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Teacher Identity, Agency, and Professional Judgment in Multilingual 3T Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Teaching in multilingual rural classrooms requires teachers to respond to linguistic diversity, contextual constraints, and institutional demands while supporting students' learning. However, little is known about how teacher identity, agency, and professional judgment interact in shaping these responses in Indonesia's frontier, remote, and underdeveloped (3T) regions. This study explored how English as a Foreign Language teachers negotiated identity, exercised agency, and made professional judgments in multilingual 3T classrooms. A qualitative narrative inquiry design was employed involving three junior high school teachers in Hanau district, Seruyan, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. Data were collected through reflective journals and semi-structured narrative interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers' professional practices were shaped by three interconnected dimensions: relational and contextual identity, adaptive agency, and context-sensitive judgment. These dimensions formed an Identity-Agency-Judgment Nexus that guided teachers' responses to classroom challenges and multilingual realities. The study highlights the importance of context-responsive and ethically informed teaching in multilingual rural settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching English in rural multilingual schools requires teachers to pace instruction, use students' linguistic repertoires, adapt materials, and distribute attention, with pedagogical and ethical consequences (Campbell, 2008; Miller et al., 2017).When addressing a struggling learner, teachers engage in what Noddings describes as "the relational encounter where the one-caring responds to the expressed needs of the cared-for"(Noddings, 2012, 2019) . This ethical dimension is intensified in linguistically diverse and underserved educational settings, particularly

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in Indonesia's 3T regions, which stand for *Terdepan* (frontier), *Terpencil* (remote), and *Tertinggal* (underdeveloped).

Teacher identity is widely understood as a dynamic, evolving process shaped by personal history, professional experiences, institutional structures, and sociocultural interactions (Barkhuizen, 2016; Beijaard et al., 2004). In multilingual and rural classrooms, identity formation is further layered by cultural adaptation, community expectations, and national curriculum demands. In Indonesia, professional identity is continuously shaped through teachers' interactions with curriculum, institutional expectations, and sociocultural norms identity (Norton, 2016; Nur'Aini, 2018).

Teacher agency is closely connected to teacher identity because it reflects how teachers respond to contextual opportunities and constraints. Research in Indonesian EFL settings shows that agency is often enacted through reflection, adaptation, and professional decision-making, particularly when teachers face curriculum demands and diverse classroom needs (Hidayati, 2024; Utami & Kuswandono, 2023). These studies highlight the context-dependent nature of agency but provide limited insight into how agency interacts with identity and professional judgment in multilingual rural classrooms.

Research across language-teaching contexts has linked identity with teachers' possibilities for action, but the relationship should not be reduced to a stable individual trait (Toshmatov, 2025). It is shaped by the social, material, and institutional conditions under which teachers work (Clarke, 2009; Utami & Kuswandono, 2023).

The ethical dimension of teacher agency is central in multilingual settings. Sisson (2016) demonstrates that moral agency often emerges through critical incidents, moments when teachers must improvise or re-evaluate practices in response to ethical dilemmas. This aligns with Clarke's (2009) conception of identity agency as ethical self-formation, where teachers continually negotiate who they are within institutional and sociocultural constraints through reflection, moral evaluation, and professional action.

In Hanau, teachers work with students who use Dayak Pembuang, Banjarese, Bahasa Indonesia alongside English. They therefore encounter the practical question of how to make English learning accessible without treating local languages, local knowledge, or learners' uneven starting points as deficits. Research has consistently shown that code-switching and code-mixing can function as valuable pedagogical resources. These practices help teachers clarify complex concepts, reduce learner anxiety, and facilitate participation among students with limited exposure to English (Abubakar, 2022; Kumari, 2024; Rengur et al., 2025; Rosyidha et al., 2025).

Previous Indonesian research has documented contextual constraints and teachers' adaptive responses in rural EFL settings (Herizal et al., 2023; Poedjiastutie et al., 2021). Recent scholarship also shows that multilingual pedagogies can be exercised as teacher agency when they widen equitable participation (Putra, 2024). What remains less clear is how identity, agency, and professional judgment become connected within the same concrete teaching episode in rural multilingual classrooms.

Studies of teacher identity, agency, and professional judgment are often discussed as separate strands. Identity concerns how teachers understand and position themselves professionally; agency concerns the action they can take within enabling and constraining conditions; and professional judgment concerns the reasoned, ethical selection of action in a particular situation. Treating these as analytically connected, rather than as three independent variables, makes it possible to examine the practical and moral work embedded in teachers' situated choices.

