

EFL Teacher Agency Across Context: A Mixed-Method Study of Instructional Problem-Solving in Urban and Rural Schools

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Abstract

Background:

EFL teachers in Indonesia encounter persistent classroom challenges shaped by linguistic, cultural, and resource-related diversity. While teacher agency has been widely theorized, little is known about how it is enacted in everyday classroom problem-solving, particularly across urban and rural contexts.

Methodology:

This mixed-method study involves 129 EFL instructors (85 from rural schools, 44 from urban schools) who completed a survey, and 35 submitted reflective journals. Quantitative data were assessed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were evaluated through thematic analysis.

Findings:

Descriptive statistical analysis highlighted patterns of motivation, autonomy, professional development, and future aspirations, while thematic analysis of journals revealed recurring challenges such as low student motivation, vocabulary limitations, and speaking anxiety. Rural teachers drew on local resources and contextualized lessons, while urban teachers emphasized technology use, student-centered learning, and global skill development

Conclusion:

The study shows that teachers' ecological past experiences, present conditions, and future goals shaped how they solved problems. Rural teachers relied on local resources and flexible strategies, while urban teachers used creative, student-centered methods to build autonomy and global skills, pointing to the need for context-specific support and policies that empower teacher-led innovation.

Originality:

This study offers how teacher agency is lived out in the everyday problem-solving of EFL classrooms, not just in teachers' beliefs or intentions. Comparing rural and urban contexts in Indonesia reveals how agency looks different across settings and highlights the creativity and resilience of teachers, especially in resource-challenged schools.

Keywords : Urban and Rural; EFL teacher agency; problem solving

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, teachers are regarded as more than exclusive transmitters of curriculum; they are acknowledged as reflective professionals who influence, mediate, and enhance the learning experiences of their students, which leads to the increasing acknowledgement of teacher agency (TA). TA denotes the ability of educators to make significant decisions, apply professional judgement, and undertake intentional acts to enhance their practice and facilitate student learning ([Buchanan, 2015](#); [Cong-Lem, 2024](#); [Zhang et al., 2023](#)). However, whether teachers could keep students motivated when working with limited resources or responding to curriculum demands is still underexplored. TA also pertains to educators' capacity to maneuver through the intricacies of classroom dynamics ([Green & Pappa, 2021](#)), address obstacles ([Unciti & Palau, 2023](#)), and foster positive transformation ([Pei & Yang, 2019](#)), even in adverse circumstances.

In the Indonesian context, it is especially important to explore these ideas further. With its cultural and linguistic diversity, Indonesia presents teachers with very different realities depending on whether they teach in rural or urban schools ([Utami & Kuswandono, 2023](#); [Sari, 2021](#)). In rural areas, teachers often face shortages of resources and training opportunities, while those in urban schools may struggle with high expectations, student distractions, and the pressures of integrating technology. Despite these contrasting challenges, little is known about how teachers in Indonesia enact agency in their daily practice to solve instructional problems. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, characterized by linguistic diversity, curriculum demands, student motivation challenges, and resource limitations, the exercise of agency is not merely advantageous; it is imperative ([Gu et al., 2022](#); [Jiang, 2022](#); [Munandar & Newton, 2021](#)).

Studies conducted over the preceding decade have demonstrated that TA does not function in isolation, yet it is influenced by various elements, including educators' convictions, professional expertise, previous experiences, school administration, resource availability, institutional regulations, and collaborative networks ([Li, 2023](#); [Priestley et al., 2016](#)) which were in line with ([Priestley et al., 2022](#)) ecological approach to agency. Literature reported that scholars have progressively adopted an ecological perspective on agency, perceiving it as an emergent and context-dependent process which underscores that teachers' ability to act is influenced by their engagement with their iterational (past experiences and personal histories), practical-evaluative (present resources, conditions, and constraints), and their projections (future goals, aspirations) ([Biesta et al., 2017](#)). Teachers are not completely autonomous nor wholly restricted by their environment; instead, they continuously navigate the balance

between possibilities and limitations ([Ashadi et al., 2022](#); [Buchanan, 2015](#)). This framework has enhanced theoretical comprehension of agency; however, significant gaps persist in the empirical literature. Primarily, the majority of research on TA has been undertaken in isolation without sufficient attention to how agency is enacted in the everyday instructional strategies teachers use to overcome classroom challenges in urban and rural EFL contexts ([Li et al., 2021](#); [Tao & Gao, 2021](#)).

