

Article

Agency in Motion: An Autoethnographic Inquiry of a Transnational Language Teacher Educator

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Abstract

As English-medium instruction (EMI) programs expand globally, teacher educators play a crucial yet understudied role in navigating multilingual, sociocultural, and institutional complexities. Understanding their agency is essential for examining how pedagogical reasoning, language ideologies, and context-responsive practices develop in educational spaces. This autoethnographic research explores how I negotiate and enact my agency as a language teacher educator in a language teacher education program at an EMI institution. Drawing on teaching journal entries, retrospective reflections, and course artifacts, the analysis showed how my pedagogical agency was enacted through reframing translanguaging and multilingual perspectives, navigating critical perspectives in context, and fostering teacher candidates' agency and professional identity. These enactments emerged through ongoing negotiation among transnational trajectory, insider-outsider positioning, students' realities, evolving educator identities, and negotiation with the context. The study offers nuanced understandings of teacher educator agency in transnational educational contexts and implications for promoting multilingual, context-responsive, and agency-oriented language teacher education in EMI settings.

Keywords

Language teacher educator, teacher agency, EMI, teacher identity, translanguaging

1 Introduction

In the changing global landscape of education, agency has become increasingly central for exploring how teachers and teacher educators navigate complex professional worlds. Agency broadly refers to making deliberate choices and taking action. Rather than a fixed capacity, it is understood as a dynamic and situated process, arising through the interplay of personal trajectories and beliefs, professional expertise, contextual affordances and constraints, sociocultural conditions, and temporal dimensions (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Kayi-Aydar, 2019b; Priestley et al., 2015). In language education, scholars have showed how educators draw on their lived linguistic experiences, identities, and values to enact instructional

choices aligned with their goals and students' needs (Dang et al., 2023; Weng, 2024). For bi/multilingual and transnational educators, the enactment of agency can become more layered as their practices are informed by movement across languages, cultures, and educational paradigms. These transnational trajectories influence how they interpret pedagogical frameworks, conceptualize language practices, and negotiate institutional expectations.

These negotiations become especially prominent in English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts, where academic English norms, monolingual ideologies, institutional expectations, local sociolinguistic realities, and global-local tensions intersect (Dafouz & Smit, 2016; Gu et al., 2024; Jinghui, 2023). Educators in EMI settings must navigate these complexities when making pedagogical decisions, interpreting policies, and supporting students' development. Language teacher educators in particular play an important role in modeling how language practices, language ideologies, and multilingualism can be conceptualized, legitimized, and negotiated in educational settings, and how teachers might navigate tensions and possibilities in the ever-changing educational environments (Gao & Yang, 2023). Understanding (language) teacher educator agency in EMI contexts is therefore critical for examining how pedagogical meaning-making, multilingual resources and practices, and contextual negotiation unfold in these hybrid spaces (i.e., spaces shaped by the intersection of global and local, multilingual, and institutional influences).

Although EMI research has expanded across areas such as internationalization and cross-cultural interaction, outcomes of content and language learning, pedagogical challenges and opportunities, attitudes and beliefs of stakeholders, and policy implementation issues (Karabay & Durrani, 2024; Macaro et al., 2018; Wu & Tsai, 2024), less attention has been given to the teacher educators, especially those entering the space with transnational and bi/multilingual identities. Similarly, while research focusing on teacher agency has shed light on language teachers' agentic practices and how their agency has been formed (e.g., Huang, 2021; Wang, 2022), less is known about how (language) teacher educators in multilingual, hybrid, and higher-education contexts negotiate and enact agency.

To address these underexplored areas, this study investigates how I enact my agency as a language teacher educator in a language teacher education program in EMI context and how different influences shape the enactment, guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How do I enact agency as a language teacher educator in my current teaching context?
- (2) How do personal, professional, and contextual aspects interact to shape my enactment of agency amid flux in the transnational language teacher education context?

2 Literature Review

The study adopts an ecological understanding of agency (Priestley et al., 2012, 2015). This overarching framework conceptualizes agency as situated achievement and practice emerging through the interaction of personal histories and capacities, present contextual conditions, and future-oriented aspirations. This overarching perspective is complemented and enriched by scholarship on language educator agency, contextual mediation, relational dimension of agency, and identity, which helps illuminate how agency is shaped by educators' experiences, beliefs, identities, professional commitments, and the contextual conditions. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual framework for exploring how my pedagogical agency developed and was negotiated in a transnational, multilingual teacher education context.

Although this study focuses on language teacher educator agency, much of its conceptual foundation is drawn from the broader literature on teacher agency. Teacher educators and classroom teachers share many common features of agency, including making pedagogical decisions, interpreting contextual conditions, negotiating constraints and opportunities, and enacting professional commitments in practice (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2015). At the same time, teacher educator agency involves

an additional layer related to their role of supporting the learning, professional growth, and identity development of future teachers (Loughran & Berry, 2005; White, 2013). This future-oriented layer gives teacher educator agency a strong projective dimension (Weng & Fu, 2026) and is closely intertwined with their own evolving identities, career trajectories, and negotiation of multiple professional responsibilities and relationships across contexts (Nazari et al., 2024; Weng, 2025).

In language teacher education, agency further extends to shaping how language, teaching, and learning are understood by future teachers. Because language is both the medium and the focus, language teacher educators make decisions about how language, multilingualism, and language ideologies are represented and negotiated in teacher learning. Their agency may therefore involve modeling pedagogical reasoning, legitimizing particular perspectives on language, and supporting teacher candidates in navigating linguistic, cultural, and educational complexities in their future professional practice.

