to be an ongoing process throughout a teacher's career. It evolves from early-service teaching, when there is perhaps more dependence on the toolkit of techniques that they have learned during their training, and it takes time for new teachers to develop their own sense of who they are as a teacher. As Singh and Richards (2006) suggest, identity encompasses how teachers define themselves as well as their approach to the practical 'nuts and bolts' of teaching itself:

> "Teacher-learning involves not only discovering more about the skills and knowledge of language teaching but also *what it means* to be a language teacher. Identity seems to play a special role in teaching, as compared with other professions" (Singh and Richards, 2006: 155).

In my interviews, whether teachers spoke about their identity explicitly or not, it was a recurring thread throughout our discussions. The way in which teachers spoke about themselves, their attitudes and their teaching methods revealed telling details about how they identify as teachers. However, it should be noted that the way I interpret and discuss their identities may be different to how they would describe them. Pennington and Richards (2016: 7) reference this gap in perception, as there may be discrepancies in the ways in which people tell stories about themselves and how these stories of their "self-image and self-awareness [are] understood by others".

As mentioned in the literature review, previous studies (e.g., Borg, 2003; Crookes, 2015; Golombek, 2015) have developed models of teacher cognition which include identity and beliefs, both about themselves as teachers and about the learning process in general. A growing body of research is acknowledging the importance of teachers' identity and beliefs in connection with how they can act agentively in the classroom, for example, Biesta, Priestley and Robinson's (2015) model generates questions about how teachers develop their beliefs and how they act as drivers for action and what teachers *do*. A key question, then, is: "How do beliefs influence what is actually done, that is, how do they function as resources for engagement in the concrete situations in and through which teachers act?" (Biesta, Priestley and Robinson, 2015: 628).

In one of my interviews, the participant presented a striking metaphor to describe his personal formation of identity as a teacher and how he developed it over time. When he was still early in his career, he said that he was like an actor who goes out on stage with a perfectly rehearsed script to follow. The students were the audience observing him and his priority was to repeat his lines and not get anything wrong. However, he described his identity shifting over time and a realisation that his true aim was to be there to help other people rather than to put on a show for them. The metaphor of the early-career teacher as performer is borne out in previous research which suggests a level of comfort in using pre-rehearsed exercises and

activities as ‘props’ while inexperienced teachers develop their identities over time (e.g., Soini et al., 2015; Teng, 2019).

As teachers become more experienced over time, building up their knowledge and developing their confidence in the classroom, findings from the literature and my participants’ experience suggests that this leads to awareness of their identity emerging in tandem with agency. Identity interacts with agency in the sense that when teachers have a solid grounding of who they are and how they want to be in the classroom, they feel more at ease trying out different ideas and identifying affordances in the environment around them. In other words, experienced teachers can freely exploit opportunities for teaching and learning, as Liu and Chao (2018) highlight, and their capacity for agency is influenced by their identity which is, in turn, shaped by their experience (Teng, 2019: 83).

5.4 Teachers’ aspirations and perceptions of their role

Finally, in this section, I discuss the “projective” aspects of agency. Teachers’ aspirations for their classes emerged as a frequent discussion topic during my interviews, and this reflects the “projective” dimension of Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015), which looks towards short- and long-term goals. My findings suggest that these goals are also interlinked with how teachers view themselves and the beliefs that they hold towards their students. Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015: 3) reference “the belief that the teacher is the most important ‘factor’ in the educational process”, as supported by educational policy. However, my data suggests that teachers are more likely to see themselves as facilitators, foregrounding the learners instead. For example, one participant (Anna) implied that her role is to support students to develop based on the language they hear around them. The telling phrase that she used, “if one can call oneself a teacher”, suggests that her perception of her role is less of a hierarchical teacher/student relationship and, instead, as an enabler of emerging language. This sense is heightened by her correction of herself when speaking about students’ English based on their everyday interactions, where she initially refers to the teacher

developing the students' language and then adjusts her perspective to the teacher "help[ing]" to develop their language:

> "*So they are able to bring in their daily encounters with English and as teachers, if one can call oneself a teacher, one can develop that, you know* ***help them*** [emphasis mine] *develop that*" (lines 117–119).