Indonesia, with its linguistic and cultural diversity, reflects the everyday realities of teachers who must constantly adapt to different student backgrounds and community expectations. At the same time, the salient contrasts between rural and urban schools, whether in access to resources, use of technology, or professional development opportunities, mirror many of the challenges faced by teachers worldwide ([Kristiawan et al., 2022](#)). Studying how Indonesian teachers navigate these conditions not only deepens our understanding of local practice but also provides lessons that speak to global debates on equity, adaptability, and the role of teachers as professionals ([Utami & Kuswandono, 2023](#); [Sari, 2021](#)), the perspectives, obstacles, and advancements of these teachers are still inadequately represented in global studies. In addition, previous research on TA frequently emphasized perceptions or degrees of agency and often neglected to examine the relationship between agency and the tangible instructional strategies that teachers construct in response to classroom issues. Rural teachers often face restricted resources and limited access to training, while urban teachers may contend with distractions, high expectations, and technological pressures. Yet, despite these contrasts, relatively little research has examined how Indonesian teachers in such varied contexts enact agency to solve instructional problems. In the absence of this relationship, scholars, policy makers, and school leaders struggle to comprehend the practical significance of fostering TA or to devise professional development and policies that genuinely empower teachers. This study addresses these gaps by offering two significant contributions. It broadens the discourse of TA by concentrating on Indonesia's urban and rural educational institutions. The study transcends mere measurement of agency levels to investigate the enactment of agency through instructional problem-solving. The study integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative reflective diaries, offering a comprehensive overview of agency patterns and an in-depth, practice-oriented insight into how EFL teachers devise solutions to the instructional challenges they encounter.

Framed by the ecological framework of agency, this study is directed by three research questions: (1) What are the degrees of teacher agency among urban and rural EFL educators in

Indonesia? (2) What pedagogical challenges do EFL teachers face in urban and rural EFL classrooms? (3) How do EFL teachers' ecological dimensions of agency shape the EFL instructional problem-solving? The study aims to (1) analyze and compare agency levels across rural and urban school environments, (2) identify the most significant instructional obstacles encountered by teachers in rural and urban schools, and (3) investigate how teachers' ecological aspects shape their EFL instructional decisions to solve EFL learning problems. This study seeks to enhance comprehension of teacher agency in EFL practical classroom environments and to produce insights that assist school leaders, policymakers, and teacher educators in supporting the daily activities of teachers in various educational EFL contexts. This research addresses a wider discourse in the area of the support of teachers, not merely as teachers of externally mandated reforms, but as collaborative architects of educational transformation. The study contends that agency is closely linked to teachers' professional identity, motivation, and dedication ([Tao & Gao, 2021](#)) by comprehending how EFL teachers assert agency within their own circumstances, particularly in the face of obstacles, thus it may offer critical insights for the development of professional training, curriculum modification, and institutional assistance that address local requirements and enhance a global and inclusive comprehension of teachers' roles as agents of change.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a mixed-methods approach to investigate the relationship between teacher agency (TA) and instructional problem-solving among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) educators in Indonesia. The quantitative data were collected using a 37-item Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from Hull and Uematsu ([2020](#)). The instrument measured four domains of teacher agency: (1) autonomy and decision-making, (2) professional development and learning, (3) institutional expectations and constraints, and (4) motivation and future goals. Adaptation involved translation, expert validation, and minor wording adjustments to align with Indonesian EFL contexts. Reliability was established through pilot testing with 20 teachers, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating strong internal consistency. Descriptive statistical analyses were performed to assess mean scores, medians, modes, and standard deviations of survey items, in addition to investigating patterns based on school context. The qualitative phase utilized teachers' reflective journals from rural and urban geographic locations. A thematic analysis was performed utilizing ([Braun & Clarke, 2021](#)) six-step framework: familiarization, coding, topic development, review, definition, and reporting. This method facilitated the recognition of themes pertaining to educational difficulties and EFL

teachers' problem-solving strategies. The amalgamation of quantitative and qualitative findings yielded a thorough comprehension of the enactment of TA across many contexts, thereby generating context-specific suggestions for educational policy and practice. Integration occurred during the interpretation stage, where quantitative trends (e.g., reported levels of autonomy or professional development) were compared with qualitative insights (e.g., strategies described in journals). This allowed the study to address all three research questions: (1) describing reported agency levels, (2) identifying major instructional challenges, and (3) examining how ecological dimensions of agency shaped problem-solving practices.

2.1. The participants

As in Figure 1, the research encompassed 129 EFL educators from diverse urban and rural institutions in Indonesia who willingly consented to participate. Urban and rural classifications were based on criteria used by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, which defines rural schools as those located in villages or remote districts with limited access to resources, and urban schools as those situated in cities or towns with greater infrastructure and institutional support. Classification was confirmed during recruitment to reduce the risk of misclassification. Ninety participants (69.8%) were female, while thirty-nine (30.2%) were male. The sample comprised 85 teachers (65.9%) from rural institutions and 44 teachers (34.1%) from urban institutions. Participants were solicited through a public announcement disseminated via social media channels, encouraging EFL teachers throughout Indonesia to participate in the study. This public, voluntary recruitment strategy guaranteed diversity across geographic and institutional contexts, yielding extensive quantitative data and profound qualitative insights for the study. Regarding professional development experience, 57 participants (44.2%) attended 1–3 training or professional development (TPD) programs, 30 (23.3%) participated in 4–6 programs, 15 (11.6%) attended 7–10 programs, and 27 (20.9%) completed more than 10 programs. Concerning teaching experience, 5 participants (3.9%) had taught for 0–5 years, 44 (34.1%) for 6–10 years, 50 (38.8%) for 11–15 years, 28 (21.7%) for 16–20 years, and 2 participants (1.6%) had more than 21 years of experience.

