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Bridging Worlds: A Collective Case Study of Novice English Language Teacher Agency in Hybrid Teaching

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Article info Abstract

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The increasing adoption of hybrid language instruction in the post-pandemic era has reshaped the ecology of language classrooms; however, little is known about how novice English language teachers negotiate their professional agency within these blended environments. Drawing on an ecological framework, the researchers investigated how these teachers steer pedagogical duality, role ambiguity, and shifting power dynamics as they adapt to the hybrid teaching environment. The experiences of four novice teachers in Iran were examined using in-depth interviews and weekly teaching journals. The findings revealed that novice teachers faced three key challenges in the hybrid setting: (1) negotiating the pedagogical duality of virtual and in-person instruction, (2) experiencing role epistemic uncertainty when adopting multiple teacher identities, and (3) managing contested power dynamics with students in the hybrid space. In response to these challenges, the novice teachers enacted their agency through iterative adaptations that strategically aligned task design with modal affordances, renegotiated their professional identities from knowledge authorities to distributed facilitators, and cultivated learner autonomy to address power asymmetries. The study contributes to the literature on teacher agency by highlighting the situated and temporal nature of agency enactment, especially for novice teachers facing disruptive educational changes.

Keywords: ecological framework, educational change, hybrid instruction, language teacher agency, novice language teachers.

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1. Introduction

Research on language teacher agency has expanded in recent years, focusing on different theoretical considerations in diverse educational settings (e.g., Ashton, 2020; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Miller et al., 2018; Tao & Gao, 2021). Existing scholarship on language teacher agency provides an insightful picture of how teachers exercise agency and the analytical foundations for studying teacher agency. However, the complex processes through which individual teachers enact their agency when dealing with every day routines of their profession is an area which needs to be further addressed.

Educational change is a complex process that requires teachers to continuously adapt their professional roles and instructional practices, often leading to shifts in their identities and agency (Vähäsantanen, 2015). However, novice teachers often face heightened tensions due to their limited experience and evolving professional identities (Hamilton & Clandinin, 2011). This challenge is even more noticeable for language teachers as they must balance pedagogical and technological competencies while addressing diverse learner needs (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2015).

One of the most significant educational changes in recent years has been the shift toward online and hybrid language teaching which emerged in response to COVID-19 pandemic. Hybrid language teaching, which integrates online and face-to-face instruction, has since evolved into a more permanent feature of language schools, requiring teachers to steer dual instructional modes (Chen, 2022; Gacs et al., 2020). Novice teachers, in particular, may struggle to enact their agency in this new context, as they must simultaneously develop their professional competencies and adapt to the complexities of hybrid teaching. Investigating their agency in this context sheds light on how teachers negotiate their roles and manage instructional transitions to respond to shifting power dynamics in the classroom (Ashton, 2020).

In the past decade, research has examined teacher agency in online settings (e.g., Chen, 2022; Kayi-Aydar, 2015, 2019) and novice teacher challenges in traditional contexts (e.g., Nazari et al., 2023). However, few studies have explored the hybrid model of language teaching as a disruptive educational ecology. What is still insufficiently understood is how agency is reshaped when teachers must constantly adjust their practices and professional roles in both online and face-to-face sessions. This study, therefore, focuses on the adjustments novice language teachers make as they move between online and face-to-face instruction. It examines how novice teachers repeatedly adapt their decisions and roles in changing conditions. Considering their limited professional experience, these shifts demand constant recalibration. In this sense, the study shows that, for novice teachers

in hybrid contexts, agency is not fixed but continually reshaped in response to evolving pedagogical realities. Therefore, this study examines novice language teachers' agency when they experience the new hybrid teaching model and the affordances and constraints that help or hinder their agency enactment. To achieve this objective, the researchers have adopted an ecological framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language Teacher Agency

Teacher agency refers to the capacity of teachers to have an impact on their work and professional identities by exerting influence, making choices, and adopting specific positions (Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019). From a sociocultural perspective, teacher agency is a "contextually enacted way of being in the world" (Van Lier, 2008, p. 163). Language teacher agency has been conceptualized as a dynamic process that is influenced by social, institutional, and individual factors. According to Priestley et al. (2015), agency is a situational phenomenon that arises through interaction with contextual structures.

