

## Merdeka Belajar Curriculum: A Study on EFL Teachers' Varying Expressions of Agency

\*<sup>1</sup>Sonia Handini Lubis, <sup>2</sup>Endang Fauziati, <sup>1</sup>Dewi Rochsantiningsih

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Sebelas Maret Surakarta, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia

**\*Correspondence:**

soniaalubis@students.uns.ac.id

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### Abstract

In Indonesia, the introduction of the new Merdeka Belajar curriculum emphasizes the significance of teachers' agency, denoting their proactive role in influencing their professional conditions for the betterment of education. While an agency is a pivotal aspect of teachers' professionalism, its recognition has become essential for the effective enactment of the new curriculum in classrooms. Despite the global surge in research on teacher agency, studies examining its variations among EFL secondary teachers in Indonesia, particularly in the context of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, remain scant. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore these variations. Drawing on Jenkins' (2019) categorizations — proactive teacher agency, active teacher agency, and passive teacher agency — this study assessed the prevalent types of agencies in Indonesia. Furthermore, Bandura's (2001) core properties of agency were utilized to delve into the characteristics of proactive teacher agency in relation to the curriculum. The findings from this study offer valuable insights into pedagogical practices, providing policymakers with informed perspectives to facilitate successful curriculum transitions.

**Keywords:** Teacher agency, curriculum changes, English as a Foreign Language Teacher

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on teacher agency within the field of educational research. This trend coincides with ongoing curriculum revisions occurring on a global scale (Dinh, 2022). According to Biesta et al. (2015), agency as an important dimension of teachers' professionalism. Hence, the recognition of teacher agency as a crucial factor in successfully implementing the new curriculum in the classroom has grown in response to the new policy. Each decade, Indonesia has undergone curriculum changes (Setiawan, 2020; Ekawati, 2016). Then, in 2022, Indonesia introduced a new curriculum known as the Merdeka Belajar curriculum so teachers could recognize the potential of students more deeply in order to create relevant learning. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum

also allows teachers to apply fun learning because it can be done through project-based learning. This change required teachers to be an agent to successfully achieve the goals of the new curriculum, and the primary belief behind producing high-quality education is the teacher.

The Merdeka Curriculum is a learning approach that offers diversity within extracurricular activities, where its content is optimized so that students have ample opportunity to delve deep into concepts and strengthen their competencies. This grants teachers the freedom to choose instructional materials, allowing teaching methods to be more tailored to individual students' needs and interests. Moreover, the Merdeka Curriculum provides educators the latitude to create quality learning experiences relevant to the context of their learning environment. Some key characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum include the development of soft skills and character, a focus on essential materials, flexibility in learning, and the implementation of projects designed to reinforce the Pancasila student profile. These projects are developed based on specific themes set by the government and are not constrained by specific learning outcomes or particular subject content.

Based on the previous statement, it is believed that teachers are expected to be the bridge between the new policy and the good result of the implementation of this curriculum change. It supported the previous study mentioned that teachers are the main actors in the world of education and they must always be ready for all policy changes in the education sector (Nugraha, 2022). In addition, refers to Oolbekkink - Marchand et al. (2017) stated to execute curricular reform, teachers must have a professional teacher agency. Herold (2020) believed that the effective implementation of a flexible curriculum necessitates proactive teachers who play a critical role in achieving the desired outcomes. Consequently, a thorough exploration of teacher agency is imperative to achieve the standard goals of mandated curriculum alterations.

The concept of ecological agency posits that agency and the capacity of a teacher to take action are inherently intertwined with the environments in which they function (Bandura, 2006; Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Campbell, 2012; Lasky, 2005). Teachers could demonstrate agency when they try to put effort into making judgments in their academic routines regarding, among other things, student learning, instructional innovation, professional development, and collaborative teacher learning (White, 2018). Teachers are required to be assertive at this moment of major curriculum reform. Without agency, teachers would have little control or influence over a significant aspect of their professional lives, particularly their classroom, department, and school curriculum.