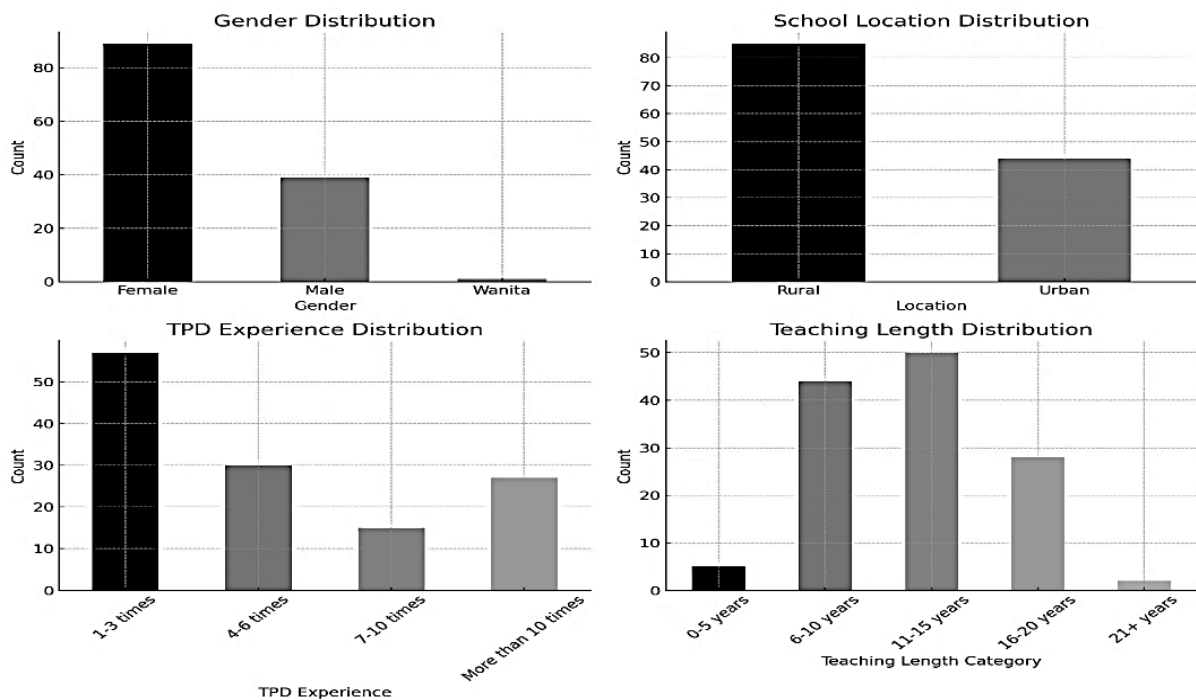


Figure 1: The participants' demographics

2.2. Data collection

Quantitative data were gathered by a structured survey of 37 Likert-scale items that assessed critical aspects of TA, including autonomy, decision-making authority, professional development, and institutional limitations. The survey was conducted in Google Forms format to enhance accessibility across various locations. Qualitative data were collected via reflective writing authored voluntarily over a four-week duration. EFL teachers were requested to articulate the instructional challenges they faced, the measures they implemented to mitigate these issues, and their views on the results. Measures were taken to ensure data quality, including restricting responses to one submission per participant, ensuring anonymity, and providing clear instructions. All 129 EFL teachers participated in the survey, and from this cohort, 35 educators additionally provided reflective journals that were incorporated into the qualitative analysis. From the total sample, 35 teachers also submitted reflective journals. Selection was voluntary, based on willingness to provide detailed written accounts. Contributions were sought from both urban and rural schools to maintain diversity. This dual data collection method facilitated triangulation (Panke, 2024) and a more nuanced examination of teacher agency within the context.

2.3. Data analysis

Quantitative data were examined through descriptive statistics, encompassing means, medians, modes, and standard deviations, to encapsulate agency levels across survey items and discern disparities between urban and rural respondents. A thematic analysis of the qualitative data was performed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework. The two datasets were amalgamated during the analysis phase to cultivate a thorough comprehension of how TA impacted instructional problem-solving across rural and urban educational settings.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. RQ1: What are the degrees of teacher agency among urban and rural EFL teachers in Indonesia?