Discussing language teacher agency, Kayi-Aydar (2019) has proposed three major theoretical views. The social cognitive theory views agency in terms of individuals' ability for intentional action, self-reflection, and goal-setting. The ecological approach explains the interaction between personal, structural, and cultural factors. Finally, the positioning theory sees agency as a discursive process of identity construction. Expanding on these dimensions, Tao and Gao (2021) introduced an additional strand which viewed agency as a socio-culturally mediated process that highlights the interaction between individuals and their contexts. These theoretical perspectives have led to the development of research interest in the connections between agency and aspects such as emotions (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018), autonomy (Teng, 2019), and identity (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). Overall, these studies show the complex and intersectional nature of agency in relation to contextual discourses and sociocultural factors.

Recent research on language teacher agency (e.g., Kong, 2022; Nazari & Kamali, 2025; Yazan et al., 2023) has deepened our understanding of how teachers act in their professional environment and has emphasized the significance of both internal and external factors that influence their agency. The focus of language teacher agency is to show how teachers take initiatives to cope with institutional demands while maintaining their professional autonomy. In other words, external constraints such as policies and administrative expectations can shape the ways in which teachers exert agency in their teaching practice (Ruohotie-

Lyhty & Moate, 2015; Solati et al., 2026; Teng, 2019). As Nazari et al. (2023) suggest agency is a process of negotiation and transformation by which teachers respond to the imposed constraints through resistance, adaptation, or innovation. Along with external factors, teachers' internal drives such as their motivations and beliefs play a crucial role in enacting agency (Damşa et al., 2021; Tao & Gao, 2021).

A growing body of research has explored the factors which influence teacher agency including their personal and professional histories, present relationships and situational contexts, as well as future goals and expectations (Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Priestley et al., 2015; Teng, 2019). These elements significantly influence teachers' autonomy, motivation, and their sense of professional identity (Nowruzi & Khodamoradi, 2026) and they determine their capacity to act independently and make professional decisions (Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

This conceptualization is consistent with an ecological perspective. Viewing agency from an ecological perspective involves teachers' reflection on their past experiences, current circumstances, and future goals (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Tao & Gao, 2021). Priestley et al. (2015) explains agency, through the ecological lens, as the "outcome of the interplay of iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions" (p. 29). In other words, the ecological perspective emphasizes viewing agency via a temporal lens, in which agency is influenced by both previous experiences and future goals in addition to being exercised in the present.

2.2. Agency and Affordance From an Ecological Perspective

The capacity of individuals to act on their own initiative and make decisions that influence their environment is known as agency. Agency is viewed as a dynamic process that incorporates the interaction of previous experiences, present evaluations, and future expectations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Teacher agency, which refers to the teachers' potential to make choices that impact their teaching practices and the learning outcomes, is especially important in educational contexts. This definition of teacher agency emphasizes the active role teachers play in dealing with curricular and pedagogical challenges.

Affordance constitute the potential for action that the environment offers to an individual. According to van Lier (2000), affordances in educational contexts refer to the opportunities for teaching and learning activities which are provided by the physical, social, and technological environment. In the context of hybrid language instruction, affordances include digital tools like video conferencing software and learning management systems, as well as traditional classroom resources like textbooks and whiteboards. Perceiving and using these affordances is

important for novice language teachers, however, it can be challenging due to their limited experience. A growing body of research (e.g., Chen, 2022; Weinmann et al., 2024; Yang & Chen, 2021) has focused on affordances in digital language classrooms.

Agency and affordance in teaching form a reciprocal relationship and are mutually dependent and dynamic (Withagen et al., 2017). Affordances offer the potential for certain actions, while agency determines how individuals act upon those affordances. Teachers' use of their agency to identify, choose, and evaluate potential actions in relation to behavior settings activates the actionable properties of affordances (Withagen et al., 2017). As a result, instructional behaviors arise from the dynamics between affordances and teacher agency. This dynamic relationship is crucial in educational settings, particularly for novice language teachers as they are required to undergo the curricular and pedagogical challenges of both online and face-to-face environments. Research on teacher agency has expanded recently in different educational contexts (e.g., Cong-lem & Nguyen, 2024; Min & Nelson, 2024; Nazari, 2024).

In recent years, research on teacher agency has grown across different educational contexts. However, despite its significance, substantial empirical work on the interplay of language teacher affordances and agency in online or hybrid educational settings is still limited. One of the studies on the intersection of affordances and language teacher agency was conducted by Jeon et al. (2022). Drawing on an ecological perspective, they examined how teachers of young learners exploited the digital affordances as they enacted their agency in online classes. Their findings indicated that young English learners' characteristics impacted language teachers' enactment of agency and their adoption of certain affordances and constraints. Lee and Jeon (2024) also tracked how two teachers implemented ICT affordances to exercise their agency in classroom-based assessment. Findings linked teacher agency to a number of factors including their beliefs and identity as well as the cultural, structural and material aspects of their teaching.