This gap is significant because teaching in Indonesia's 3T regions involves challenges that extend beyond instructional concerns. Teachers work in environments characterized by linguistic diversity, limited educational resources, geographical isolation, and strong local cultural traditions. In such settings, decisions about language use, lesson adaptation, and curriculum implementation often require teachers to balance institutional expectations with students' immediate learning needs. Understanding how teachers navigate these complexities is therefore important for developing a more context-sensitive understanding of English language teaching in underserved and multilingual educational contexts.

The present study addresses this gap by examining teacher identity, agency, and professional judgment as interconnected dimensions of professional practice. Unlike previous studies that have focused primarily on teacher identity, agency, or multilingual pedagogy in isolation, this study investigates how these dimensions interact in teachers' everyday experiences within multilingual 3T classrooms. By bringing professional judgment into the discussion, the study highlights the ways teachers interpret classroom realities, respond to contextual challenges, and make decisions that are pedagogically and ethically meaningful.

The novelty of this study lies in its exploration of the Identity-Agency-Judgment Nexus in multilingual EFL classrooms located in Indonesia's 3T context. Identity informs how teachers position their responsibilities; agency is enacted through contextual pedagogical action; and professional judgment mediates choices by weighing learning access, care, policy, and feasibility. The findings should be read as an analytically transferable account from a small, context-specific sample, not as a statistically validated model.

To guide the inquiry, the study addresses the following research question: How do EFL teachers in Hanau District, Seruyan Regency negotiate professional identity, exercise agency, and make professional judgments in multilingual rural classrooms? The study develops a contextually grounded conceptual proposition from participants' narrated and written accounts; it does not test a pre-validated causal model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Teacher Identity in Language Education

Teacher identity is widely understood as a dynamic and evolving aspect of professional life rather than a fixed personal attribute. Beijaard et al. (2004) describe teacher identity as an ongoing process through which teachers interpret and reinterpret their experiences, professional roles, and relationships. In language education, identity is particularly significant because teaching involves continuous

engagement with language, culture, and communication. Barkhuizen (2016) further argues that teachers construct professional identities through narratives of practice, making sense of who they are through interactions with learners, institutions, and communities. Identity is therefore relational and context-dependent rather than solely individual. Norton (2016) similarly emphasizes that identity influences how individuals position themselves within social relationships and participate in linguistic practices.

Although teacher identity has received considerable scholarly attention, less is known about multilingual rural settings where teachers navigate linguistic diversity, limited resources, and strong local cultural influences. This gap is particularly relevant in Indonesia's 3T regions.

2.2. Teacher Agency in Contextually Constrained Settings

Teacher agency refers to teachers' capacity to make purposeful decisions and act within particular social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Contemporary perspectives view agency as relational rather than purely individual, emphasizing that teachers exercise agency through their responses to contextual opportunities and constraints (Miller et al., 2017). Agency is therefore reflected in the ways teachers adapt, negotiate, and respond to challenges encountered in their professional work.

Studies in Indonesian EFL contexts suggest that agency is often enacted through reflection and adaptation. Utami and Kuswandono (2023) found that teachers exercised agency by adjusting instructional practices to meet students' needs, while Hidayati (2024) demonstrated how teachers negotiated policy demands through reflective decision-making. These findings indicate that agency is not simply a matter of autonomy but involves maintaining professional commitment while working within existing constraints.

In rural and under-resourced contexts, agency frequently takes practical forms, such as modifying instructional materials, adjusting learning objectives, and creating locally relevant teaching strategies. Such actions illustrate how teachers actively shape learning opportunities despite structural limitations. However, previous studies have largely examined agency as a separate construct, providing limited insight into how agency interacts with identity and professional judgment in multilingual educational settings.

2.3. Professional Judgment, Multilingual Pedagogy, and Ethics of Care

Teaching requires continuous professional judgment. Teachers regularly make decisions about instructional strategies, language use, classroom participation, and learner support. Such decisions are particularly important in multilingual classrooms, where language choices directly influence students' understanding and engagement.

Research on multilingual pedagogy indicates that strategic use of students' linguistic repertoires can support meaning-making and participation when it is responsive to learning purposes (Abubakar, 2022; Hamdani & Yudhiantara, 2026; Kumari, 2024; Rengur et al., 2025; Rosyidha et al., 2025). In this study, multilingual

practice is interpreted as one possible form of situated agency rather than as a uniformly effective technique.