While I did not collect empirical data on learner agency, research supports teachers' agency in enabling learners to have more freedom to act and make decisions about what they want to study (e.g., Mercer, 2012; Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021). It would require a shift from the traditionally hierarchical nature of a teacher/student relationship, but it could be suggested that there is a symbiotic relationship between teacher and learner agency in the sense that when teachers are open to unexpected requests and questions raised in their classroom, they can also empower their students by enabling them to progress and develop their language learning. This perspective sees teaching and learning as collaborative, with teachers' roles going "hand in hand with learner agency" (Liu and Chao, 2018: 16) and supporting the action-based pedagogy described by van Lier (2007).

Teachers' aspirations for their classes were a recurring theme throughout my data collection process, with several interviewees citing the desire for their students to be empowered to do the work rather than passively absorbing information. As one participant described it, "*it's just about setting up a fairly loosely framed task and then they are away*" (Anna). At the micro level, this brings us back to the relationship between structure and agency; complete freedom in a class is unlikely to result in agency but, when students have the structure of a task, it can enable them to progress. To reiterate van Lier's perspective, "[a] well designed structure can instigate and enhance pedagogical processes that, without the structure, would not be possible" (van Lier, 2007: 52).

The data also presented teachers' views of their students at odds with the wider policy discourse, which tends to see them for what they lack rather than what they bring to the table.

As Simpson (2011) identifies, ESOL students are often viewed “in a limited, deficit way as potential employees and as test-takers” (Simpson, 2011: 10). However, my data found that teachers’ aspirations for their students differ from governmental policy. While in some cases, teachers were partly constrained by having to ‘teach to the test’ and prepare students for exams, their main aspirations were for learners to be able to communicate well and, as a result, to be able to live full lives outside the classroom. The frequently mentioned goals of facilitating learner expression and helping them to bring their whole selves into the classroom suggest that most teachers are aware of the richness of experience and diverse backgrounds of their ESOL cohorts. However, the discussion of ESOL as being primarily a skills-focused, functional discipline suggests that there is an opportunity to expand on this. While students need practical day-to-day skills, such as being able to purchase a bus ticket or ask for directions, there is an argument for taking a step back and exploring other approaches which enable more personalisation and flexibility. Of course, this is contingent on several factors, such as the language level of the students, teachers’ familiarity with different pedagogies and the support that teachers have from their workplace.

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that the practice of ESOL is as diverse as its students and, therefore, there is much to learn from the lived experience of professionals working in the sector. While there is an increasing research focus on what teachers think and believe, and how this shapes their practice, it is important to close the gap between theory and the understanding of teachers’ experience on the ground. In doing so, this could enable teachers to achieve even greater agency in their practice, as encouraging “research literacy” (Xerri and Pioquinto, 2018) would promote conscious reflection on teachers’ current methods and perhaps broaden their awareness of different pedagogical options. The current study has expanded our understanding of the complex factors that come together to create an environment which is either conducive to or prohibitive of teacher agency. It adds support to the idea that agency is

not inherent in a person and their characteristics, but that it is an active operation that requires external support.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this research was to explore perceptions of agency among ESOL teachers. The findings add to the expanding field of teacher agency; this is still under-theorised in the ESOL sector as most previous studies focus on teaching in other education settings such as secondary schools and colleges. My research project sampled people with ESOL teaching experience who work in an ESOL context in England. The research approach used semi-structured interviews and an inductive qualitative analysis to report on ESOL teachers' experiences of agency, choice of pedagogy and the influence of formal and informal policies while teaching.

6.2 A summary of key findings

Similar to trends in the literature, my results support the ecological approach to agency and add support to Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) theoretical view of agency as a temporal process, which argues that influences from the past, present and future all interact and contribute to the formation of individual agency. The main findings from the analysis indicate that teachers generally feel that they have scope to make decisions and act with agency, without being bound by top-down bureaucracy or strict policies. Government funding was cited as the main constraint and this sometimes limits enrolment, but there appears to be sparse policy on the type of material or approach that teachers should adopt.