Key to the ecological perspective is its focus on viewing human behavior as a network of interconnections (van Lier, 2004). The ecological perspective sees agency as a situated achievement, emerging from the dynamic interplay between the individual and their environment, which includes past experiences, current cultural and structural features, and future goals (Priestley et al., 2015). This framework views teacher agency as a process through which teachers reflect on their past experiences, set future goals, and evaluate these to identify appropriate actions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Leijen et al., 2020; Priestley et al., 2015). For teachers to make practical decisions, they should be able to choose between options which is

possible in light of the affordances the context offers and then evaluate their actions (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2017). The decisions teacher make will be practical as they are informed by the affordances and constraints of the context, and evaluative as the teacher has to evaluate the risks and benefits within different circumstances (Priestley et al., 2015).

Recent research has adopted an ecological perspective in examining teacher agency in relation to the affordances and constraints (e.g., Ashton, 2022; Chen, 2022; Sulis et al., 2023). In a study which was conducted during COVID-19, Ashton (2022) explored the agency of four language teachers and the affordances and constraints in the way of achieving their agency in an online pedagogical setting. Her study showed how critical incidents can change regular teaching practices and as a consequence, prompt teachers to reflect on their roles and identity and finally take appropriate actions. Drawing on an ecological framework, Chen (2022) investigated how teachers used digital affordances via their teacher agency in remote language teaching. Findings showed teachers enacted agency through the use of digital affordances aligned with social contexts and their teaching beliefs. Finally, Sulis et al. (2023) showed how teachers experienced four levels of well-being namely triggers, reflection, affordances, and action when exercising their agency.

Building on these perspectives, it is evident that novice English language teachers need to continuously renegotiate their agency in response to pedagogical affordances and constraints because hybrid teaching presents a more complex scenario. In this context, affordances are not simply digital or physical; they become available, recede, and re-emerge as teachers shift between modalities. This ongoing movement may alter how teachers experience their professional competence. However, we know little about how this movement between the modes of instruction influences the temporal and relational dimensions of agency, especially for novice teachers with limited prior experience to draw upon. While previous studies have explored the interplay between teacher agency, institutional expectations, and digital affordances (e.g., Chen, 2022; Priestley et al., 2015; Tao & Gao, 2021), further research is needed to add to our understanding of how novice teachers enact their agency within the hybrid model of language teaching. To that end, this study answered the following research question:

How do novice English language teachers negotiate their agency in hybrid language teaching to balance institutional demands, technological affordances, and learner engagement?

3. Method

3.1. Design of the Study

A collective qualitative case study approach was used to examine the agency of four female novice language teachers in hybrid classes in Iran. The collective case study design was adopted as four novice teachers were studied as interconnected cases to illuminate common and divergent processes of their agency enactment within a single hybrid teaching ecology. Qualitative case studies are conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of novice language teachers' agency and the challenges they faced while enacting their agency in the hybrid system of instruction and are frequently used method for researching teacher agency (Weng et al., 2019). As novice language teachers' instructional behaviors could not be directly observed, semi-structured interview was used as the inquiry method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

3.2. Context and Participants

As the present study drew on an ecological perspective to explore Iranian novice language teachers' agency, a description of the ecology of language teaching after the pandemic is given first. Language teaching underwent significant transformations in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. Language schools had to adapt their teaching methods to ensure continuity of learning while prioritizing the safety of students and teachers. This led to the emergence of hybrid classes, which combine in-person and online instruction. The integration of technology became crucial in the context of language teaching under such circumstances. Language teachers had to familiarize themselves with online platforms, video conferencing tools, learning management systems, and digital resources to effectively deliver lessons. Despite the affordances provided by these technologies, the constraints they imposed created a challenge for language teachers.

The research site was a private language school based in north of Tehran. Students aged 14 above were registered after a placement test and covered Top Notch Series. The school promoted the principles of communicative language teaching through a hybrid model of instruction in which each class met twice a week, one session regular in-person instruction and one session online. It should be noted that the only professional development course that the language school provided was a one-day workshop to familiarize new teachers with the school's policies, syllabus and the materials covered. The school had 17 teachers most of whom had classes at different proficiency levels. Eight teachers had less than four years of experience. We obtained the approval of school manager to conduct our study; also, teachers' consent to participate in the study was obtained. Following approval from the school manager, all novice teachers were

contacted and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Four teachers agreed to take part in the present study.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the four novice teachers who agreed to be interviewed. To ensure their anonymity, pseudonyms are used for all. The language teachers selected for this case study were all novice teachers. Novice teachers (less than four years of experience) were identified as the participants of this study as the decisions they make when they face new problems and challenges are different from experienced teachers. They seem to be less confident compared to their experienced colleagues (Ashton, 2018). Furthermore, how they cope in the new educational systems and the survival strategies they use determine their willingness to develop professionally (Hamilton & Clandinin, 2011).