Professional decisions involve more than instructional effectiveness. Teaching requires attention to how choices affect learners' access, participation, and dignity (Campbell, 2008; Miller et al., 2017). From this perspective, decisions about language use and instructional adaptation are pedagogical and ethical at the same time.

The present study uses the three constructs as an integrated sensitizing lens. Professional identity is understood as a negotiated, relational positioning shaped by experience and recognition (Barkhuizen, 2016; Beijaard et al., 2004). Agency is understood as teachers' capacity to act constructively within structural and relational conditions, rather than as unrestricted individual autonomy (Clarke, 2009; Putra, 2024). Professional judgment refers to situated evaluation of pedagogical possibilities in relation to learners' needs, professional values, institutional demands, and consequences (Campbell, 2008; Sisson, 2016). These distinctions guide the analysis, while the empirically observed links among them are developed from the data rather than assumed in advance.

METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry to explore how teachers made sense of lived professional experience across time, social relations, and place (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry was appropriate because the data retained teachers' accounts of critical incidents and their meanings. A staged thematic analysis was then used as an analytic procedure to identify patterned meanings across the three cases (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thus, narrative inquiry frames the design and data generation, while thematic analysis structures the cross-case interpretation.

The researcher currently serves as a school principal in a rural 3T area and previously worked as an EFL teacher in a similar multilingual context. This background provided contextual familiarity and facilitated rapport with participants, while reflective memoing, member checking and peer debriefing were used to manage researcher bias and strengthen trustworthiness.

The study followed four stages: purposive recruitment and written informed consent; four weeks of reflective journaling; semi-structured narrative interviews; and iterative thematic analysis. Rather than pursuing statistical representativeness, the sample size of three teachers was guided by Malterud et al.'s (Malterud et al., 2016) model of information power: the narrow study aim, the specific professional characteristics of experienced EFL educators in 3T settings, longitudinal qualitative depth (four weekly journals and 45-60 minute interviews), and cross-case variation provided adequate narrative richness to examine situated teacher decision-making.

3.2. Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Hanau District, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, a 3T area characterized by limited infrastructure, restricted access to technology, and strong multilingual diversity. Students predominantly use Dayak Pembuang,

Banjarese, and Bahasa Indonesia, while English is rarely spoken outside the classroom.

Three junior high school EFL teachers participated in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) a minimum of three years of teaching experience, (2) active engagement in multilingual classrooms, and (3) willingness to participate in reflective journaling and interviews. Pseudonyms (Ani, Siti, and Susi) are used throughout. Their schools differed in proximity to the district centre, exposure to seasonal disruption, and access to teaching resources; these contextual contrasts were treated as part of the case analysis rather than as demographic variables for generalization.

Prior to data collection, the research protocol and instruments were documented in the Human Ethics Research Form and submitted for institutional ethical review. The study was formally evaluated as a low-risk educational inquiry and granted ethical approval by the Ethics Committee of the Postgraduate Program, Universitas PGRI Semarang (UPGRIS) on 19 January 2026 (No: 019/Ps/UPGRIS/I/2026). Distinct from this ethical clearance, administrative research permissions were independently obtained from the school principals in Hanau District. All participants received written Participant Information Sheets and provided voluntary, written informed consent prior to data collection.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through reflective journals and semi-structured narrative interviews. Each participant completed one reflective journal entry per week for four weeks. Prompts invited accounts of ethical or emotional dilemmas (Weeks 1-2), the effects of teachers' responses, sociocultural and institutional influences (Week 3), and moments when multiple pressures shaped a decision (Week 4). Entries could be written in Bahasa Indonesia or English.

Semi-structured narrative interviews followed the journals and invited participants to recount significant classroom incidents, explain their choices, and reflect on consequences. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or English. The interview guide used open prompts rather than treating the interview as a test of the emerging framework.

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, and Indonesian or local-language segments were translated into English by the researcher with source-language wording and cultural notes retained in the audit trail. Participants reviewed summary interpretations and selected translated excerpts during member checking. Translation was therefore treated as an interpretive step requiring traceability, not as a mechanical substitution of words.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, combining systematic coding with narrative interpretation. First, the researcher repeatedly read journals and transcripts, wrote reflexive memos, and identified critical incidents. Second, meaningful segments were coded in MAXQDA; codes were compared within each case before being clustered into categories and broader themes. Third, the cross-case

interpretation examined where identity positioning, enacted agency, and professional judgment converged or diverged. MAXQDA supported data organization, retrieval, and auditability; it did not generate themes or replace interpretive judgment.

Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis framework, the study operationalized the analysis into four stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development of categories, and construction of themes. The analysis followed a primarily inductive approach during coding, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives. The final interpretation was subsequently informed by the study's theoretical framework, including teacher identity, teacher agency, professional judgment, ethics of care, and multilingual pedagogy.

Consistent with narrative inquiry principles (Clandinin et al., 1999), participants' experiences were also reconstructed into coherent narratives to preserve their temporal and contextual dimensions. Figures presented in the findings illustrate the relative distribution of categories generated during coding and are intended to support thematic interpretation rather than statistical comparison.

Trustworthiness was established through an audit trail linking raw journal and interview segments to initial codes, categories, themes, and interpretive memos. Triangulation compared each teacher's journal account with the subsequent interview. For example, Siti's Week 4 journal entry noted she felt she was losing her identity as an English teacher when required to teach Mathematics for TKA (Tes Kemampuan Akademik, a standardised national academic aptitude assessment) preparation; the interview clarified that she was also the school's sole Mathematics teacher, context absent from the journal alone. Member checking returned summary interpretations to participants (no revisions were requested), and peer debriefing reviewed coding without changes. The researcher maintained a reflexive memo on positionality, translation decisions, and assumptions regarding rural education (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1. Illustrative audit trail from raw data to theme

Statement	Initial code	Category	Theme
Siti: 'I decided to slow down. I translated the sentences into Bahasa Indonesia and gave more simple examples.'	Slowing pace; translation; simplified examples	Pedagogical agency; language use	Agency; judgment prioritizing learning access over pace
Ani: 'I use a different worksheet for the student who needs more support.'	Differentiating material	Agency under constraints	Agency; identity as facilitator and ethical attention to participation
Susi's journal describes using familiar oil-palm and fishing activities to explain time expressions.	Local example; contextual adaptation	Cultural/ contextual identity	Identity-agency link; judgment about relevance and comprehension

RESULTS

The analysis revealed three interconnected themes: (1) Identity as Relational and Contextual Becoming, (2) Agency as Situated and Negotiated Practice, and (3) Professional Judgment as Context-Sensitive and Ethical Decision-Making. Figures 1-3 illustrate the relative distribution of categories within each theme. The counting unit is the discrete coded segment in MAXQDA, with overlapping coding permitted across co-occurring dimensions. Category percentages were calculated against each thematic denominator [(n / N) × 100%]: Teacher Identity (N = 102 coded segments; Figure 1), Teacher Agency (N = 134; Figure 2), and Professional Judgment (N = 165; Figure 3). These descriptive metrics indicate category prominence within the qualitative corpus to support interpretation, not statistical generalizability or population estimates. The findings below draw on participants' reflective journals and interview narratives to describe how teachers experienced and negotiated their roles in multilingual 3T classrooms.

4.1. Identity as Relational and Contextual Becoming

Figure 1 summarizes coded segments within the teacher-identity theme. Cultural and Contextual Identity, Relational Identity, and Identity Tension were the most frequently coded. The counts indicate analytic prominence in the corpus, not the proportion of participants or a statistical distribution

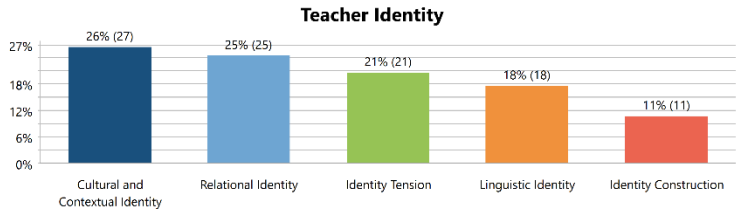


Figure 1. Teacher identity categories

4.1.1. Contextual and Cultural Identity

Teachers frequently described their professional identity in relation to the realities of their schools and communities. Their narratives reflected an awareness that teaching English in multilingual 3T classrooms required sensitivity to local languages, cultural practices, and students' lived experiences.

Ani explained:

(1) 'Students mostly speak local language… English feels very foreign, so I need to translate.' (Ani)

Similarly, Susi described how local experiences became part of classroom instruction:

(2) 'Usually at that time people start going to the oil palm plantation.' (Ani)

This observation emerged during a morning lesson on telling time (Week 2 of data collection). In Hanau, oil-palm plantation work shapes the daily rhythms of most students' families: laborers typically leave before dawn and return by mid-

morning during peak harvest periods. Susi drew on this lived reality deliberately, using the familiar schedule of plantation departures and arrivals as anchor points for teaching time expressions such as 'half past six' and 'a quarter to eight.' She reasoned that textbook examples (clocks, school bells, train timetables) were too distant from students' daily experience to support genuine comprehension, whereas plantation rhythms were immediately recognizable and emotionally salient. This contextual anchoring helped students connect abstract English expressions with concrete, shared activities they understood. Teachers consistently emphasized that students had limited exposure to English outside school and often relied on Bahasa Indonesia or local languages to understand new concepts.