A key finding was that several teachers recognised there is scope for more innovative approaches in the ESOL sector, going beyond the functional approach and content of a typical ESOL class. There are efforts to share knowledge and materials, according to the findings from my interviews. However, in the current context of a lack of a cohesive strategy for ESOL in England, the findings suggest that many teachers are working in silos and that there is a

lack of joined-up support for teachers across England. This is especially the case in teaching pre- or low-literacy learners, where teachers' responses cited using YouTube videos to teach themselves how to teach basic motor skills to adults. In such cases, it appears that having too much agency could be a limiting factor on agency itself; there may be a need for some structure and guidance to facilitate decision-making and paths of action.

6.3 Limitations and opportunities for future research

While this study has contributed to the literature on agency in ESOL, there are numerous opportunities to explore further, as teacher agency is an exciting and rapidly expanding field. A major limitation of the current work is that all participants had a considerable level of ESOL experience. While this was advantageous in allowing me to access knowledgeable participants who had fully formed opinions based on their years of experience, analysis of how teachers develop agency and negotiate their environment would be warranted with a sample of less experienced teachers. My findings suggest that teachers develop their identities and decision-making practices over time and, therefore, it would be interesting to elicit the perspectives of more junior teachers.

Secondly, a methodological limitation of the study is that I used network sampling to reach participants. A potential criticism of network sampling is that it can lead to an 'echo chamber' effect as people are only referring within their own social and professional networks. However, the aim of the study was for an in-depth qualitative exploration, and I succeeded in reaching participants from different teaching backgrounds and areas in England. A further methodological limitation is that my findings on teacher agency are based on interviews and their reports of how they act in the classroom, rather than based on classroom observation. The interview approach that I adopted was due to difficulties in obtaining ethics clearance for observations, especially in the context of the timescale of this study. Future studies could include observation as a way of gathering empirical findings based on direct observation of what teachers *do* as opposed to what they *say* they do. Direct observation and, potentially,

interviews with the learners themselves could also provide opportunities for further research to investigate learner agency alongside the teachers. In the results of this study, learner requirements appear to be an influential factor in teachers' decision-making, which suggests that learners may also be exercising some level of agency. Future research could explore the intersection between teacher and learner agency and how it is achieved.

For future research, there is also an opportunity to explore how to achieve a balance between encouraging agency while still maintaining a cohesive team environment where teachers are aware of collective goals and requirements. As teachers are usually subject to the decisions from management and the hierarchy of their workplace, it would be interesting to see how they negotiate agency within this team environment. Nonetheless, despite the limitations discussed above, the findings of this study have several practical implications for the sector.

6.4 General recommendations for the ESOL sector

The following suggestions for action are based on my participants' responses and identification of areas that are currently lacking in ESOL provision, according to this research.

1. The development of targeted support and training for ESOL teachers

This support could range from mentoring by other ESOL teachers to the development of a formally accredited training course which is targeted specifically for the demographics that ESOL teachers are likely to have in their classes. ESOL teachers currently lack any formalised support and guidance for teaching learners with low or no literacy and, therefore, there is an urgent need to address this gap. Arguably, ESOL teachers also need more support with trauma-informed pedagogies to raise awareness of the mental health needs of their cohorts and to provide strategies for teaching students who may have experienced trauma.

2. A focus on diversity and inclusion in course materials

In the current study, several ESOL teachers cited the lack of appropriate materials in formal coursebooks and mentioned the issue of sensitive topics, for example, the inherent privilege assumed in activities about holidays abroad or shopping for pleasure. Coursebooks tend to be aimed at the typical idea of an EFL learner – a predominantly middle-class, white, European person – and specifics are removed to try and make coursebooks widely applicable. However, several teachers in the study mentioned that coursebooks are a useful resource, especially if they choose to present formal aspects of grammar in a class. In those cases, coursebooks provide them with a structure to do so, which is especially valuable for early career teachers who are building up their repertoire of knowledge and may be less comfortable with improvising. Therefore, there is a need for coursebooks and materials which are culturally inclusive.