Table 1
Information About the Four Novice Teachers

	Lena	Sahar	Kimia	Mahtab
Field of study	BA in English Translation	BA in TEFL	BA in TEFL	BA in TEFL
Year(s) of teaching	Almost two years	Three years	One year	Four years
Prior experiences of online/hybrid teaching	No	Yes	No	Yes
Course(s)	Pre-Intermediate Intermediate	Upper-Intermediate Advanced discussion	Elementary Pre-Intermediate	Upper-Intermediate Advanced
Class size	8-14 students per course	7-11 students per course	10-16 students per course	6-10 students per course
Ages of students	14-27	18-33	14-24	19-30

3.3. Data Collection Tools and Procedures

The data collection took place about three months using a case study approach, incorporating multiple data collection sources. The primary data came from in-depth interviews with each participant. Interviews with teachers were conducted face-to-face and in Persian lasting approximately 60 minutes. Afterward, the transcripts of their responses were translated into English.

In addition, participants kept weekly journals writing about their experiences teaching in the new hybrid model. They were asked to note the challenges of teaching in both online and face-to-face classes and the critical incidents they encountered every week. Drawing on literature on teacher agency, we provided prompts to guide teachers' journals: (1)

describe the challenges you had teaching in both online and face-to-face classes this week, (2) what actions did you take to deal with these incidents?, and (3) what limitations and opportunities did you have when taking those actions? They were informed that the length of their journals was not an issue. That is the length of these notes varied according to each participant's preference. Another source of data came from the informal conversation the first researcher had with participants every week after each journal was sent. These conversations took place over the three-month period of data collection and participants were mainly asked to clarify relevant details in their journals. Teacher journals and conversations were designed to inform the interviews by gaining deeper insights into teachers' teaching history and context.

The interviews which served as a useful method for gaining retrospective-introspective insights (Mann, 2016), were conducted to allow participants to narrate their own stories and experiences in hybrid classes. Teacher narratives are considered crucial in understanding the connection between their contextualized experiences and their teaching practice (Kartch, 2017). These narratives helped researchers gain insights into each teacher's agency and the affordances and constraints in exerting their agency. In these interviews, the researcher's role primarily involved active listening and gently guiding the conversation towards subsequent questions and topics. Drawing on literature, the interview questions were prepared to cover three main components: (1) teachers' understanding of their role in the hybrid teaching environment and how it differed from traditional or fully online settings, (2) the challenges they faced and power dynamics between teachers and students, and (3) instances of agency enactment, promoting learner engagement, and adaptive practices for transitioning to hybrid language teaching context (see Appendix)

3.4. Data Analysis

In this study, the interview data were thoroughly examined through multiple rounds of listening before being transcribed. Then, they were transcribed verbatim. Then, the first author translated the transcripts back into English, and translations were checked against the transcripts by the two authors. An inductive approach to coding was used to focus on identifying instances of agency, as well as the affordances and constraints associated with the enactment of agency. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), data from the three sources were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis by going through the process of data familiarization, coding of data, searching for themes and reviewing of themes. After listening to the interviews and transcribing them, member checking about interview content was conducted by sending transcripts to the teachers.

The four teachers thought that the transcripts were accurate and added words that were asked for clarification. Then, the transcripts and teachers' reflective journals were highlighted and data related to teacher agency and the constraints and affordances mentioned by the novice teachers were coded manually.

Identifying and reviewing the codes constitute an iterative process through which novice teachers' informal conversations were also considered as another source of verifying codes. Initial coding was performed inductively by focusing on how teachers described their experiences in the new context and their agentic actions. At this stage, the ecological framework was applied as the analytical filter in our study. That is, we focused on how teachers' agency was shaped by the temporal and contextual dimensions of the ecology of their practice. During this stage, it became evident that within the context of shifting to hybrid classes participants experienced unique critical incidents that significantly disrupted their usual teaching practices and prompted them to exert their agency. That is, although the four teachers underwent similar challenges, the incidents each experienced were unique. Therefore, the analysis also involved a careful examination of these critical incidents and exploring their impact on the teachers' agency in conjunction with relevant past experiences, as well as the affordances and constraints which influenced their agency enactment.