2.1 Purposeful and informed decision-making

Agency first takes shape through purposeful and informed decision-making, guided by educators' personal and professional experiences, expertise, and beliefs. Scholars have underscored the importance of the personal dimension in understanding agency. Eteläpelto et al. (2013), for instance, describe professional agency through a subject-centered sociocultural lens, highlighting how agency is rooted in individuals' histories, identities, motivations, and goals, even as it is enacted within social contexts. The ecological framework (Priestley et al., 2012, 2015) further explains how such decision-making emerges through the interplay of past experiences (iterational), present judgments (practical-evaluative), and future goals (projective). These dimensions illuminate how educators draw on prior experiences, interpret contextual conditions, and orient their actions toward future aspirations.

Empirical research in English-as-a-second/foreign-language contexts similarly shows that teachers' personal and professional experiences, beliefs, and dispositions play a critical role as they make deliberate choices regarding instructional practices, curriculum adaptations, and students' needs in their specific settings (e.g., Chaaban et al., 2021; Haneda & Alexander, 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2019a; Ollerhead, 2010; Tao & Gao, 2017; Wang, 2022). Together, these perspectives suggest that agency is not merely a matter of action but is grounded in how educators interpret situations and make meaning-informed decisions.

2.2 Enacting agency in practice

Agency becomes meaningful and visible when decision-making is translated into action. For educators, this mostly involves turning intentions into situated pedagogical practices, even when those practices in reality do not fully match their initial plans or expectations (Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Yang & Clarke, 2018). From an ecological perspective (Priestley et al., 2012, 2015), such enactment is not the direct realization of prior plans, but an achievement emerging through the interaction between individual capacities and contextual conditions across time. Empirical studies illustrate how agency unfolds in practice. Nagel et al. (2023), for instance, show that teacher educators enact agency by responding to students' needs, interpreting institutional expectations, and collaborating with others, rather than simply implementing program plans. Tao and Gao (2017) describe how teachers create and adapt teaching materials as a form of agency during curricular reform by drawing on their professional experiences and external resources. These studies highlight the dynamic and ongoing nature of agency as educators continuously reshape their practices in motion.

Rather than being limited to either resistance or compliance, agency can manifest in different ways, taking forms such as adaptation, negotiation, and transformation. Research on language-in-education policies reveals that unlike passive recipients, educators act as active interpreters who negotiate, adapt,

and reshape policies grounded in their beliefs, students' needs, and contextual realities (Cruze et al., 2019; Heineke & Cameron, 2013; Malsbary & Appelgate, 2016). Newcomer and Collier (2015) further suggest that agency can also demonstrate itself through inaction, particularly when educators perceive strong constraints on meaningful change and deny themselves the possibility of acting. Studies in EMI and educational reform contexts similarly demonstrate varied ways of how teachers enact agency (e.g., Dang et al., 2023; Han et al., 2025; Tao & Gao, 2017; Wang, 2022; Yang, 2025). Research in EMI settings, for example, shows educator agency ranging from actively responding to policy demands and adapting teaching practices, to interpreting and negotiating policy with considerations of student needs and teaching objectives, to resisting policy (Dang et al., 2023; Han et al., 2025).

For language educators, especially in contexts where monolingual norms remain dominant, agency can also be enacted through engaging in and legitimizing multilingual practices. Translanguaging, broadly understood as the flexible, dynamic use of individuals' entire linguistic and semiotic repertoires for communication, learning, and meaning-making (García & Li, 2014), provides one prominent example of such enactment. Research has shown that educators exercise agency with translanguaging orientations in various settings, and such actions can include drawing upon students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, positioning students' multilingual repertoires as valid, meaningful resources for participating in learning, challenging deficit and monolingual views of language, and affirming multilingual learners' identities (Phyak et al., 2022; Seki, 2025; Xiong et al., 2024; Yang, 2025). These practices highlight how agency can be enacted through both pedagogical decisions and ideological commitments regarding language and learning.

2.3 Contextual mediation of agency

A key insight across agency research is that agency is situated and mediated by context. It emerges through the dynamic interaction between the personal and the contextual, structural dimensions (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). This interaction is also relational, as individuals align their actions with the goals, knowledge, and shared resources of others within their professional environments (Edwards, 2005).

Educators' agency is mediated by contextual and structural layers, such as professional learning opportunities, collegial collaboration, evaluation systems, institutional cultures and support, and broader sociocultural environments (e.g., Han et al., 2025; Nagel et al., 2023; Tao & Gao, 2017; Teng, 2019; Viberg et al., 2021; Wang, 2022; Weng, 2025a; Yang & Clarke, 2018). These conditions may function as affordances or constraints depending on how they are interpreted and engaged with. In EMI or policy-driven contexts, the mediation often involves navigating competing demands and complexities in various aspects (Liyanage & Walker, 2023; Malsbary & Appelgate, 2016; Xiong et al., 2024). For example, Xiong et al. (2024) illustrate how EMI teachers navigate tensions between policy expectations and classroom realities, appropriating these tensions as opportunities for linguistic and cultural negotiation.

2.4 Agency and identity as mutually constitutive

A consistent theme across the literature is the intertwined relationship between agency and identity. These two constructs mutually shape and influence one another and evolve together over time. One line of research suggests that identity serves as a starting point that triggers and enables agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Venegas-Weber, 2018), while agency (in terms of sense, choices, positions, and actions) contributes to the realization and development of identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Weng, 2025b). For example, agency can open up possibilities for (re)shaping, (re)negotiating, and (re)constructing identity (Bowen et al., 2021; Chaaban et al., 2021; Huang, 2021; Teng, 2019; Weng, 2025a). Through exercising agency, educators maintain, construct, deepen, and extend different dimensions of their identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Roumbanis Viberg et al., 2021; Weng, 2025b).