The survey identified numerous essential elements of teacher agency, including autonomy, decision-making authority, professional development, and the impact of institutional expectations. As shown in Table 1 and Table 2, the TA survey data uncover significant insights regarding the levels of teacher agency among urban and rural EFL educators in Indonesia. Urban teachers generally reported slightly higher mean scores across several domains. For instance, regarding motivation (Q1), urban educators indicate a mean score of 4.52, but rural educators report a mean of 4.26. The urban mean for autonomy in teaching (Q4) is 4.39, whereas the rural mean is 4.26. Regarding future goals (Q37), urban educators exhibit a mean score of 4.50, whereas rural educators demonstrate a mean of 4.25. These scores indicate robust motivation, self-efficacy, and professional desire among urban educators. Furthermore, urban responses have reduced standard deviations, signifying more consistent experiences throughout the group. The mode values often attain the maximum score of 5, thus strengthening the perception of robust and consistent agency inside urban schools. Conversely, rural EFL educators demonstrate moderate to high degrees of agency, albeit their average scores are marginally lower across the majority of categories. For instance, regarding availability to professional development resources (Q5), rural educators indicate a mean score of 2.41, but urban educators report a mean of 2.68. Nonetheless, rural educators exhibit significant strength in intrinsic drive and classroom autonomy, with a mean motivation score (Q1) of 4.26 and an autonomy score (Q4) of 4.26, demonstrating resilience and dedication. Nonetheless, their responses exhibit elevated standard deviations, indicating increased variability and varied experiences. In rural schools, mode values typically converge around 4, indicating a robust albeit less apparent peak of agency in comparison to metropolitan schools.

Table 1: Statistical analysis of Ta in urban schools					Table 2: Statistical analysis of TA in rural schools				
	Mean	Median	Mode	SD		Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Q1	4.523	5	5	0.82	Q1	4.26	4.00	4.00	0.73
Q3	3.909	4	4	0.91	Q3	3.72	4.00	4.00	1.01
Q4	4.386	4	4	0.62	Q4	4.26	4.00	4.00	0.73
Q5	2.682	2.5	2	1.05	Q5	2.81	2.00	2.00	1.11
Q6	2.159	2	2	0.86	Q6	2.65	2.00	2.00	0.97
Q7	3.227	3.5	2	1.27	Q7	3.04	3.00	4.00	1.18
Q8	1.659	1.5	1	0.91	Q8	1.79	2.00	2.00	0.90
Q9	4.727	5	5	0.45	Q9	4.48	5.00	5.00	0.70
Q10	1.773	2	2	0.64	Q10	2.04	2.00	2.00	0.88
Q11	4.364	4	4	0.61	Q11	4.22	4.00	4.00	0.70
Q12	2.955	3	2	1.20	Q12	3.27	3.00	4.00	1.14
Q13	4.000	4	4	0.75	Q13	4.07	4.00	4.00	0.87
Q15	4.432	4	4	0.59	Q15	4.20	4.00	4.00	0.67
Q16	4.023	4	4	0.76	Q16	4.04	4.00	4.00	0.71
Q17	3.614	4	4	0.94	Q17	3.44	4.00	4.00	1.09
Q18	4.455	5	5	0.70	Q18	4.38	4.00	4.00	0.58
Q19	2.659	2	2	1.18	Q19	2.82	2.00	2.00	1.04
Q20	3.068	3	2	1.11	Q20	2.84	3.00	2.00	1.09
Q21	2.068	2	2	0.82	Q21	2.34	2.00	2.00	0.98
Q22	2.591	2	2	1.13	Q22	2.79	3.00	2.00	1.01
Q23	4.432	5	5	0.85	Q23	4.39	4.00	4.00	0.56
Q24	2.591	2	2	1.23	Q24	3.04	3.00	2.00	1.20
Q25	4.568	5	5	0.50	Q25	4.31	4.00	4.00	0.51
Q26	2.205	2	2	1.00	Q26	2.52	2.00	2.00	1.10
Q27	4.773	5	5	0.42	Q27	4.60	5.00	5.00	0.52
Q28	4.614	5	5	0.49	Q28	4.36	4.00	4.00	0.57
Q29	1.932	2	2	0.76	Q29	2.19	2.00	2.00	0.85
Q30	4.636	5	5	0.49	Q30	4.33	4.00	4.00	0.61
Q31	3.955	4	4	0.99	Q31	3.73	4.00	4.00	0.89
Q32	2.318	2	2	0.98	Q32	2.66	2.00	2.00	1.08
Q33	2.659	2	2	0.99	Q33	2.75	3.00	2.00	1.00
Q34	2.591	2	2	1.06	Q34	2.81	3.00	2.00	1.02
Q35	4.477	4.5	5	0.55	Q35	4.22	4.00	4.00	0.59
Q36	4.091	4	4	0.94	Q36	4.06	4.00	4.00	0.70
Q37	4.500	5	5	0.70	Q37	4.25	4.00	4.00	0.74

Figure 2 illustrates a comparison of the average results for all 37 survey questions assessing TA among urban and rural EFL educators in Indonesia, illustrating disparities in critical variables including motivation, autonomy, access to professional development, and future goals. This visual representation facilitates a comparison of TA across rural and urban schools, highlighting both shared strengths and significant disparities between the two groups.