Teacher agency manifests when educators proactively plan for action, anticipate potential outcomes, execute these plans, and intentionally adapt, all while reflecting on the outcomes. This active agency emerges even when teachers operate within the confines of their routine work environments (Bandura, 1999; Lasky, 2005; Marsh et al., 2008). Such confines often involve mandatory curriculum changes dictated at federal, state, or school levels. In these scenarios, decisions about the curriculum are made externally, and teachers are tasked with responding to these imposed directives. According to Jenkins (2019), there are three types of teacher agency: proactive agency, reactive agency, and passive agency. Teachers with proactive agency planned and started curriculum reform as a personal

decision. Reactive agency teachers who were compelled to adapt as a consequence of an external influence, such as a command from their leadership, and passive teachers' agency who opted to passively reject a mandated curriculum change yet appeared to their administration to have implemented it. In believing in becoming the proactive teacher agency, the teacher exhibited core properties of agency: a) intentionality, b) forethought, c) self-reactiveness, and d) self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2001).

Recent studies have explored teacher agency in many dimensions. Alvunger (2018) studied and analyzed the curricular agency of social science teachers, another study by Hamid (2016) studied teacher agency in early bilingual development and education. Not only that, Cong-Lem (2021) conducted a comprehensive examination of teacher agency in a broad sense, and Miller et al. (2020) specifically explored teacher agency in the context of inclusive education. Additionally, Chisholm et al. (2019) study focused on teacher agency in the domain of language arts instruction. Researcher Hinostroza (2020) investigated the agency of teacher educators within the setting of higher education. Also, other studies from Code (2020), who studied a learner agency among second-year undergraduate Canadian University, and Annala et al. (2021), who studied at a university, examined educational agency and the mechanisms that support or hinder educational agencies in curricular development. However, there is no previous study that explores teacher agency toward new curricula in Indonesia.

Furthermore, this study aims to explore the variations of teacher agency within the context of Indonesia's new curriculum and to understand the nature of proactive teacher agency in response to it. By examining these aspects, we seek to assist teachers in leveraging their agency to effectively engage with curriculum modifications in the classroom while actively influencing their work conditions for the betterment of overall educational quality. The findings are intended to offer valuable insights for pedagogical practices, inspiring policymakers to craft strategies that foster successful curriculum transformation.

## **METHOD**

This study's population consisted of 34 EFL teachers from secondary schools in Yogyakarta, selected specifically because these schools have adopted the new curriculum. A qualitative approach was employed to fulfill the study's objectives. Data collection was facilitated through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured online interviews. Yin (1994) characterized a case study as particularly potent for addressing 'how' and 'why' questions, especially when the researcher exercises minimal control over events and when the emphasis is on contemporary phenomena within real-world contexts. Later, Yin (2014) defined a case study as an empirical examination of contemporary phenomena, particularly when the contexts of these phenomena are not immediately clear. Given these definitions, the case study methodology is apt for this research, facilitating a deep understanding of the variations in agency demonstrated by EFL teachers concerning the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and the manner in which proactive teacher agency interacts with this new curriculum.

The qualitative data analysis approach was employed for this study. This method encompasses four stages: a) Data collection, b) Data condensation, c) Data display, and d) Conclusion drawing and verification. The questionnaires were designed based on Jenkins'

(2019) classifications of teacher agency, which include proactive, reactive, and passive teachers. Concurrently, the interview questions drew inspiration from Bandura's (2001) core properties of agency, namely intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### The Variation of Teacher Agency Expressed by the EFL Teachers Regarding the New Curriculum

The first result in this study revealed the variation of teacher agency expressed by EFL teachers regarding the new curriculum. The variation in teacher agency contains proactive teacher agency, reactive teacher agency, and passive teacher agency. There were 34 respondents and most of them were not proactive teacher agency. Teachers highly showed reactive teacher agency (23/67%). Reactive teacher agency can be seen when teachers behaved with responsive agency and reacted to follow the required changes as mandated. They showed that they agreed with the new curriculum established by the government. Since it was a government request, they were compelled to follow the existing regulations.