At the same time, agency emerges and develops through ongoing (re)negotiation and (re)construction of identity, especially when challenges, conflicts and tensions arise (Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Liao & Maddamsetti, 2019; Liyanage & Walker, 2023; Trent, 2017; Warren & Ward, 2021; Weng, 2024). For example, Kayi-Aydar (2019a) demonstrates how a bilingual teacher's identities and lived experiences are closely tied to her agentic choices in navigating classroom practices and academic studies.

3 Methods

3.1 Autoethnography as the research approach

This study adopts autoethnography as the methodological approach. As a form of qualitative inquiry, autoethnography integrates the self, culture, and context, allowing researchers to examine their lived experiences as sites of inquiry and meaning-making (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Chang, 2008). It is a systematic methodology that offers spaces for interpreting and interrogating how identities, positioning, ideologies, and power dynamics shape professional practices and orientations. In recent years, (collaborative) autoethnography has gained increasing attention from language educators and teacher educators seeking deeper exploration of how their identities, beliefs, agency, and pedagogical orientations develop over time and across contexts (e.g., Liao & Maddamsetti, 2019; Yazan, 2019a; Zhu et al., 2024). In teacher education, (critical) autoethnography has also been used as a pedagogical tool to support teacher candidates in making sense of their ideological and identity becoming, as well as the negotiations involved in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students (e.g., Kessler, 2024; Yazan, 2019b, 2019c).

While autoethnography offers rich, situated insights into lived experiences, there are also concerns and critiques around issues such as subjectivity, selectivity of memory, and the potential to overemphasize personal interpretations (Sparkes, 2024). In this study, I addressed these limitations by grounding analysis in systematic, iterative coding procedures, revisiting interpretations throughout the analytical process, and critically examining not only moments of agency but also tensions, uncertainties, and constraints in my practice (Berger, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Given these affordances and considerations, autoethnography is well-suited for addressing the research questions guiding this study. It allows me to trace the process of “becoming” – how my agency emerges from my experiences and trajectory, linguistic and cultural histories, pedagogical reasoning, and interactions within the situated context.

3.2 Context of the study

The study took place at an English-medium international campus of a U.S. university, established as a joint-venture institution in China. The master-level language teacher education program follows the curriculum and student learning outcomes of the U.S. partner university, while instructors have some autonomy in designing course content, materials, and assignments. At the time of the study, I had been working in this context for almost two years, teaching courses focusing on language teaching and educational research. The students I worked with were pre- and in-service teachers, and the majority of them were domestic Chinese students who had completed their prior education in China.

3.3 Researcher positionality

For qualitative research, articulating the researcher's experiences, beliefs, and identities is vital for building transparency and trustworthiness (Goundar, 2025). My positionality is deeply influenced by my lived experiences as a language learner, multilingual, and educator across contexts. The trajectory of growing up and receiving my initial education in China and later completing graduate studies and

professional work in the U.S. has exposed me to different landscapes of language learning and education. These transnational experiences broadened my understanding of language, culture, diversity, and the sociocultural contexts that shape them. Over time, I came to view language learning not simply as skill acquisition, but as deeply intertwined with identity, power, belonging, and lived experience. My personal and educational experiences have also cultivated a strong commitment to inclusiveness and supportive learning environments. Throughout my doctoral studies, the ongoing process of learning, unlearning, and revisiting past experiences helped me understand how these moments have shaped who I am as an educator and researcher.

Beyond articulating positionality, this study also engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process (Berger, 2015; Palaganas et al., 2017). I remained attentive to how my beliefs, values, and emotional investments might influence what I noticed, how I interpreted events, and how I represented my experiences. Additionally, my current work in the EMI context has further prompted me to continually reflect on and re-examine some of my assumptions and created opportunities to negotiate how perspectives developed through my prior experiences might be adapted, recontextualized, or challenged within this setting. These experiences and negotiations have contributed to the ongoing construction of my identities, pedagogical practices, and how I make sense of agency.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The primary data for this study consisted of a teaching journal containing 29 pages of dated entries (55 entries, 15000 words in length) written across 3.5 semesters (Fall, Spring, Summer, and the ongoing Fall semester during the period of analysis) and ongoing retrospective reflections (8 pages, 4700 words at the time of the data analysis). The teaching journal documented my thoughts and reflections on key teaching decisions such as choices of instructional content, design and sequencing of activities, assignment rationales, and how I would frame or introduce concepts and issues. It also included quick reflections on what went well in the class sessions, what did not go as planned, and possible explanations. The retrospective reflections were guided by self-generated prompt questions such as: *What key experiences, episodes, or moments have cultivated my language teacher and teacher educator identities? How have I come to make sense of my professional, academic, and personal experiences, and how have these processes contributed to clearer understandings of who I am as an educator? What do I consider important for my pre- and in-service language teachers to learn and develop, and what do I strive to integrate into my teaching?* These questions encouraged me to revisit my earlier experiences with more specific purposes and a clearer sense of my evolving identities and orientations. Teaching journal entries were written regularly following class sessions, whereas retrospective reflections were written intermittently when thoughts emerged and were revisited and developed iteratively over time. The secondary data included course slides, instructional materials, and related artifacts. These data were used to contextualize and corroborate reflections and examples documented in the teaching journal and retrospective reflections.