Several journal entries also highlighted the importance of adapting lessons to local realities. Susi also noted that examples provided in textbooks often differed from students' daily experiences and therefore required modification.

(3) 'But then I realized, in the official learning materials used, there aren't any examples related to rural life or local commodities. The notes in the final evaluation only use common examples.' (Susi)

She explained that students became more engaged when classroom discussions included activities such as fishing, farming, or plantation work that reflected village life. By situating English-language practice within these socioeconomically meaningful contexts, Susi's instructional choices reflected both a culturally responsive professional identity and a deliberate pedagogical judgment that relevance and comprehension took precedence over adherence to standardized textbook examples.

4.1.2. Relational Identity

Teachers frequently described their role in supporting students' participation and understanding.

Ani stated:

(4) 'I wanted to be fair to everyone.' (Siti)

(5) 'For me, they understand the material is more important than just finishing the book.' (Siti)

These statements reveal how teachers positioned themselves as facilitators and supporters rather than simply transmitters of knowledge. Their reflections frequently focused on students who struggled academically, lacked learning resources, or required additional assistance.

For example, when several students did not have access to workbooks because of financial difficulties, Siti explained:

(6) 'I didn't want those students to just sit there doing nothing while their friends practiced.' (Ani)

Similarly, Ani described her efforts to support a student with special educational needs by adapting speaking activities and providing additional guidance. She reflected:

(7) 'Even though the class situation is unique, I must keep striving to provide good learning experiences.' (Susi)

Across the narratives, relationships with students emerged as a central aspect of how teachers understood their professional role.

4.1.3. Identity Tension

In academic contexts, when there is a misalignment between a teacher's personal beliefs and self-concept and the expectations from the management, a tension presents itself to complicate the interplay between personal and social factors. This tension shows that teachers' identity is fluid and not merely self-concept; at a deeper level, identity is relational and closely tied to the environment in which they practice. Their sense of accomplishment stretched beyond the classroom and went further to prioritizing their sense of being a responsible teacher. They responded to their students' individual needs while at the same time ensuring that the class's progress is whole and thorough. Participants described moments when competing responsibilities created uncertainty in their professional roles.

Siti described the challenge of balancing the needs of students with different ability levels:

(8) 'I tend to be confused about which one to prioritize.' (Siti)

Ani expressed emotional uncertainty when trying to support a student with special needs while simultaneously teaching the rest of the class:

(9) 'I'm very sad because I'm confused what I have to do first.' (Siti)

The participants also reported tensions between curriculum expectations and classroom realities. Siti reflected:

(10) 'The lessons move very fast and the level of the material is quite advanced, but many students still struggle with basic words.' (Ani)

A particularly strong example emerged when a teacher was required to use English class time for Mathematics instruction during TKA (Tes Kemampuan Akademik) preparation:

(11) 'I feel like I was losing my identity as an English teacher.' (Siti)

It demonstrates that teachers frequently encountered situations where professional expectations, student needs, and contextual constraints competed for attention. Identity was therefore experienced not only as a source of commitment but also as a site of uncertainty and negotiation.

4.2. Agency as Situated and Negotiated Practice

Figure 2 summarizes coded segments within the teacher-agency theme. Pedagogical Agency, Reflective Agency, and Agency Under Constraints were most prominent. A segment could receive codes in more than one analytic dimension.

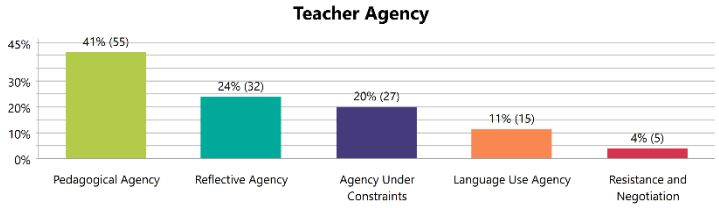


Figure 2. Teacher agency categories

4.2.1. Pedagogical Agency

Teachers frequently adapted instruction to classroom realities. Participants modified lesson objectives, adjusted teaching strategies, and developed alternative learning activities when necessary.