*"Agree, and I just follow government decisions." [Teacher IA, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"Agree, I was trying to adjust and follow the standard decision of the Ministry of Education and Culture." [Teacher AS, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"Yes, I agree, efforts towards a better direction inevitably follow the rules that have been set." [Teacher AU, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"Agree, just follow what has been decided by the Ministry of Education/school." [Teacher ZD, Questionnaires, 2023].*

*"Agree, I follow all the requirements of the existence of the Merdeka curriculum and study the curriculum according to what the Department of Education conveys." [Teacher FA, Questionnaires, 2023].*

The aforementioned teachers predominantly displayed a reactive agency concerning the new curriculum. Their responses unequivocally indicate compliance with the directives established by the Ministry of Education, coupled with efforts to adapt to these stipulations. Similarly, other respondents mirrored this reactive agency, with their sentiments aligning closely with the previously mentioned examples. They voiced agreement and commitment to the new curriculum's implementation, as dictated by the stakeholders. These findings harmonize well with Jenkins' (2019) theory regarding variations in teacher agency.

Conversely, a notable 20% (7 out of 34) of the participants demonstrated passive teacher agency. This form of agency was evident when teachers, despite their reservations, opted not to actively engage in the mandated curriculum transformation. Rather than embracing the change, they either adhered to the curriculum they were accustomed to or modified the new curriculum within their classrooms to better suit their individual teaching goals and perspectives.

*"No, more comfortable with the previous curriculum K 2013". [Teacher JI, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"Disagree, I chose to refrain from participating in the new curriculum. It is complicated and not massively socialized". [Teacher BO, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"I don't agree. I have chosen to refrain from actively participating in this curriculum. It's good, but the preparation is complicated". [Teacher CW, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"I disagree; the whole thing is extremely complex". [Teacher MR, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"Disagree. It's hard to adjust, so I chose to refrain from the new, and I'm better used K13". [Teacher SA, Questionnaires, 2023]*

The teachers highlighted above explicitly communicated their reservations about the new curriculum, finding it complex and challenging to comprehend. Some opted out of adopting the new framework, preferring to revert to the previous Curriculum 13 or K13. The sentiments of the final two teachers echoed this disapproval. They voiced concerns about the time, existing school conditions, and teacher preparedness required to effectively assimilate and implement the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in their teaching methodologies. Moreover, there was a prevailing apprehension that it might not yield optimal results in classroom settings.

*"I do not agree. I chose to refrain from the idea of implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. I know it is quite good, but it should be more adapted to the conditions of each school as well as the provision of the teachers themselves". (Teacher DH, Questionnaires, 2023).*

*"I don't agree. I chose to refrain from the new curriculum because it only makes the teacher spend time learning about the existing curriculum, and in the end, the teaching process is not optimal". (Teacher SD, Questionnaires, 2023).*

The observed variations in teacher agency are consistent with [Jenkins' \(2019\)](#) definition of passive teacher agency. Teachers who did not demonstrate proactive agency typically fell into categories of either reactive or passive teacher agency. Their acceptance of the new curriculum was rooted not in genuine endorsement but in obligation. Conversely, some displayed resistance, revealing a preference for the methodologies of the prior curriculum.

Several factors may underpin this phenomenon. One such factor is the disparity between the provisions of the new curriculum and teachers' long-held beliefs and prior experiences. [Bergh and Wahlström's \(2018\)](#) study lends support to this notion, revealing significant incongruences between neoliberal reform components (like grading, national testing, prescriptive objectives, and accountability) and teachers' sense of autonomy in contexts like Sweden, Australia, and Ireland. [Fu & Clarke \(2019\)](#) added another layer to this discourse, highlighting clashes between reform mandates, such as student-centered approaches, and prevailing traditional practices, like college entrance examinations. These conflicts necessitate a delicate balancing act on the part of the educators. [Dinh's \(2022\)](#) research further contributes to this conversation, underscoring the role of cultural nuances, particularly the importance of fostering a cooperative and supportive school environment.