The data analysis was primarily guided by works focusing on coding and analyzing qualitative data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). I began with an initial cycle of open coding to identify segments of data that reflected significant teaching moments, tensions, pedagogical decisions and acts, and reflections across my teaching journal, reflective writings, and related artifacts. At this stage, the coding remained inductive and grounded in the data. In the second cycle, I engaged in a more focused process, grouping and organizing related codes into broader categories and patterns that corresponded to the two research questions. The themes and categories were mainly generated inductively from the data, and the interpretation was informed by the ecological perspective and complemented ideas on agency as described in the literature review. I considered how prior experiences and identities, present contextual affordances and constraints, relationships, and future-oriented commitments interacted in the enactment of agency. Agency-related instances were identified through evidence of deliberate pedagogical decision-

making, adaptation, negotiation, and actions taken in response to contextual elements. Examples of some categories included “inviting local voices and linguistic knowledge”, “creating entry points for making concepts accessible”, “cultivating critical reflection”, and “naming agency”. These categories were refined, reframed, and reorganized through an iterative and recursive process.

4 Findings

The findings are presented as an integrated account of how my pedagogical agency was enacted and negotiated within the teaching context. Sections 4.1 to 4.3 trace three prominent and interrelated areas of agentive practices. Across these sections, the enactment of agency is illustrated not as a series of isolated pedagogical moves, but as emerging through ongoing negotiation among personal experiences, professional commitments, students’ realities, and broader institutional and sociocultural conditions. Section 4.4 then draws these threads together more explicitly by synthesizing the interacting layers that shaped how and why my pedagogical agency took the forms described in the previous sections.

4.1 Reframing translanguaging and multilingualism

One of the persistent questions I have wrestled with in my teaching is how to introduce ideas of translanguaging and multilingualism in ways that make sense within my current context. Through my own academic and professional trajectory, particularly my training in U.S.-based language teacher education programs, I came to see translanguaging not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a perspective of understanding language as dynamic, fluid, and inseparable from meaning-making through leveraging one’s full linguistic and semiotic repertoire. This perspective shaped my commitments as a teacher educator, and I believe it is also important for language teachers to develop, particularly in cultivating more inclusive and equitable understandings of language and learning. Nonetheless, bringing them into the classroom in my current context was far from a straightforward process. As reflected across my teaching journal and reflections over multiple semesters, it involved ongoing negotiation between my pedagogical commitments, students’ linguistic realities, and the broader expectations and discourses surrounding language use.

In the broader societal discourse surrounding my students, most are positioned as monolingual Mandarin speakers rather than as bi/multilingual individuals, and many may not immediately see themselves as bi/multilingual speakers or recognize their own linguistic resources and experiences as relevant to academic learning. My teaching notes repeatedly captured my uncertainty about how students might receive these ideas – some might have encountered terms like translanguaging before, while others might never have heard of it. At the same time, English carries particular symbolic authority within the EMI environment, functioning as the default language of academic communication. While Mandarin is always present in students’ everyday interactions and often surfaces naturally in classroom discussions, its legitimacy within academic learning spaces remains ambiguous. In many situations, language use depends largely on the instructor’s stance, whether to maintain an English-only expectation or allow more flexible practices. In my retrospective reflections, I noted that both my students and I seemed to navigate this uncertainty together, as I wrote: “...sometimes hesitating about whether and how much to use Chinese in academic discussions might appear inappropriate.”

These recurring moments of tension and negotiation prompted me to think more carefully about how translanguaging and multilingual perspectives could be introduced and framed in my current teaching context in ways that would resonate with students rather than appear abstract, theoretical, or disconnected from their experiences.

One of my earliest pedagogical moves was therefore to explicitly position students’ multilingual repertoires as legitimate resources for learning. In the first session of each course, I introduced what I called a “classroom language policy” (see Figure 1 for the slide I created). Using visual illustrations

and a toolbox metaphor, I explained and emphasized that they, as language users, possess multiple linguistic and semiotic resources that can be drawn upon meaningfully and purposefully for thinking, communicating, and learning.

Figure 1

Class Slide Example for Illustrating Language Policy

Language Policy

- ▶ **Language:** English will be the main language of instruction and communication. However, feel free to use all your linguistic and semiotic resources in meaningful ways for your learning and meaning making. The use of language will also depend on the specific purposes of activities and assignments





This decision emerged directly from my reflections while planning the course. In one journal entry (Sept. 20, 2024), I wrote that I needed “to reframe and introduce translanguaging in a way that makes sense to my students—something they can understand, relate to, and resonate with, instead of abstract theoretical concepts.” At the same time, my reflections also reveal an awareness that encouraging flexible language use could appear contradictory within an EMI setting where English is often associated with academic legitimacy. My intention was therefore not to diminish the importance of developing English, but rather to broaden students’ understanding that their full linguistic repertoires can support meaning-making while they continue building their English resources.

This stance also shaped how the language policy was enacted in classroom activities. For example, when students responded to complex questions, brainstormed ideas, or wrote reflective journals, I explicitly communicated that they could draw on whatever linguistic resources that helped them articulate their thinking more fully. Students would first explore ideas through a mix of Chinese and English, and then summarize, explain, and renegotiate key insights into English during whole-class discussions. Through these classroom interactions, translanguaging becomes not a rejection of English but “a bridge that supports deeper conceptual engagement while students continue working within the expectations of the EMI environment” (Retrospective Reflections).

Beyond designing activities, I also enacted translanguaging on my own. Although I typically conducted instruction in English, my teaching notes frequently recorded moments when I alternated between English and Chinese when explaining unfamiliar concepts, clarifying processes and rationale, or responding to students’ questions. These practices sometimes occurred “spontaneously and naturally to make meaning,” while at other times were more intentional where “I found myself deliberately deciding when and how Chinese or other linguistic resources might be incorporated in teaching” (Teaching Journal, Sept.22, 2024) to support elaborated comprehension or demonstrate to students how linguistic resources could be drawn without fixed barriers. These ongoing moments have also become occasions for reflection, prompting me to continually consider how translanguaging can be enacted more purposefully in my pedagogical acts.