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the data peer examination and multiple data collection sources (interviews, journals, and conversations) were used. Inter-coder reliability was estimated by asking the second researcher to independently code approximately 25% of the transcripts from the interviews and reflective journals. The level of agreement between the two coders was calculated using Cohen's kappa. The resulting coefficient was 0.82 which indicates substantial agreement between the two coders. Then, coding discrepancies were discussed in relation to the teachers' narrated experiences of agency, affordances, and constraints in hybrid instruction. This resulted in a refined coding framework that guided the analysis of the remaining data. Additionally, the two authors consistently discussed the steps in the analysis of the data and "the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 259).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

As a result of data analysis, three themes, including three challenges and their agency enactment counterparts, were extracted. Despite unique critical incidents they encountered, the challenges the four novice teachers

experienced in this case study and their agentic behavior in the new hybrid environment were almost similar. Table 2 illustrates the challenges faced by teachers and their agentic responses.

Table 2
Novice Teachers' Challenges and Agency Enactment

	Challenge	Sample Extract	Agency Enactment	Sample Extract
Theme 1	Negotiating Pedagogical Duality by Reconciling Two Modalities	Hybrid classes have the disadvantages of both. Students are still disengaged in online sessions and I can't take full advantage of the in-person sessions too	Agency enactment: Iterational Adaptation through Strategic Alignment of Task Design with Modal Affordances	To handle this problem, I moved speaking activities to the in-person sessions
Theme 2	Role Epistemic Uncertainty when Negotiating Multiplicity in Teacher Identity	During the in-person session... I can be a one-hundred percent teacher... But in online session I have to focus on the quality of the interaction with students	Role (Re)Positioning from Authority to Distributed Facilitation	I stay almost 10 to 15 minutes after the class
Theme 3	Power Asymmetry: Contested Epistemic Authority	During our online sessions, the same students who were enthusiastic would turn off their cameras	Cultivating Learner Autonomy through Relational Praxis	I decided to teach students to be involved in their own progress

4.1.1. Challenge: Negotiating Pedagogical Duality by Reconciling Two Modalities

In the hybrid system of language teaching, teachers had to plan their syllabus for one session of regular and one session of online instruction. The integration of physical and virtual environment posed serious challenges to the efficiency of teaching as the participating teachers were teaching in the new system for the first time. Early on in their new teaching experience, the four novice teachers became concerned that the tasks they were planning for in-person and online sessions should be different from the tasks in the traditional physical classes or the emergency online classes they taught during the pandemic. Creating a balance between task types on the one hand and teacher responsibilities on the other hand in the two pedagogical environments seemed to be one of their primary concerns. In expanding on this challenge, Sahar stated:

Although my teacher education was mainly focused on conducting traditional classes, I learned to adapt to teaching in online classroom very quickly... I find hybrid classes more difficult to manage because I have to be prepared for both in-person and online environment.

Kimia, who has recently begun her teaching career, found it challenging to efficiently teach certain tasks in the hybrid setting as she believed “Much of the class time is spent on helping and reminding learners what they were supposed to do”. Sharing similar views, Mahtab, who had practiced in both traditional and virtual environments, commented:

Hybrid classes have the disadvantages of both. Students are still disengaged in online sessions and I can’t take full advantage of the in-person sessions too... Sometimes students ask me to repeat the grammar lesson I have taught online and I think maybe they haven’t listened because it was boring listening to a voice lecturing.

The significant challenge encountered by our participating teachers was the constant transition between the two instructional modalities. Given that each educational environment offers a myriad of possibilities, it is important for teachers to optimally integrate them in their practice. However, planning the syllabus that caters to both settings created unpredictable complexities which required adequate flexibility and preparation for the two scenarios.

4.1.2. Agency enactment: Iterational Adaptation Through Strategic Alignment of Task Design With Modal Affordances

After experiencing a few sessions of the hybrid classes with instructional uncertainties, teachers demonstrated ways to empower themselves. The comments revealed that they were engaged in constant evaluation of the affordances and constraints of two modes to adapt their practice. The most important affordance was their willingness to enhance student engagement in different tasks. Therefore, they enacted their agency by planning their syllabus based on the requirements of the tasks. For instance, activities that required the integration of digital tools were integrated in the online session and tasks that demanded the physical presence of the teacher were moved to the face-to-face session. As Lena put it: “Digital tools in the online session have some advantages like facilitating students’ comprehension of listening and when the internet speed is not low, the listening task can be run even faster than the same task in the physical class”.

Her agentic response to the new situation entailed planning listening activities for the online session as she believed such activities required more focus on the material and less interaction with others. Additionally, speaking activities were integrated as part of the in-person sessions. Sahar achieved

some level of agency by redesigning her syllabus in ways adaptable to the hybrid system: “I had difficulty performing every task that involved interaction in the online session... To handle this problem, I moved speaking activities to the in-person sessions when it was possible”.