[Min's \(2019\)](#) research reinforces the idea, emphasizing the pivotal role that robust professional relationships play in augmenting teacher agency. This perspective gains further credence from a series of academic studies underscoring the value of trust and mutual

respect as catalysts for teacher agency amidst curricular transitions (Fu & Clarke, 2018; Poulton, 2020; Willis et al., 2019). Such elements have been spotlighted as barriers that potentially hinder EFL teachers' agency in this research, especially in the context of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum's rollout in Indonesia.

Conversely, the proactive agency stands out as another distinct variation of teacher agency observed among EFL teachers concerning the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in Indonesia. Of the participants, four (representing 11.7%) demonstrated proactive teacher agency. Their endorsement of the government-initiated curriculum changes was evident, with language indicating their proactive stance: initiating change, planning for it, and spurring themselves into action to realize their envisioned goals.

*"Agree. I initiated change to plan and motivated myself to study and look for lots of peer references in making administration or direct simulations with students, even discussing it in the same departmental community both at school and in the district scope in the MGMP forum so that my students have good results of their academic." [Teacher SH, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"I agree. After hearing that there would be changes to the curriculum, I initiated the change plan and motivated myself to look for detailed information about the curriculum from various sources and attended various seminars, training, technical guidance, and others." [Teacher UI, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"Agree, if there is a change, it must be for the better. I initiated the change to plan and motivated myself to study a lot and adapt because it's new, as well as learn from any media and ask those who understand." [Teacher IM, Questionnaires, 2023]*

*"Agree, it is great to adapt to the characteristics of today's students, and I was initiating the change by planning and motivating myself to adopt curriculum requirements into my teaching practices since this will allow me to better prepare a range of approaches for educating students...". [Teacher SN, Questionnaires, 2023]*

### **Proactive Teacher Agency Responds to the New Curriculum**

Proactive teacher agency occurs when all four fundamental attributes of the agency. In a belief in becoming the proactive agency, the teacher exhibited core properties of agency: a) intentionality, b) forethought, c) self – reactivity, and d) self – reflectiveness (Bandura, 2001). It revealed all respondents (4/100%) exhibited four core properties agency.

Intentionality is the first property of core agency that teachers exhibit when they have the intent to modify or adapt the curriculum and implement it in the classroom. This element contains self – organizing, indication for change, and action plans and strategies. It is described by the **four teachers (4/100%)** who enacted proactive agency.

*"... after hearing the new curriculum released, I think there was a need to change everything before and after the teaching process. Firstly, I self-organizing by conducting all information about the Merdeka curriculum and learning it individually like I usually engage in the process of acquiring knowledge and skill development while also including the use of P5 and P2RA techniques to enhance my learning experience. I have several plans and strategies to develop a teaching module that incorporates the use of a training plan (TP) and a corresponding curriculum plan (CP) that has been made available. Eeee... I gather information from online sources... in addition, my typical participation is receiving*

*technical guidance and engaging in new training opportunities...". [Teacher UI, Semi-Structured Int, 2023]*

Forethought was exhibited when teachers visualized desirable curriculum outcomes for their classrooms. It means teachers establish their own goals and engage in proactive assessment of potential consequences in order to direct and inspire their efforts. The interview result showed that every participant (**4/100%**) expressed the act of visualizing desirable curriculum outcomes for their learning environments. Teacher IM described forethought as mentioned.