Siti explained:

(12) 'I decided to slow down the explanation because students need the basics first.' (Siti)

While Ani described changing the focus of a lesson when students struggled with prerequisite knowledge:

(13) 'The lesson was telling time, but I changed it to learning numbers.' (Susi)

Teachers also demonstrated agency by creating alternative learning materials when resources were unavailable. For example, Siti photocopied workbook pages for students who had not yet received their books so that they could participate in classroom activities.

(14) 'I decided to make photocopies of the specific dialogue pages and handed them out to the students without books.' (Ani)

In another case, Susi modified speaking activities because she only has one student in class. Rather than cancelling the activity, she developed vocabulary cards and adjusted the task to suit the situation.

(15) '…, but instead made Dita a small card with the vocabulary and self-introduction sentences written on it.' (Susi)

These examples indicate that teachers regularly exercised agency through practical instructional decisions designed to maintain student participation and learning. Furthermore, teachers' skills in adapting the instructional materials show that they are active agents who respond to particular challenges in their teaching contexts. Their capacity to make context-specific decisions and recognize the students' needs indicates the strength of their pedagogical agency, albeit the constraints of limited resources and policies.

4.2.2. Reflective Agency

Teachers regularly reflected on classroom experiences and considered how future instruction could be improved.

Ani reflected:

(16) 'I realized the real problem is numbers, not telling time. Next time I will focus on that skill first.' (Susi)

Susi noted:

(17) 'I plan to make some audio recordings based on the material that students can listen to anytime.' (Ani)

Siti emphasized:

(18) 'It made me realize how much resources (or the lack of them) can affect the classroom atmosphere.' (Ani)

Reflection was also evident in teachers' efforts to analyze the causes of classroom difficulties. Several journal entries discussed limited student motivation, restricted access to learning resources, and the gap between curriculum expectations and students' actual abilities. Rather than treating challenges as isolated incidents, teachers often used them as opportunities to reconsider teaching strategies and plan future actions.

4.2.3. Agency under Constraints

Participants described working within conditions characterized by limited resources, staffing shortages, and infrastructure challenges.

Siti explained:

(19) 'We only have three teachers, including the principal.' (Siti)

Ani reflected on the lack of technology and educational resources available to students:

(20) 'The internet connection is unstable, making it difficult for students to complete their assignments.' (Ani)

Teachers also described challenges related to curriculum demands, limited instructional time, and the expectation to teach multiple subjects. Despite these constraints, they continued to seek alternative solutions, including modifying lessons, creating supplementary materials, and collaborating with colleagues.

Although constraints were frequently mentioned, teachers generally focused on how they responded to difficulties rather than simply describing the obstacles themselves.

4.3. Professional Judgment as Context-Sensitive and Ethical Decision-Making

Figure 3 summarizes coded segments within the professional-judgment theme. Context-Sensitive Judgment, Policy versus Reality Judgment, and Ethical Judgment accounted for the largest proportions of coded segments within this theme. Percentages use the professional-judgment theme total and describe coded segments, not people, prevalence, or inferential results.

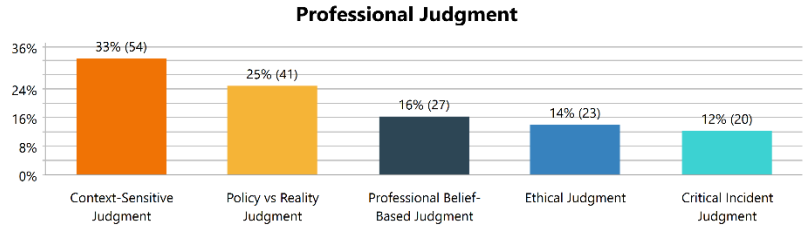


Figure 3. Professional judgment categories

4.3.1. Context-Sensitive Judgment

Teachers frequently described making decisions based on students' needs, classroom conditions, and local realities.

Ani explained:

(21) 'English feels very foreign to them, so I have to spend more time explaining simple concepts.' (Ani)

Susi reflected on using local examples during instruction:

(22) 'The student became more enthusiastic when I started mentioning examples from daily life.' (Susi)

Teachers frequently adjusted lesson pacing, language use, instructional materials, and classroom activities according to students' abilities and circumstances. These decisions were often made during lessons in response to immediate classroom situations.

4.3.2. Policy vs Reality Judgment

Teachers often described tensions between curriculum expectations and classroom realities.

Ani stated:

(23) 'I was worried I wouldn't finish the curriculum on time.' (Ani)
(24) 'There is a big gap between the national curriculum and my students' actual English levels.' (Ani)

Teachers also discussed balancing textbook requirements with locally relevant learning experiences. One teacher questioned whether she should follow textbook examples or use examples from students' everyday lives.