3. Future research that explores how to use culturally sensitive materials to empower and educate women in ESOL classes

Some interview participants mentioned that women are less likely than men to have full access to ESOL classes, often due to conflicts with their daily schedules, a lack of childcare and/or perceptions that literacy is less needed or valued for women in their community. While this led to some interesting discussions in my data, this topic was outside the focus and scope of this research project. However, it is an important and valid topic which merits future research. A research project could explore a dual disadvantage that women experience when they move to a country where the language is not their L1 and are unable to access English learning resources equally. The materials used in class could be designed to raise awareness of these issues and offer specific support for women.

6.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, investigations of teacher agency have increased notably within the past decade; therefore, my findings add to a burgeoning area of study. While this study was small-scale, it has helped to add some insights into the current practices of ESOL teachers and the external influences which are prominent in their environment. In the absence of classroom observation, this study aimed to foreground teachers' lived experiences through their self-reported perspectives. The intention throughout the study was to maintain a practical focus on teachers' experiences, while integrating theoretical perspectives. Finally, the contribution of this study is that it supports the ecological model of agency; the results indicate that achieving agency is complex and dependent on an array of contextual factors, including teacher cognition, career experience and workplace hierarchy. Future research could explore this further and promote a discussion of how agency can be fostered throughout teachers' careers.

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Appendices

APPENDIX I – Sample participant information sheet

Participant information sheet

Provisional title: The critical roles of access, agency and integration in English-language education provision to refugees and asylum seekers in the UK

Researcher: Myriam Day – myriam.day@yorksj.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr. Indu Meddegama (i.meddegama@yorksj.ac.uk)

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you wish to take part. Please ask me (myriam.day@yorksj.ac.uk) if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the study about?
The study aims to explore the impact of policymaking decisions on current ESOL teaching practices for students from refugee backgrounds. This includes wider policies at a government level as well as informal policies which are created between teachers and students (e.g., agreed classroom codes of conduct). The primary goals of the study are to explore the levels of agency that ESOL service providers, including teachers and tutors, feel they have in negotiating these policies.

Do I have to take part?
No, participation is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part, you will receive a copy of this information sheet via email. You will also be asked to sign a consent form. You can withdraw at any time.

What do I have to do?
Participation in the study involves a short interview (up to 1 hour) in which I will ask some open-ended questions about your experience of ESOL policies and ESOL provision. The interview will be recorded, but any personal information collected during the research will be kept strictly confidential. In addition, pseudonyms will be adopted for all participants.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
While there is no immediate personal benefit, the researcher hopes that the outcome of the study will contribute to the existing scholarship on ESOL teaching practices for a frequently disadvantaged group. The study aims to be applicable to real-world practices and discuss the findings in relation to their implications for wider policy decisions, as well as suggesting new areas of investigation.

What will happen after the interview?
I will contact you again to share the results as soon as my thesis has been published via the University's e-theses repository.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

Participant code*:

*For your records, please write the first two digits of the date of the interview (if you have decided to take part) followed by the first two digits of your birthday. For example, if the interview is held on 2 July 2021 and your birthday is 22 May, you would write 0222. This code will be assigned to your interview file and kept secure. If you wish to withdraw from the study after the interview, please contact me and reference your participant code.

Please note the University's Data Protection Officer is: Amanda Wilcox, University Secretary, York St. John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York, YO31 7EX Tel: 01904 876844 Email: a.wilcox@yorksj.ac.uk

APPENDIX II – Sample participant consent form

Participant consent form

Provisional title: The critical roles of access, agency and integration in English-language education provision to refugees and asylum seekers in the UK

Researcher: Myriam Day (myriam.day@yorksj.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr. Indu Meddegama (i.meddegama@yorksj.ac.uk)

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, please type 'Yes' in the responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you would like more information, please ask.

I understand that the research will involve a short interview about the topic of ESOL in the UK.
YES / NO _____

I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without having to give an explanation. If I do not want to answer any questions, I can refuse.
YES / NO _____

I agree to the interview being video or audio recorded.
YES / NO _____

I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work resulting from this study.
YES / NO _____

I understand that any data collected will be used solely for research purposes and will be deleted on completion of your research.
YES / NO _____

I understand that interview participants and their respective organisations will not be named in subsequent write-ups and material submitted for publication.
YES / NO _____

Declaration:
I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form for my own information.