Another way I reframed translanguaging was by inviting students' local linguistic knowledge into the classroom. This idea emerged gradually over time. In my previous experiences in U.S. classrooms, I had observed practices where students shared expressions or stories connected to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, when I began teaching in this EMI context, I quickly realized that such practices could not simply be transferred into my setting. In my first semester of teaching, I had already hoped to create opportunities for students to bring their linguistic experiences into class discussions, yet I struggled to "find a way that was both feasible within limited class time and meaningfully connected to the course content" (Teaching Journal, March 5, 2025). My reflections from that period often returned to the linguistic realities of my classroom: although most students speak Mandarin as their dominant language, many also speak or understand regional dialects, which are "part of people's memories, cultures, and connections with family and place" (Teaching Journal, Sept.10, 2025). These are also resources that are rarely acknowledged in academic spaces. It was not until the third semester of teaching that I decided to incorporate a small activity inviting students to share dialect expressions, explain the meanings, or recount stories connected to their hometowns. As documented in my teaching journal, these moments often generated laughter and recognition among students, while also subtly repositioning linguistic and cultural diversity as something worth acknowledging within academic spaces.

4.2 Navigating critical perspectives in context

Another dimension of my pedagogical agency emerged as I navigated engaging students with critical perspectives related to culture, language, and power. Through my academic training and professional journey, I have come to understand that developing awareness of and reflecting deeper on issues such as language ideologies, equity, and critical cultural awareness lay the important foundations for cultivating reflective and ethical language educators. In the local discourse surrounding language education, however, these ideas are not often foregrounded, and discussion related to power, diversity, or inequity can sometimes feel distant, unfamiliar, or even sensitive. As I designed course content and activities, I often found myself sitting with a series of uncertainties: Where might my students currently be in their understanding of these ideas? What experiences could they draw on? How far should I push their thinking? How could I handle silence, misinterpretation, or even resistance that might happen in class? And how could I introduce these perspectives without making them feel abstract or disconnected?

These questions accompanied my ongoing process of planning, teaching, and revising content. As reflected in my teaching journals, I was constantly weighing how to remain faithful to perspectives I believed that were pedagogically important while also being attentive to the sociocultural context shaping how these ideas might be interpreted. The challenge, therefore, was not simply whether to introduce critical perspectives, but how they might travel meaningfully across contexts.

One way I navigated this tension was by creating entry points that made complex ideas more accessible and grounded in students' experiences. For instance, in a session exploring deeper layers of culture, the original activity in the course text asked students to list cultural groups they belonged to, with examples such as "Mexican American," "Jewish," or "gay." When I first tried this activity, I was already aware that these categories, commonly referenced in discussions of multiculturalism in U.S. classrooms, might not resonate in the same way with my students. I therefore encouraged them to think about groups they identified with based on their everyday experiences. Yet as I observed students working on the task, many wrote very little, suggesting that the prompt still felt distant. As I noted, "most students only listed one or two items, and some seemed unsure what to write" (Teaching Journal, Sept.10, 2024). While walking around the classroom during the activity, I recalled discussions from a previous teaching experience about how people are often "labeled" in social interactions. Drawing on that idea, I reframed the activity on the spot around the notion of "labels". Once the prompt shifted in this direction, students began to recall more personal experiences and share examples more readily. These discussions then became accessible starting points for exploring bigger and more complex notions such

as socialization, stereotypes, and discrimination. This experience further informed my reflection on how small adjustments in framing can open up more meaningful engagement with complex ideas.

Another part of the navigation involved how I framed critical conversations. In the first semester when I introduced a part exploring cultural and linguistic diversity, my explanation of why these issues mattered was present but not particularly explicit. During the discussion, I sensed that “some students started to see the connection, got the ideas, but some others still looked confused about where we were in the discussion” (Teaching Journal, Sept.17, 2024). These observations led me to rethink how the session could be better structured. In later semesters, I devoted more attention to gradually building the conceptual pathway toward these discussions and making clearer connections between different components of the session. For example, I explicitly explained why the course titled academic language across content areas would include a session on examining deeper layers of culture at the beginning and concluded the discussion by inviting students to reflect on what these ideas might mean for their roles as teachers and the kind of classroom we wanted to create for our students. Through these adjustments, the discussion of culture and language became more clearly situated within the professional responsibilities of language educators. At the same time, this framing also reflected my negotiation with the broader context. Revisiting and reflecting on these experiences across the journal entries in the following two semesters, I came to describe this balancing act as finding ways to “open up perspectives and keep dialogue possible” in the retrospective reflections. Connecting these ideas to pedagogical purposes allowed discussions to remain grounded in students’ professional growth while still opening space to consider deeper questions about language, culture, and power.

4.3 Developing and negotiating educator agency

A further dimension of my pedagogical agency emerged as I began to engage students more explicitly with the ideas of agency and professional identity. While these concepts had become central to my own understanding of teaching through my academic training and professional journey, I realized that they might feel unfamiliar or abstract to many of the students. Additionally, through my experience and observation, many students appeared to approach teaching knowledge as something primarily acquired from the instructors or textbooks rather than something actively constructed through their own decisions and reflections. This awareness prompted me to consider how the concept of agency could be introduced in ways that felt meaningful and relevant to their experiences.

One way I approached this was by naming agency explicitly and grounding it in concrete teaching moments. Early in the semester, I introduced the idea of teacher agency and returned to it across multiple sessions, acknowledging that the term itself might be new to some students. Rather than presenting it as an abstract theoretical concept, I invited students to recall situations in their studies or teaching experiences where they had adapted a lesson, solved a problem creatively, or made decisions under constraints. I wanted students “to see agency as anchored in lived and concrete moments and examples especially when teachers respond to challenges and constraints” (Retrospective Reflections). Through these efforts, students began to recognize that agency had already been part of their practices, and explicitly naming it helps to cultivate a clearer sense of themselves as decision-makers.