Contrary to what Sahar expressed, Kimia held that online sessions provide better affordances for the oral activities because they “have an advantage for shy and reserved students”. Overall, the novice teachers initially experienced a sense of powerlessness in managing the dynamics of the new hybrid classes but later on they achieved a level of agency to adjust their teaching practice to the expectations of the students and language school.

4.1.3. Challenge: Role Epistemic Uncertainty When Negotiating Multiplicity in Teacher Identity

The initial experience of the new teaching environment led the novice teachers to believe that they had less agency than they would hope for. However, over time they realized that the dynamics of the new teaching situation required them to adopt multiple roles. Participants’ comments in the interviews revealed that while they were overwhelmed by the uncertainty of their roles in the beginning stages of this experience, over time they learned to coordinate their roles to benefit the students and their practice. Sahar found hybrid classes challenging her professional identity:

During the in-person session of the week I think I can be a one-hundred percent teacher. I teach the lesson; I have good interaction with students. But in online session I have to focus more on the quality of the interaction with students... I can manage both roles but changing roles every week is kind of confusing for learners too.

Sahar positioned herself as a traditional teacher who fulfills her duties best when teaching in physical classroom. She believed that online sessions of the week detached her from her traditional role as a teacher who is in charge because she had to fulfill other responsibilities such as focusing on her relationships with students more than she would in the physical classes.

Similar concerns about her role and responsibilities were expressed by Lena who assumed that hybrid classes expect something different from her. She explained how this new environment had transferred power from the teacher to students and how her duties had been expanded: “Students prefer hybrid classes because they have more freedom in this environment but teachers should be more supportive because of the difficulties students may face specially during the online sessions”.

Initially, novice teachers appeared to have become intimidated by the scope of change they were faced with and felt limited in their enactment of

agency. However, overtime they learned to achieve some levels of agency in a way that they could create a more effective classroom environment.

4.1.4. Agency Enactment: Role (Re)Positioning From Authority to Distributed Facilitation

Participants came to terms with the limited agency they had over their circumstances. After experiencing this new environment for a while, they began to acknowledge the necessary adjustment in their approach towards teaching in hybrid classes. Lena highlighted this adjustment in terms of becoming a different teacher: “I decided to spend more time with students to solve their problems... I stay almost 10 to 15 minutes after the class. We also have a WhatsApp group that students can send their questions after the class”.

While Lena decided to prioritize her interactions with students to effect change in the new teaching context, Mahtab accepted her multiple roles as a teacher in the new teaching system, “during the online session of the class, I’m the teacher and after the class I become technical advisor for students”.

Mahtab expressed her agency by actively trying to effect changes in her teaching approach and her mindset about the qualities of a good teacher. This was a fulfilling experience for her and aligned with her professional identity.

The new teaching context compelled Kimia, who had recently started her teaching career, to reflect on her limited agency in motivating students to participate actively in their own learning: “Elementary learners need more emotional support in online sessions. I tried to talk with them about their problems in learning in the class and after the class and keep them motivated”.

Kimia started prioritizing students' emotional needs over their language learning when she realized that some students were struggling with how to learn English along with how to take advantage of all the digital tools available to help their own learning.

4.1.5. Challenge: Power Asymmetry: Contested Epistemic Authority

Another challenge of the hybrid classes for participating teachers was the changing power dynamics between students and teachers. Their expectations of their power in relation with students were disrupted due to the constant shift between the two modes of instructions.

In the in-person teaching sessions, novice teachers had their traditional power as the resource of knowledge; in contrast, the digital affordances of the online sessions for students reduced sole reliance on teachers' knowledge. This was perceived as a challenge to their sense of

authority and acted as a potential constraint for novice teachers to achieving their agency. The following extract from the interview with Lena illustrates her tension in not being able to interact with students the way she would prefer: “In face-to-face sessions we are having a friendly relationship and students listen to my instructions... During our online sessions, the same students who were enthusiastic would turn off or pause their cameras or mute their mic”.

The constraints imposed by the hybrid classes reduced participants’ effective communication with their students as students did not have their microphones and cameras turned on. Sahar pointed out undergoing similar challenges and highlighted the role of language school and the manager in sustaining the commercial aspects of language learning: “When I explained the problem I have with students, the supervisor only asked me not to put pressure on students. They only care about their registration number for the next level”.