YES / NO _____

Name of participant:

Date:

Name of researcher:

Date:

APPENDIX III – Sample interview questions

- What does the word 'policy' mean to you?
- Thinking of ESOL, what, if any, governmental policies do you feel there are? How do you interpret them for and/or with your students?
- Should there be a national ESOL strategy? Why / why not?
    - What are the advantages / disadvantages of a local, devolved approach from central government?
- How would you describe your approach to teaching?
    - What is your position as a teacher?
- What opportunities are there on your programme for students to voice their concerns and/or to offer feedback? In what format (class discussions, questionnaires) do students typically offer feedback?
- How do you respond if students have pressing concerns or questions outside the lesson plan or lesson topic?
- What do you do if you (or your students) want to change the focus of a lesson plan or course syllabus?
    - How much freedom do you have to change or adapt it?
- What does the phrase 'participatory methods' mean to you?
    - (*If knowledgeable*) How do you use participatory methods in your classes?
- Are you required by the curriculum to teach citizenship and British values?
    - (*If yes*) what does citizenship mean to you?
- Does the course plan or curriculum follow your own beliefs? Why / why not?
- How do you think your students apply what they have learned (e.g., about citizenship) to their daily lives outside the classroom?
    - How would the info they receive be useful to them in their daily lives in terms of making decisions and acting with agency?

APPENDIX IV – Transcription symbols

[laughs]	Laughter
…	Pause
[name]	Removal of personally identifiable information
[city]	Removal of personally identifiable information
[organisation]	Removal of personally identifiable information
[college]	Removal of personally identifiable information

APPENDIX V – Sample of an interview transcription

[Interviewer] It's now saying that…hopefully that's recording, there we go, start recording

[Participant] Oh yes

[Interviewer] It's running a bit slow today, I think it's having problems. So, I wonder if we could start by, if I could start by asking you what does the word 'policy' mean to you in an ESOL context?

[Participant] Well, the hard ones first eh. Policy is a statement, most often written, of the…It's a statement which guides people like me, it guides teachers, guides managers, guides everybody. It's a statement of what you're trying to do and how you're trying to do it. I mean it could be either of those things or both of those things. And I mean it's a bit like a bit of a constitution I suppose. It's a generic statement which implies, or the opposite of implies, is explicit about who you are, what you're trying to do, how you're trying to do it.

[Interviewer] Right, so that could be set at an institutional level or at a governmental level as well, then?

[Participant] Yes, in as much as the government is an institution, then yes institutional level.

[Interviewer] Yeah, yeah, so I think one of my interests is whether teachers can create their own policies in their classrooms. What do you think about that?

[Participant] Well, I think teachers do create their own policies in classrooms. It's almost, how can I say, it's almost inevitable that teachers have their own policies. Institutions have a policy, [organisation] has policies which you've probably seen, and if you are as I am convinced of what [organisation] is doing, my policies in the classroom whatever they are can't be at variance with the institutional policies. But I'm sure, yes I think I can say I am sure, that teachers whether they know it or not have classroom policies. You know I used to train teachers a lot and I've sat in on teachers and lots of teachers declare their policy and have it written on a wall somewhere. For other teachers their policy emerges as they go along. But I'm pretty sure that all teachers have their own policies as well as the institutional policy that they're working under.

[Interviewer] Right, and what sort would that be? Would it be a set of classroom behaviours, learning goals, something different?

[Participant] Well, certainly both of those things. Rules about what is or is not acceptable in the classroom. But in my experience that's more frequent than the other thing you said about aims. But that's also possible. I mean, I think we can, as a teacher I might have a spoken or unspoken policy – my own policy – about aims. And I would hope to try to discuss with students those policy aims and certainly the policy rules. Both of those things are up for discussion. So it's not just my policy, I hope it's also the class policy.

[Interviewer] Right, so they're negotiated in a way between teacher and students?

[Participant] Yes.

[Interviewer] Yeah, so that sort of leads into one of my other questions really which is if you have students who want to change the focus of a lesson or a class syllabus, how would you respond to that?