Informed by my own experience, I believe an essential part of agency begins with developing one’s ownership of learning and professional growth. Many students initially approached coursework as tasks to complete rather than as opportunities to develop their own pedagogical thinking. In my teaching journal, I noted that students were “still used to relying on the instructor for direction in almost everything” (Teaching Journal, Nov. 10, 2024), which led me to think more intentionally about creating spaces for students to think through their own pedagogical decisions. Across the courses I taught, I incorporated regular reflective activities, including teaching journals, in-class takeaways, and short teaching briefs, where students articulated what they had learned and how these ideas might inform their future teaching. Over time, these recurring moments of reflection encouraged students to

connect theoretical concepts with their own emerging teaching philosophies. Some major assignments such as the unit plan presentation, practicum teaching journal, and parts of the action research project were also designed as spaces where students must make pedagogical choices, justify and explain their reasoning, and reflect on possible implications. In terms of evaluating assignments, I framed them as process-oriented, emphasizing the progress, growth, and reflection along the way rather than as one-time products. As I wrote in the retrospective reflections, I wanted my students to understand writing, research, and teaching all as “ongoing process that needs accumulation and exploration over time” and thus encouraging them to “see learning as an evolving process and take greater ownership of their trajectory.”

Meanwhile, I came to realize that fostering students’ agency required me to make my own pedagogical reasoning more visible. Rather than keeping teaching decisions as something implicit and mysterious, I began to communicate my instructional choices (e.g., rationale behind certain course components, adjustments to assignment formats, evaluation priorities) more transparently in class. For instance, I added a major in-class activity after students submitted their annotated bibliography work, explaining that it was designed to deepen their engagement with scholarly sources through interactions and enhance their ability to synthesize ideas across different sources. By articulating these decisions, I hoped students could see that teaching is not a set of prescribed procedures but a series of purposeful judgments shaped by beliefs, values, learners’ needs, and contextual considerations.

4.4 Interacting layers shaping the enactment of agency

Enactments and negotiations of agency described in the previous sections did not emerge from isolated decisions. Rather, they developed through the ongoing interaction of personal, professional, and contextual influences that shaped how I interpreted my teaching context and navigated pedagogical choices. The following subsections (4.4.1 to 4.4.3) further examine several key layers that informed this process. The final subsection (4.4.4) summarizes and synthesizes how contextual elements interact with these personal and professional layers to shape pedagogical agency. Rather than offering a separate description of context, this synthesis draws together insights already woven throughout the earlier sections (4.1 to 4.3) to illuminate how these layers interact within my teaching practice.

4.4.1 Transnational trajectory

One important layer shaping my pedagogical agency lies in my transnational trajectory of shuttling between languages, cultures, and social and educational contexts. It has also been a journey of learning and relearning myself as a multilingual, transnational person, and educator.

In the retrospective reflections, I revisited and traced how my understandings of language and identity evolved during my academic journey. Concepts such as translanguaging, monolingual ideologies, and critical perspectives on language “initially appeared as theoretical constructs encountered through readings and discussions.” Over time, however, these ideas began to resonate with my own experiences navigating multiple linguistic and academic worlds. I remember the gradual shift in how I examined and understood my own background and language learning experience. Earlier in my academic journey, I often viewed my English through a deficit lens, “measuring it against imagined standards of native-speaker competence.” Through further engaging with scholarship, reflecting on my experiences, and participating in conversations with people in the field, I began to see things differently and realized that some of the constructs and concepts “do not only apply to immigrant or heritage students” but also illuminate my own experience as an international student navigating multiple worlds. Such resonance and evolving understandings have moved me from a more deficit orientation of “my English is not as good enough as those native speakers” to an asset stance that recognizes my linguistic and cultural resources as strengths. Ideas such as equity, power dynamics, critical pedagogies, marginalization, legitimacy, and

agency also began to take shape through the power of engaging with my lived experiences at a deeper level and of seeing and naming the themes and underlying structures that hold many people's specific experiences together. As I noted in my reflections, "those concepts and ideas that once felt abstract and empty when I said or saw them" have become "much more real and meaningful as I could relate to specific threads, experiences, and images in my mind."

These experiences and evolving insights have informed my orientation and shaped my pedagogical commitments, including the efforts described earlier to reframe multilingualism, introduce critical perspectives on language and culture, and encourage students to recognize their own linguistic resources as meaningful in their academic and professional development. They have also shaped how I approached ideas such as translanguaging and critical awareness in my teaching. Rather than presenting them as abstract theories and terms, I increasingly saw them as ways of interpreting linguistic and cultural experiences that resonated with both my own journey and my students' realities.

4.4.2 Insider-outsider positioning in the context

Teaching in a transnational language teacher education context means constantly navigating between global discourses of language education and local realities of teaching and learning. This navigation is informed by my dual positioning as both an insider and an outsider in relation to my students and the broader educational environment.

Having grown up and received my initial education in China, I share some experiences with my students—learning English as a foreign language, navigating similar schooling structures, and encountering many of the similar assumptions about language learning and teaching. These shared experiences allow me to anticipate certain patterns in how students interpret new ideas, approach coursework, and respond to unfamiliar pedagogical concepts. This insider perspective often helps me design learning experiences that feel accessible and relevant to students' realities. For instance, when introducing ideas that may initially appear abstract, such as critical cultural awareness or teacher agency, I often draw connections to experiences that students can recognize from their own educational backgrounds. These shared reference points "create entryways for discussion and reflection that might otherwise remain distant or theoretical" (Teaching Journal, Oct.9, 2025).