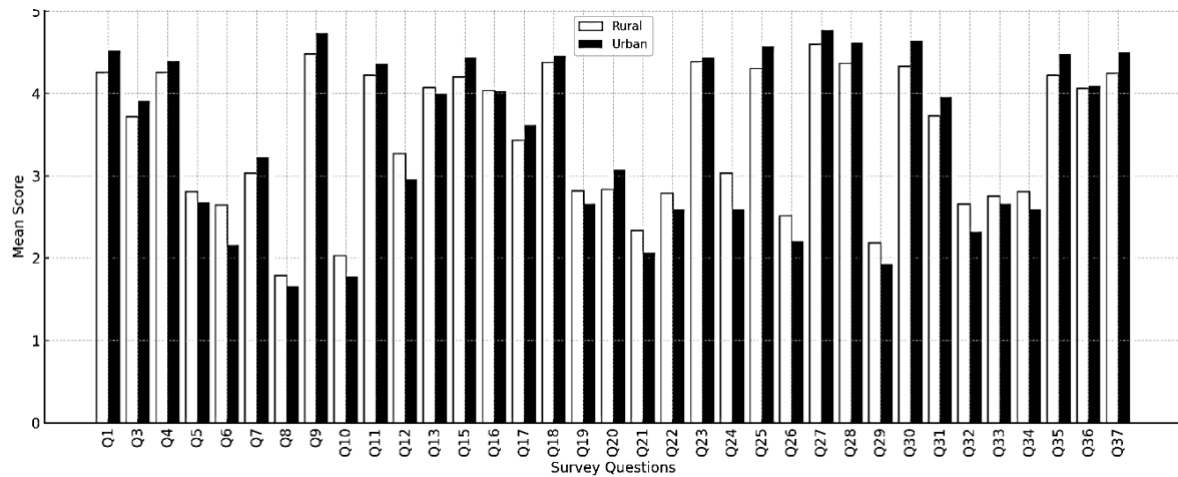


Figure 2: Comparison of TA across all questions: Urban vs Rural EFL teachers' agency

3.2. RQ2: What pedagogical challenges do EFL teachers face in urban and rural EFL classrooms?

The themes that emerged from the 35 reflective journals written by English teachers from various urban and rural institutions in Indonesia were classified based on recurring patterns in classroom challenges, teaching strategies, and reflective practices. Figure 3 illustrates the instructional problems in Indonesian EFL Classrooms.

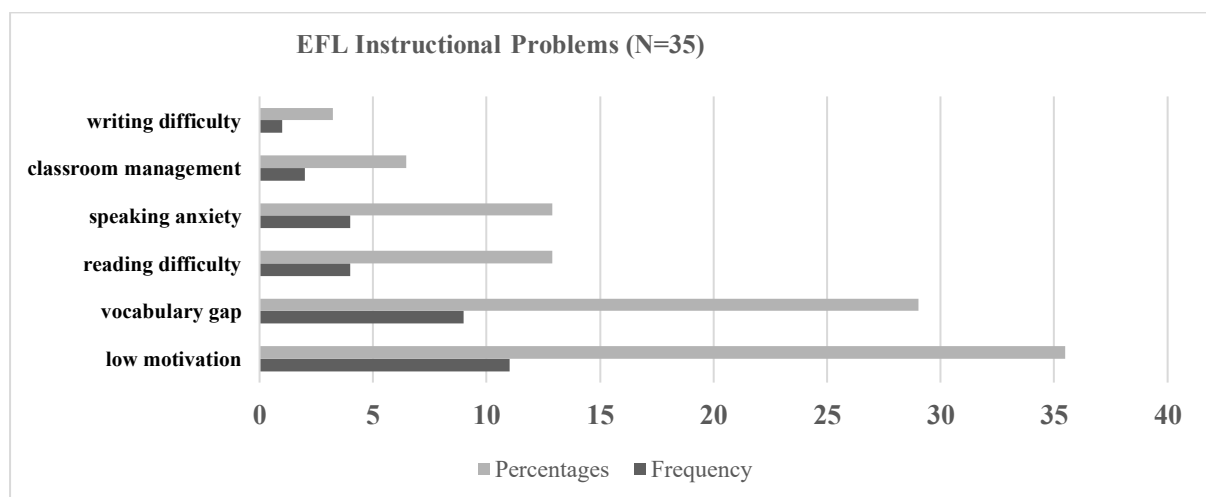


Figure 3: EFL Instructional Problems

As illustrated, the EFL problems range from motivational barriers to skill-specific difficulties, reflecting both pedagogical and contextual factors influencing teaching practices. The most frequently reported challenge was low student motivation, identified in approximately 31.4% of the reflections. Teachers described students as disengaged, reluctant to participate, and lacking interest in learning English. This widespread issue is often linked to

limited exposure to English in daily life, a lack of learner autonomy, and a minimal understanding of the practical relevance of the language. Motivation appeared to be especially problematic in rural areas, where students may have fewer opportunities to see the utility of English or interact with it beyond the classroom. A second major concern was the vocabulary gap, reported by 25.7% of teachers. Limited vocabulary was cited as a constraint across all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Teachers noted that students often struggled to express basic ideas, read with fluency, or comprehend instructions, which frequently led to frustration and further disengagement.