4.1.6. Enacting Agency: Cultivating Learner Autonomy Through Relational Praxis

Realizing that hybrid classes demanded a different teaching style, participants in this study were forced to accept that they have less power than they used to have in traditional classes. Consequently, they were able to take proactive steps to address this challenge in order to achieve some sense of agency. By adapting their teaching methods to cater to diverse student needs, they could create a fulfilling and effective learning experience for their students in hybrid classes.

Seeing hybrid classes as an opportunity to promote learner autonomy, Mahtab encouraged students to take ownership of their learning by allowing them to choose topics of their interest for classroom discussions. She exerted her agency through a process of gradual release of responsibility. She began by gradually shifting control to students. This was most effectively done with small tasks or assignments where students have more autonomy, and gradually increased their independence over time.

Lena, who was concerned about her relationship with students in the online sessions, decided to shift the challenging situation into a collaborative atmosphere by including “more peer work in online classes”. She tried to manage the difficulty in interacting with students who showed less inclination in getting involved in classroom activities by engaging them in peer collaboration. She believed that this would enhance their self-directed learning skills too.

Similar to Lena, Sahar addressed the challenge of power by enhancing her students’ self-directed learning capabilities. She managed to set the ground for students to learn metacognitive skills. She illustrated her

experience as follows: “I decided to teach students to be more involved in their own progress... I think it made them think that they are responsible too... My upper-intermediate students took it well but I need to probably work more on the other class”.

Influenced by her past teacher education learning, she chose to take on a monitoring role and spent more time teaching students how to take responsibility evaluating their own learning process. She enacted her agency by implementing metacognitive strategies as she held that they would ease the pressure she was under as well as develop students’ self-directed learning skills.

Participants’ comments showed how they managed to not only survive the challenge to their traditional authority in classroom but also took this overwhelming experience as an opportunity to transform their own professional identity as well as empowering their students by developing new learning strategies.

4.2. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal how four novice language teachers’ attempt to cope with the new pedagogical environment. The findings highlight that the teachers managed to deal with various challenges which resulted from transitioning to the hybrid teaching context, yet they also engaged in exercising their agency in diverse ways. First, they managed to reconcile in-person and virtual modes of instruction by constantly adjusting tasks to align with affordances available for each mode of instruction. This finding corroborated earlier discussion on the practical-evaluative processes teachers go through to achieve agency (Ashton, 2022; Leijen et al., 2020; Priestley et al., 2015; Rapanta et al., 2021). Our participants’ struggle to evaluate the best course of action in each environment led them to recalibrate tasks according to the requirements of each situation. Relatedly, they attempted to create a practical synergy which was efficient for both pedagogical contexts. For example, they managed to strategically align listening tasks with online sessions and speaking activities with face-to-face classes. Additionally, our teachers attempted to transform environmental potentials into pedagogical actions. For instance, through a process of actualizing affordances (Withagen et al., 2017), they made use of contextual affordances by implementing digital tools such as WhatsApp groups and screen-sharing strategically. This observation is consistent with Chen (2022) who found that teachers enact agency by using digital affordances to suit pedagogical goals. However, unlike Chen’s (2022) experienced teachers, novices in this study faced heightened uncertainty. This shows the ecological interplay of iterational (past experiences) and projective (future goals) dimensions in agency enactment. On the other hand, constraints like students

avoiding camera reveal the relational nature of affordances; that is, they depend on student participation to a great extent. This was also in line with Jeon et al.'s (2022) study of young learners' impact on teacher agency.

Second, our participants experienced role epistemic uncertainty in the new and unfamiliar professional context. However, experiences of role ambiguity gradually led to the renegotiation of their identity. This finding adds to previous literature on educational change. For instance, Vähäsantanen (2015) argued that any form of educational change necessitates identity renegotiation. The challenges of the new context initially led the teachers to feel de-skilled; however, they gradually found a way to enact their agency by repositioning themselves as facilitators. This supports previous research (e.g., Ashton, 2022; Cheung, 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020) by showing the effect of new pedagogical context on teachers' sense of professional identity as well as their ability to exercise agency. Highlighting this identity work, Aston (2022) detailed teachers transitioning from knowledge authorities to learning designers when they were positioned in a new professional context. These findings support Kayi-Aydar's (2019) positioning theory which notes that in response to contextual demands agency emerges through discursive identity work.