At the same time, my transnational study and professional trajectory position me as a partial outsider, as someone who has lived through transitions, challenges, growth, and transformation in a different context. Through these experiences, I built and enriched perspectives around issues such as linguistic diversity, critical reflection, and the sociocultural dimensions of teaching and learning, which "are often less visible and emphasized in my students' learning and professional experiences and might feel very abstract and unfamiliar for them" (Teaching Journal, Oct.20, 2025).

This dual positioning, being simultaneously familiar with the local context and shaped by insights beyond it, continually informs how I interpret the expectations and possibilities within the classroom. In particular, it shapes how I introduce pedagogical ideas that may not be widely foregrounded in the local discourse, such as critical cultural awareness, multilingual perspectives, and reflective approaches to teaching. In my retrospective reflections, this balancing act frequently appears as an effort to "find starting points that make sense for students while still opening up space for new perspectives."

4.4.3 Evolving educator identities

Moving from being a language learner to a teacher and eventually a teacher educator has been a gradual process of learning, re-learning, and positioning myself in the field of education. Throughout this trajectory, I have continually revisited questions about the purpose of teaching and the kind of educator I aspire to become. In my retrospective reflections, I described the later stages of my doctoral studies as "the

time when many things began to click together” and “abstract concepts became more tangible through my own lived experiences.” Those moments shifted my understanding of teaching and preparing teachers from “skill- and knowledge-building” toward deeper questions and understandings about the “why” and roots behind what we are doing.

The early experiences teaching pre-service teachers during my doctoral studies also played a significant role in shaping this perspective. Entering the classroom as a graduate student instructor with my ethnic and language background brought new challenges and negotiation related to identity, authority, positioning, and pedagogical confidence. It was a process of uncertainties, big and small triumphs, and a lot of decision-making. This journey taught me that “I needed to have my own teaching style, teaching philosophy, and ownership of the content that speak to myself” rather than “simply reproducing the ways I had observed from others” (Retrospective Reflections). These realizations have cultivated a strong part of agency, stemming from developing one’s pedagogical voice, ownership, and commitments, which has also become something I strive to nurture in my students as they grow into future educators.

My sense of belonging to a broader community of educators has further enriched the ongoing process of growth. Participating in academic conferences, engaging in conversations with peers, and connecting with colleagues in the field have continually reminded me that teaching is an evolving process of inquiry, reflection, and growth. As I noted in one teaching journal entry (Sept. 20, 2025): “talking with people in the field makes me feel energetic and inspired, reminding me that I am part of a larger community and keeping me grounded.” These experiences reinforce my belief that professional development involves ongoing dialogue between personal experiences, pedagogical practice, and the broader intellectual community of teacher education.

4.4.4 Contextual layer in pedagogical agency

In particular, the EMI environment often positions English as the primary language of academic legitimacy while other linguistic resources remain less visible within formal learning spaces. At the same time, broader societal discourses surrounding language education frequently frame language learning in instrumental or examination-oriented ways and position learners primarily as monolingual Mandarin speakers rather than multilingual language users. These discourses shape how students perceive their own linguistic resources and how pedagogical ideas, such as multilingualism, translanguaging, critical cultural awareness, or teacher agency, might be interpreted within the classroom. As a result, introducing these perspectives in teaching often involves not only explaining new concepts but also gradually expanding how students understand language, learning, and their own identities as language users.

My teaching decisions therefore emerged through an ongoing process of interpreting these contextual expectations while considering how new perspectives might be introduced in ways that remain meaningful and pedagogically productive. In this sense, contextual conditions neither fully determined nor simply constrained my pedagogical agency. Instead, they became part of the interpretive landscape within which I navigated how ideas could be framed, adapted, and enacted in my teaching practice.

5 Discussion

The findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of language teacher educator agency through responding to the ecological perspective as agency emerges through the interaction of personal trajectories, present contextual conditions, and future-oriented commitments. They also extend this perspective by illustrating how language teacher educator agency in a transnational, EMI context is enacted ideologically through legitimizing multilingual meaning-making, relationally through supporting future teachers, and adaptively through recontextualizing pedagogical perspectives across contexts.

5.1 Translanguaging as a stance

One key dimension of my agency lies in positioning translanguaging not simply as a teaching strategy, but as a way of understanding language and knowledge that shapes classroom learning. In EMI contexts, students' first language is often viewed as a pragmatic tool for supporting content comprehension (Hsu, 2025). Moving beyond this view, my teaching positions students' full linguistic repertoires as legitimate resources for meaning-making and intellectual engagement. Enacting this perspective involves more than introducing concepts; it requires creating conditions where students' linguistic experiences can meaningfully surface and enter the learning process.

Across classroom moments, I came to see that reframing translanguaging in this context involves navigating a delicate balance: challenging monolingual ideologies while remaining attentive to specific institutional and cultural expectations. In this sense, translanguaging becomes less of a predefined model, but more of a gradual expansion of what counts as legitimate meaning-making, supporting students in developing academic English while also affirming the value of their whole linguistic and cultural repertoires. This orientation resonates with recent scholarship advocating for moving beyond viewing the first language merely as a compensatory support within a monolingual paradigm toward recognizing multilingualism as a norm for meaning-making (Xiong et al., 2024; Yang, 2024). In my classroom, translanguaging becomes both a pedagogical practice and a stance, reflecting a commitment to expanding students' understanding of language in ways that align with their lived linguistic realities.

5.2 Relational agency of transnational multilingual teacher educators

The findings also highlight the relational nature of teacher educator agency. Agency is enacted not only through pedagogical decisions, but also through fostering the beliefs, practices, and professional identities of future teachers. This dual orientation makes teacher educator agency inherently relational. In my teaching, cultivating agency meant more than encouraging students to take initiative. It also meant making visible how I, as a teacher educator, interpreted contexts, enacted beliefs and values, made decisions, and reflected on my professional commitments. By doing so, I invite students to see teaching as a situated and interpretive practice rather than the application of fixed methods. My agency is therefore intertwined with how I support students in developing their own.