Reading difficulty emerged as another significant instructional challenge, cited in 14.3% of reflections. Teachers described students who lacked basic decoding skills or who had difficulty processing written texts. These challenges often compounded vocabulary limitations and led to reduced comprehension. In classrooms where textbooks were the primary instructional tool, poor reading ability severely impacted students' access to content and contributed to slower learning progress. Approximately 11.4% of teachers also reported issues related to speaking anxiety, particularly among students who feared making mistakes or being judged by their peers. Less frequently reported were concerns about classroom management (5.7%) and writing difficulties (2.9%). Teachers who mentioned these issues described challenges such as student inattentiveness, disruptive behavior, and difficulty organizing ideas in written form. Although these concerns were less common, they still point to the need for classroom strategies that promote discipline, focus, and writing support. Their lower frequency in teacher reflections may suggest either a lower perceived priority or a limited instructional focus on these domains.

Taken together, these insights emphasize the multifaceted nature of instructional problems in Indonesian EFL classrooms. While foundational linguistic skills and learner motivation dominate teacher concerns, issues such as anxiety, reading comprehension, and classroom dynamics also play a critical role. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of structural support, targeted teacher training, and pedagogical flexibility that empowers teachers to respond effectively to diverse classroom realities.

3.3. EFL instructional challenges in urban and rural schools

Table 3 shows the identified EFL pedagogical problems encountered in rural and urban schools. In both rural and urban schools, the predominant issues encompassed inadequate student motivation, vocabulary deficits, speaking anxiety, reading challenges, and

pronunciation shortcomings. The teachers' reflective journals reported that while these issues were present in both contexts, their root causes and manifestations varied, highlighting differences in resources, student backgrounds, and educational environments.

Table 3: EFL instructional challenges in rural and urban schools

Theme	Subthemes (Rural Schools)	Subthemes (Urban Schools)
Low student motivation	- Perceived detachment from local livelihoods (e.g., agriculture, employment opportunities) - Lacking future orientation - Limited parental support	- Distractions from cell phones and social media - Perceived difficulty of English as a subject - Absence of intrinsic motivation
Vocabulary deficiency	- Restricted English exposure beyond the classroom - Insufficient English resources (literature, media) - Inadequate retention resulting from insufficient practice	- Memorisation devoid of contextual understanding - Restricted utilisation of novel vocabulary - Excessive dependence on translation tools
Speaking anxiety	- Anxiety regarding errors in the presence of colleagues - Insufficient opportunity for practice - Diminished self-assurance	- Anxiety regarding public speaking in formal settings (e.g., presentations) - Apprehension about peer evaluation - Insufficient oral practice in genuine scenarios
Reading difficulty	- Difficulty with fundamental decoding and phonics - Insufficient early literacy advancement - Absence of reading resources at home	- Challenges in reading comprehension and inferential reasoning - Difficulties in text analysis - Minimal involvement with extensive reading
Pronunciation gap	- Insufficient exposure to proficient models - Insufficient listening practice with native or excellent speakers - Limited feedback on verbal performance	- Challenges with fluency and intonation - Emphasis on accent mitigation - Recognition of speech variability (but inconsistent mastery)
Writing and grammar difficulties	- Infrequently emphasised in reflections - Primarily concentrate on fundamental sentence construction and spelling	- Difficulties in structuring thoughts in writing - Issues with grammatical precision - Challenges with consistency and continuity in extended writings

To quantify, Figure 4 illustrates the percentages of EFL instructional problems in rural and urban schools. In rural schools, reading difficulties constituted the most common problem, representing 23.5% of the issues in English learning. Students have challenges with fundamental English literacy, frequently attributable to insufficient access to reading resources and early literacy assistance within their communities. Low student motivation was recorded at 17.6%, indicating students' frequent enquiries on the relevance of English to their daily lives, particularly in rural or vocational groups. Vocabulary insufficiency and speaking anxiety were each recorded at 17.6%, since rural learners generally had limited opportunity to engage with English or practise speaking without the worry of making errors. Pronunciation deficiencies constituted 11.8%, primarily attributable to restricted access to proficient English exemplars and insufficient exposure to genuine English. EFL teachers in rural schools reported that they often addressed these issues by contextualising teaching to local needs, employing topics such as agriculture, tourism, or community life to render English more relevant and engaging. In urban schools, challenges in English acquisition exhibited a rather distinct trend. Each of the issues was reported at a rate of 16.7%: low student motivation, vocabulary insufficiency, speaking anxiety, reading difficulty, and challenges in writing and grammatical comprehension.