Finally, the hybrid teaching context essentially reshaped traditional power dynamics between participating teachers and their students by creating contested epistemic authority. Our teachers reported significant challenges in maintaining their conventional role as knowledge authorities because students were able to exercise greater control over their participation in online sessions, particularly for using camera and microphone. Similarly, Lee and Jeon (2024) argued that new teaching contexts such as online education inherently disrupt established teacher-student power relationships as they introduce new technological variables that redistribute classroom control. When faced with these constraints, teachers showed agency by cultivating learner autonomy. They implemented innovative strategies such as metacognitive training and student-directed learning. This is in line with what Tao and Gao (2021) describe as "relational agency" in pedagogical contexts. This transition from authority figures to facilitators of self-directed learning represents a significant professional adaptation for language teachers. This becomes particularly important in teachers' course of professional growth considering their novice status. This pedagogical shift emphasizes Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological perspective by showing how contextual constraints can prompt agentic responses. Interestingly, these findings contrast with Nazari et al.'s (2023) study of Iranian novice teachers in traditional classrooms. The participants in their study resisted yielding authority as they wanted to maintain classroom control. Misalignment in the findings of the two studies suggests that contextual and institutional factors may mediate the

way teachers negotiate power when faced with changing educational environments. While participants in Nazari et al.'s (2023) study viewed maintaining authority as critical to their professional identity, teachers in our study adapted their identities to adjust with new power distributions. This difference may stem from the unique demands of hybrid instruction. This comparison highlights the situated nature of teacher agency, supporting Kayi-Aydar's (2019) argument that agency emerges through contextually embedded identity work.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined novice English language teachers' agency in hybrid instructional contexts through an ecological lens. The findings revealed that four novice teachers experienced pedagogical duality, role ambiguity, and power asymmetries when they were positioned in the new professional environment. However, in the face of these challenges, they enacted their agency through evaluation of modal affordances, identity repositioning, and negotiated power relations. Based on this case study, three key contributions to the literature can be suggested: First, hybrid teaching appeared to require practical-evaluative agency, where teachers need to continuously adapt tasks across in-person and online modalities. This process of recalibration becomes more distinct in the case of novice teachers because of their limited iterational experiences. Second, role ambiguity was linked to processes of identity renegotiation. Through this process, teachers shift from knowledge authorities to facilitators of distributed learning. Third, experiences of contested epistemic authority were associated with efforts by the participating teachers to promote greater learner autonomy. This happens through relational agency, although it should be acknowledged that this process is mediated by institutional and cultural factors.

The findings provide clear implications for teacher education and teacher professional development. As novice teachers need to be prepared to quickly adapt when their regular practice is disrupted, teacher educators should equip them with the essential competencies to deal with the complexities of new pedagogical contexts. To enable these teachers to cope with the uncertainties of new educational environments such as hybrid teaching, teacher education programs should cultivate affordance literacy through helping teachers to be mindful of how to evaluate circumstances and utilize pedagogical possibilities available for different modes of instruction. This involves equipping teachers with the skills to make informed decisions about when and how to use digital tools and design learning tasks as well as how to scaffold student engagement across online and face-to-face settings. By developing this competency, novice teachers can become more confident

in aligning instructional strategies with the affordances of hybrid environments.

While this study captured teachers' narrated experiences, classroom observations could reveal how agency is exercised in practice. This reliance on teachers' self-reported data presents a limitation because spontaneous decision-making and moment-to-moment adaptations, may differ from retrospective narratives. Future lines of research could also compare agency enactment across novice and experienced teachers when they encounter a disruption in their practice. Furthermore, future research should investigate how cultural and institutional factors such as new educational policies, technological infrastructures, and socio-political norms may influence the reconfiguration of power in hybrid classrooms. As agency is not exercised in a vacuum, but it occurs within contextual structures, examining how macro-level conditions shape micro-level teaching practices will add to our understanding of teacher agency particularly when teachers are faced with educational change.

By reflecting on the challenges that they face during educational change, novice teachers can pave the way for changes in their own cognition and practice. This helps them overcome the problems and empowers them to exercise their agency. Finally, it should be noted that agency development is a gradual process that both influences and is influenced by novice teachers' professional growth.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How did you perceive your role as a teacher in the hybrid teaching environment, and how did it differ from your role in traditional face-to-face or fully online classes?
2. What strategies did you use to adapt to the dual responsibilities of teaching in both online and in-person settings?
3. What challenges did you face in planning and delivering lessons that catered to both online and in-person sessions?
4. How did the shift to hybrid teaching affect the power dynamics between you and your students, particularly in online sessions?
5. What strategies did you employ to maintain student engagement and participation in online sessions, especially when students were less responsive?
6. Can you describe a specific instance where you felt you had to exert your agency to address a challenge in the hybrid teaching environment?
7. How did you promote learner autonomy in your hybrid classes, and what role did students play in shaping their own learning experiences?
8. What support or training do you think would have been most helpful to you as a novice teacher transitioning to hybrid teaching?