(25) 'Should I continue using local examples that are easy for the student to understand, or should I focus on following the examples in the book, so the student is prepared for the evaluation?' (Susi)

Similarly, the pressure to prioritize TKA (Tes Kemampuan Akademik) preparation created dilemmas for teachers responsible for multiple subjects. One participant explained:

(26) 'The pressure to ensure the students pass the TKA felt more urgent than completing the English curriculum.' (Siti)

These demonstrate the frequent negotiation between formal expectations and practical classroom realities.

4.3.3. Ethical Judgment

Participants frequently referred to fairness, inclusion, and student well-being when explaining their decisions.

Siti stated:

(27) 'For me, they understand the material is more important than finishing the book.' (Siti)

Ethical considerations were also evident when teachers adapted instruction for students with special needs, provided learning materials for students experiencing financial difficulties, or adjusted teaching strategies to ensure participation.

Siti reflected:

(28) 'Every student has the right to learning that is appropriate for their level and needs.' (Ani)

Across the dataset, teachers frequently described making decisions that prioritized student understanding, participation, and access to learning. Ethical concerns were particularly visible in situations where institutional expectations conflicted with what teachers believed was best for their students.

DISCUSSION

5.1. Identity as Relational and Contextual

The discussion positions the findings alongside, rather than above, existing work on teacher identity and agency. Like scholarship on identity tension, the data show that competing institutional and intercultural demands can shape professional

practice (Y. F. Gong & Gao, 2025). Like working on translanguaging agency, the data show teachers using available linguistic resources to support equitable participation (Putra, 2024). The contribution here is not to claim a new universal theory, but to make the relationship among identity positioning, constrained action, and ethical-pedagogical judgment visible in rural multilingual EFL narratives.

Within these three cases, this pattern reflects the realities of teaching in a rural multilingual setting, where limited English exposure, scarce resources, and linguistic diversity required teachers to move beyond standardized instructional approaches. Professional identity becomes closely connected to understanding students' backgrounds and adapting to local needs. Rather than functioning as a fixed professional category, identity emerges through continuous negotiation between personal values, institutional expectations, and classroom realities.

The prominence of contextual and cultural identity also highlights the importance of place in shaping professional practice. Teachers frequently connected instruction to students' everyday experiences, including plantation work, fishing activities, and local community life. These choices indicate that identity is shaped not only by professional training but also by teachers' participation in the communities they serve. Local context therefore acts as an active influence on professional identity rather than simply a setting for teaching.

The findings also reveal that identity is often accompanied by tension. Participants experienced uncertainty when curriculum expectations, administrative demands, and students' needs competed for attention. Such tensions do not indicate professional weakness. Rather, they demonstrate the complexity of teaching in contexts where ideal solutions are rarely available. In this sense, identity is continually negotiated through everyday decisions and dilemmas. This interpretation reflects Beijaard et al.'s (2004) view of identity as an ongoing process of interpretation and Barkhuizen's (2016) emphasis on identity as emerging through lived professional experience.

5.2. Agency as Adaptive and Reflective Practice

Teacher agency was enacted primarily through adaptation and reflection rather than resistance. Participants exercised agency by modifying materials, adjusting lesson objectives, redesigning activities, and creating alternative learning opportunities in response to classroom realities. Agency was therefore embedded in everyday pedagogical decisions rather than expressed through direct challenges to institutional structures.

This pattern differs from conceptions of agency centered on individual autonomy or resistance. In the present cases, agency was visible as situated, relational action through which teachers worked within existing constraints to sustain student learning, highlighting adaptation as a context-dependent form of professional action.

One reason for this pattern may lie in the realities of multilingual 3T contexts. Structural challenges such as limited infrastructure, staffing shortages, and restricted access to learning resources are largely beyond teachers' control. As a result, agency is expressed through practical actions that make learning possible within existing

constraints. Teachers focused on what could be changed in the classroom rather than on transforming broader institutional conditions.

Reflective agency was particularly significant because it functioned as the mechanism through which teachers interpreted problems and generated responses. Participants regularly reflected on classroom experiences, reconsidered instructional choices, and adapted their approaches accordingly. Reflection was therefore not simply retrospective but closely linked to action. When students lacked prerequisite knowledge, teachers modified learning goals. When materials proved unsuitable, they created alternatives. When participation declined, they redesigned activities.