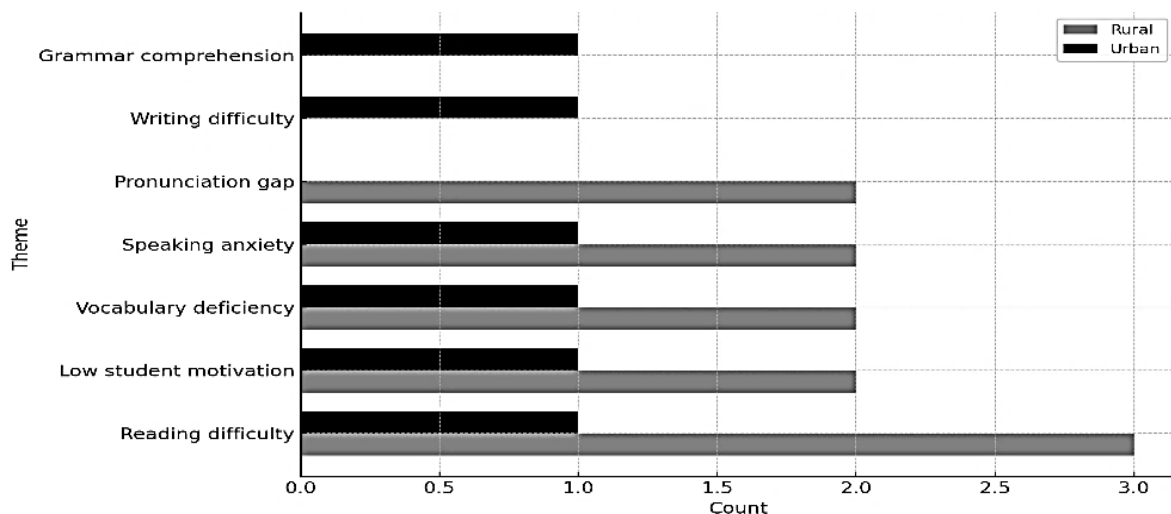


Figure 4: Percentages of EFL Instructional challenges in rural and urban schools

3.4. RQ3: How do EFL teachers' ecological dimensions of agency shape the EFL instructional problem-solving?

Table 4 describes how the ecological dimensions of agency shape the EFL teachers' agency to solve instructional problems in rural and urban contexts. The themes reveal that while

rural teachers focus on adaptation and inclusiveness, urban teachers focus on innovation and future preparation. The themes also show how historical experiences and current circumstances inform future goals to promote more effective EFL instruction. Across both, agency impacts not just how difficulties are solved but also how they are understood and prioritized ([Lu & Yoon, 2022](#)).

Table 4: TA ecological dimensions on EFL teachers' instructional problem-solving

Ecological Agency Dimension	Rural Schools	Urban Schools
Iterational (Past experiences, personal histories)	Employs role play, repetition, and visual aids to enhance learning in under-resourced classrooms, drawing from past experiences despite material limitations.	Employs gamification, student-centered learning, and ice breakers to enhance participation, drawing on previous experience with training and successful innovations.
Practical-evaluative (Present resources, conditions, constraints)	Constrained by limited resources and varied abilities, employs local materials, outdoor settings, and contextual themes (e.g., agriculture, tourism) to render lessons pertinent and innovative.	Utilises technology and addresses unique student needs by integrating ICT tools, fostering collaborative group work, and using differentiated instruction to improve learning results.
Projective (Future goals, aspirations)	Aims to enhance students' practical communication abilities and self-assurance by utilising collaborative learning, personalised assistance, and confidence-boosting activities to prepare them for real-world challenges.	Promote learner autonomy, critical thinking, and global competencies through discovery learning, project-based learning (PBL), and activities that enhance student voice, hence encouraging independence

In rural educational institutions, EFL teachers utilised familiar, adaptive methodologies such as role play, repetition, and local resources to cultivate fundamental skills and inspire pupils, frequently managing constrained resources and heterogeneous classes. In urban schools, EFL teachers utilised their previous expertise to implement innovative, student-centered approaches, using technology, differentiated assignments, and collaborative activities to engage a varied student body. As a result, rural EFL teachers prioritise cultivating student

confidence and practical language application, whereas urban educators are projected to enhance learner autonomy, critical thinking, and global communication competencies.

The iterational dimension (past experiences) of the EFL teachers shaped the rural teachers' agency when they decided to use repetition, role play, and visual aids, which reflected strategies learned through personal teaching histories in under-resourced classrooms. For example, one rural teacher noted: *"Because our students have little exposure to English, I always repeat vocabulary through games and songs, the same way I learned during training."* By contrast, urban teachers often referenced past experiences with workshops and training that encouraged interactive methods, such as gamification and group projects. The practical-evaluative dimension (present conditions) was evident in shaping agency when EFL rural teachers adapted limited resources by using local materials (e.g., farming tools, tourism themes) and outdoor contexts to make lessons more relevant. Urban teachers described drawing on available technology, such as digital media and online platforms, to foster participation. For instance: *"I assigned group presentations with slides because students are motivated by technology and visuals."* The projective dimension of agency shapes agency when the rural teachers aimed to build students' confidence and functional communication skills, which are often linked to English in daily life and future employment in tourism or community activities. Urban teachers focused on preparing students for global communication, emphasizing autonomy, critical thinking, and advanced literacy. One urban teacher wrote: *"I want my students to be ready for international competitions, so I emphasize critical discussion and presentation skills."*