Teaching also becomes a space where both my students and I negotiate what it means to act as agentive educators within our contexts. This unfolds through a two-way interaction, where students' responses and prior experiences also inform how I frame ideas, adjust my pedagogical moves, and sustain dialogue. Such interaction and connection resonate with the concept of relational agency, where individuals interpret situations and respond to problems by aligning themselves with others' responses and practices, and the structures around them (Edwards, 2005; Kusters et al., 2026). In teacher education, this involves not only coordinating actions with others but also modeling, scaffolding, and cultivating the perspectives, beliefs, and practices that teacher educators hope future teachers will develop (Loughran & Berry, 2005; White, 2013).

My transnational, multilingual background further shapes this relational agency. It informs my orientations toward teaching and learning, which resonates with research highlighting the reciprocal relationship between identity and agency, particularly for educators whose multilingual identities shape their commitments and agentive stances (Heineke & Cameron, 2013; Kayi-Aydar, 2019a; Liao & Maddamsetti, 2019). Extending this line of work, the study indicates how mobility across cultural, social, and educational contexts fosters heightened awareness of how pedagogical ideas travel and transform. This perspective helps me anticipate tensions between teaching content and students' prior experiences, and design learning that bridges these differences. It also encourages reinterpretation rather than replication of ideas. My transnational experiences and multilingual identities thus function as interpretive resources informing how I engage with students and support their developing agency.

5.3 Adaptive and situated agency in transnational EMI contexts

This study also contributes to understanding teacher educator agency in transnational EMI contexts, where multiple educational traditions, linguistic expectations, and sociocultural norms intersect. My teaching context is neither a fully U.S.-based teacher education program nor a traditional Chinese setting, but an in-between space where transnational curricula, institutional expectations, local social and educational realities, and students' experiences intersect. In such space, pedagogical ideas do not travel unchanged; instead, they must be reinterpreted and adapted meaningfully. I use the term *adaptive and situated agency* to describe how my agency unfolds within this dynamic environment. It refers to a form of agency that emerges when educators reinterpret and re-contextualize their knowledge, perspectives, and commitments across linguistic, cultural, and institutional boundaries. These processes are evident in everyday teaching decisions, such as rephrasing theoretical perspectives to make them more connected, or reframing discussions to keep dialogue open while still engaging students in questions and thinking that expand visions.

In this sense, I also see my role as a cultural mediator who works between global academic discourses and local educational realities. Agency emerges through framing issues, pacing content, and anticipating how students encounter new ideas. Such negotiation resonates with research showing that language educators adapt and reshape their practices in response to changing conditions (Chaaban et al., 2021; Liyanage & Walker, 2023; Tao & Gao, 2017). The ecological framework (Priestley et al., 2015) helps further illuminate these processes. My past experiences and transnational trajectory play an essential part in fostering my beliefs and shaping how I interpret teaching situations (iterational); the present contextual elements influence what is possible and how ideas can be enacted (practical-evaluative); and my aspiration to cultivate reflective and agentive teachers guides my pedagogical decisions (projective). Agency therefore also develops through the interaction of these dimensions and represents one way ecological agency becomes visible within transnational EMI contexts.

6 Implications and Conclusion

This study explored how my agency as a language teacher educator was enacted and negotiated within a transnational, multilingual EMI context. The findings illustrated the enactment across three interconnected areas: reframing translanguaging and multilingualism in ways that connected with students' experiences; navigating how critical perspectives could be meaningfully introduced; and negotiating educator agency alongside students' emerging professional identities. These enactments were shaped by my transnational experiences, evolving educator identity, knowledge and positioning of the context, and ongoing negotiation of institutional and sociocultural conditions.

In response to the special issue theme of “a time of flux and transformation,” this study conceptualizes flux not as perceptible changes in policy or student background, but as the ongoing and evolving conditions within which pedagogical decisions are made. In this study, flux is reflected in the hybrid and dynamic nature of the EMI context itself, where global and local discourses, linguistic expectations, institutional structures, and students' experiences continuously interact, as well as in the adaptations and refinements in my teaching across time. Rather than occurring through abrupt transformation, agency develops through sustained processes of negotiation, reinterpretation, and adaptation in response to these dynamic and often uncertain conditions.

This study offers some implications for practice. It highlights the potential value of legitimizing students' full linguistic repertoires and adopting translanguaging as a pedagogical stance in EMI and teacher education contexts. In my teaching, creating space for multilingual meaning-making enhanced students' engagement and helped connect learning to their own linguistic experiences. While this study does not examine student outcomes directly, these practices point to ways teacher educators can foster more inclusive and meaningful learning environments. Furthermore, teacher educators need space and

support to adapt and recontextualize theoretical and pedagogical frameworks responding to local realities while making their pedagogical reasoning visible to students. By explicitly modeling how pedagogical decisions are made and negotiated in practice, teacher educators can create opportunities for their teacher candidates to engage in reflection, building ownership, and decision-making.

As an autoethnographic study grounded in a specific teaching context and my personal trajectory, this research is inherently situated and does not aim for broad generalizability. The findings reflect my own experiences and interpretations, shaped by my positionality and context. Future research can build on this work by examining how teacher educator agency unfolds across diverse transnational settings and delving into how institutional, sociocultural, and ideological conditions shape possibilities for agentive action. In conclusion, this study highlights the dynamic and relational nature of teacher educator agency in hybrid educational spaces and demonstrates the significance of multilingual and transnational perspectives in preparing future educators.

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