*"... I visualized on current curriculum change's goal would give the desirable outcomes as fostering student independence, continuing to increase the relevance of learning, developing skills for the 21st century, increasing diversity and inclusiveness, and implementing comprehensive evaluation... ..". [Teacher IM, Semi - Structured Int, 2023]*

Self - reactivity occurs when teachers describe themselves as making adjustments to achieve the curriculum goals as circumstances affect them in the class. The question's results revealed that the four (4/100%) teachers promoted self - self-reactiveness through their interview answers. They seemed to have some alternative plans or make adjustments or plan B in case they face several factors that affect them in the class. This act is to help them to achieve the curriculum goals. All of them were able to have alternative plans or make adjustments or plan B to help them in the classroom so that they could still reach the input of the curriculum in their practicing teaching.

*"...I would have plan B to anticipate the outcome. Whatever happens in the future, it will not be in accordance with our plans. Now I must develop a new strategy that would help me accomplish a successful outcome in my teaching process...". [Teacher SH, Semi-Structured Int, 2023]*

Lastly, self-reflectiveness was identified when participants gradually examined their own functioning, ruminating on their personal efficacy, the validity of their thoughts and actions, and the corrective adjustments they had made. Interviews results revealed that all participants (4/100%) enacted self - reactivity. This property of agency is simply known as teachers reflecting, examining, or evaluating.

*"... upon reflection on the learning process that had been implemented, it was pertinent to examine any obstacles encountered during its application. Specifically, it was crucial to investigate whether students are facing any challenges and, if so, discover the underlying reasons for these issues and create a resolution to prevent its recurrence...". [Teacher SN, Semi-Structured Int, 2023]*

In summation, the actions of the teachers embodying proactive agency corresponded seamlessly with the fundamental characteristics of agency as delineated by [Bandura \(2001\)](#). It's postulated that the essence of proactive teacher agency is influenced by several dimensions, which find resonance in [Bandura's \(1999\)](#) Triadic Reciprocal Causation Model. Bandura emphasized the interplay of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors in shaping proactive teachers. Numerous studies underscore the efficacy of proactive teacher agency in actualizing the core tenets of the agency. Key drivers behind this include a robust positive link between teacher self-efficacy and agency, cohesive colleague relations, adept

school management and leadership, resource accessibility, targeted guidance, and external support and intervention (Min, 2019; Kneen et al., 2021; Fu & Clarke, 2018; Poulton, 2020; Ryder et al., 2018). This alignment of factors dovetails with Jenkins (2019), who posited that teachers' proactive response to curricula enables them to fully embrace and realize the intrinsic aspects of agency.

## CONCLUSION

This study determines that EFL teachers at the secondary level exhibited limited proactive engagement with the new curriculum. Teachers manifesting reactive agency largely incorporated it in their instruction due to its mandate by curriculum developers. In contrast, those exhibiting passive agency displayed resistance, largely unprepared for the transition and displaying a preference for the previous curriculum. Various factors underpin these outcomes, suggesting a need for curriculum developers and other stakeholders to devise more effective strategies to navigate these challenges. By understanding the diverse manifestations of teacher agency, policymakers, and curriculum designers are better positioned to support teachers in addressing implementation hurdles.

Hence, it is imperative to consider multiple elements in order to ensure the proactive success of teacher agencies in effectively addressing the new curriculum as established by curriculum developers. Subsequently, curriculum developers are able to gain insights into facilitating the transition of passive teachers towards proactivity, while also evaluating the suitability of curriculum modifications through an examination of the prevailing circumstances surrounding both educators and students within the educational institution. The purpose of this endeavor is to ensure that all stakeholders, including external entities and the educational institution itself, work towards a common objective of enhancing the education system and providing a platform for students to equip themselves for future endeavors. For further research, the same topic can be studied with a large scale of teachers and using research and development methodology to determine whether teacher agency can shift from proactive to reactive or from passive to proactive in tandem with changes in the curriculum as a consequence of the fact that a teacher's response to curriculum changes is not the ultimate manifestation of their agency.

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