4. DISCUSSION

This study set out to understand how Indonesian EFL teachers in rural and urban schools exercise agency in dealing with classroom challenges. What emerges is a picture of teachers who are highly committed to their students but whose practices are shaped in very different ways by the contexts in which they work. The survey results show that both rural and urban teachers demonstrated strong levels of agency, but the implementation was quite variable. Urban teachers reported autonomy, professional development engagement, and clarity about their future goals. These patterns reflect the advantages of being situated in schools with better access to training, resources, and professional networks. In many ways, this supports the view that agency thrives in supportive institutional environments where teachers are encouraged to grow and innovate ([Phan & Hamid, 2017](#)). By contrast, rural teachers

displayed a kind of agency that was less consistent but no less meaningful. Their motivation was largely intrinsic, which was rooted in personal commitment and resilience rather than institutional support. While their scores on professional development access were lower, their reflections revealed determination to adapt creatively, often drawing on personal experiences and local knowledge. This mirrors the broader argument in teacher agency research that agency is not a fixed trait but something that emerges from the interplay of teachers' histories, current realities, and future aspirations. In that sense, rural teachers' agency looked different but was equally significant.

In rural schools, disengagement was often linked to students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom and their sense that English had little relevance to future work or daily life. Teachers also noted that limited parental support and scarce resources compounded these difficulties. In urban classrooms, however, the problem of motivation took a different form. Here, distractions from mobile phones and social media competed with learning, and English was often seen as a difficult subject associated with pressure and high expectations. Vocabulary challenges also reflect these contrasts. Rural learners struggled with retention and exposure, while urban learners often relied too heavily on memorization or translation tools, leaving them unable to use words flexibly in context. Speaking anxiety followed a similar pattern: rural students feared making mistakes in front of peers, while urban students worried about performance in formal, high-stakes tasks like presentations or debates. Reading and writing issues also diverged, with rural students struggling at the level of decoding and fluency, while urban students grappled more with comprehension, analysis, and grammatical accuracy. These differences remind us that the "same" problems, motivation, vocabulary, and anxiety can mean very different things in practice (Zhou & Wu, 2024). Teachers' accounts underscore the importance of seeing challenges not as generic obstacles but as contextually shaped realities ([Lăpădat, 2023](#); [Ali & Hamid, 2023](#)). The findings show how teachers responded to cope with those challenges. Rural teachers leaned on local resources, familiar strategies, and community contexts to make English relevant. They used role play, repetition, and everyday themes such as agriculture and tourism, turning what might be seen as limitations into opportunities for contextualized learning. This kind of problem-solving reflects a form of agency that is both adaptive and resourceful ([Cong-Lem, 2024](#); [Hendawy Al-Mahdy et al., 2024](#)). Urban teachers, by contrast, tended to draw on technology, gamification, and project-based approaches. Their focus was often on preparing learners for global communication and fostering autonomy and critical thinking. This reflects a different

but equally powerful enactment of agency that leverages resources to push learners toward higher-order goals ([Brown et al., 2024](#); [Li, 2023](#)). In the lens of ecological perspective, these practices confirm that EFL teachers' past experiences shaped their go-to strategies, their current conditions determined what was possible, and their aspirations for students guided what they prioritized. Rural teachers emphasized confidence-building and everyday communication skills, while urban teachers looked toward global competencies and academic achievement. Both were exercising agencies, but in ways that were finely suitable with their environments.

5. CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods study provides significant insights into the nature of EFL teacher agency in Indonesian urban and rural schools, emphasizing how instructors address difficult instructional challenges through context-responsive approaches. Quantitative data indicated that teachers had significant autonomy, decision-making authority, and involvement in professional growth; but structural and institutional obstacles, particularly in rural areas, persisted in limiting their agency. Qualitative insights from reflective journals enhanced this understanding, illustrating how educators exert agency through adaptable, inventive, and reflective practices, including technology integration, problem-based learning, differentiated instruction, and contextual adaptation. This study significantly illustrates that teacher agency is not a monolithic concept but is influenced by ecological factors such as resource availability professional networks, and local school environments ([Brown et al., 2024](#)). The findings significantly contest deficiency perspectives on rural education by demonstrating the innovative and proactive actions of educators in under-resourced environments. The study's findings indicate the necessity for educational policies and leadership practices that promote teacher-led innovation, guarantee fair access to professional development, and nurture thoughtful, collaborative school cultures. By acknowledging educators as proactive catalysts for change, educational systems can more effectively facilitate significant, contextually relevant enhancements in English as a Foreign Language instruction and learning.

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