Agency in these classrooms was thus fundamentally adaptive: teachers sustained learning through responsiveness and pragmatic problem-solving rather than resistance.

The findings support Utami and Kuswandono's (2023) argument that teacher agency is shaped by teachers' responses to their professional contexts. However, in multilingual 3T classrooms, agency was enacted primarily through practical adaptations, such as modifying lessons, using local knowledge, and drawing on multilingual resources to address students' needs amid limited resources and challenging conditions.

5.3. Professional Judgment as Context-Sensitive and Ethical Decision-Making

Within the professional-judgment theme, context-sensitive judgment represented the largest share of coded segments. This pattern suggests that, within the professional-judgment data, teachers frequently evaluated pedagogical possibilities in relation to students' needs, classroom conditions, and local realities.

The prominence of context-sensitive judgment indicates that teachers relied heavily on their understanding of local realities. Rather than applying instructional procedures mechanically, they adapted lessons according to students' language proficiency, learning readiness, and classroom circumstances. Professional expertise was therefore closely connected to contextual knowledge. Understanding students and communities has become an essential resource for effective decision-making.

The findings also reveal persistent tensions between policy and practice. Teachers frequently encountered situations where curriculum expectations did not align with classroom realities. Differences in students' proficiency levels, limited resources, and competing institutional priorities often required departures from planned instruction. Professional judgment therefore involved mediating between what policy prescribed and what classroom conditions made possible.

Equally important was the ethical dimension of decision-making. Participants repeatedly justified their actions in terms of fairness, care, inclusion, and student well-being. Decisions to slow instructional pacing, modify activities, or prioritize understanding over curriculum completion were often motivated by concern for students rather than procedural compliance. Professional judgment was therefore not only technical but also moral in nature.

This ethical dimension was especially visible in teachers' multilingual language practices. Previous research has shown that code-switching and

translanguaging can support learning and participation in EFL classrooms (Hamdani & Yudhiantara, 2026; Rengur et al., 2025). The present findings suggest that such practices are also expressions of professional judgment. Teachers used local languages not simply because they were effective instructional tools but because they considered them appropriate and responsive to students' circumstances. Multilingual practices therefore reflected broader professional reasoning rather than isolated pedagogical techniques.

5.4. Towards an Identity-Agency-Judgment Nexus

The Teacher Identity-Agency-Judgment Nexus emerged from recurring links across the cases. To maintain analytical transparency, direct narrative evidence is demarcated from conceptual linkage: while the interview and journal excerpts provide empirical evidence of situated classroom actions and emotional dilemmas, the bidirectional and recursive nature of the Nexus is an interpretive synthesis. Notably, temporal and recursive identity negotiation is evidenced most prominently in Siti's trajectory. Confronted with severe teacher shortages, Siti's initial identification as a specialized EFL teacher experienced acute tension when required to teach Mathematics during TKA preparation ("I felt like I was losing my identity as an English teacher"). Her situated judgment prioritized student need over disciplinary boundary, leading to instructional reorientation, which subsequently prompted retrospective reflection and an expanded professional self-concept as a more "flexible, patient, and caring" village educator. In contrast, Ani and Susi's accounts primarily provided concurrent evidence of facilitator positioning and context-sensitive material adaptation. This proposed Nexus sharpens and extends existing theoretical accounts of teacher agency in two substantive ways. First, while Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson's (2015) ecological model conceptualizes teacher agency primarily along temporal dimensions (iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective), it leaves the internal ethical deliberations of teachers relatively underspecified. In our 3T corpus, agency was rarely driven by long-term projective aspirations; rather, it was triggered by immediate moral imperatives, such as noticing a student's distress over unpaid workbooks or extreme linguistic confusion. The Nexus contributes by positioning professional judgment not merely as an evaluative step, but as the moral-pedagogical core that activates agency amid severe structural deprivation. Second, in contrast to Clarke's (2009) account of identity agency, which emphasizes overt resistance and political counter-conduct against institutional policy, the agency enacted by these rural teachers took the form of adaptive, quiet compromise. Rather than resisting national curriculum directives, teachers reconciled policy-reality dissonances through localized translanguaging and curricular pruning, mediated by an ethics of care (Noddings, 2012). Thus, the Nexus demonstrates that in marginalized classrooms, professional identity negotiation is sustained not through ideological resistance, but through situated, ethically grounded adaptations. Figure 4 therefore represents an empirically grounded interpretive pattern rather than a validated causal model.

Table 2. Participant-to-framework traceability

Participant	Critical Incident	Identity-Agency-Judgment trace	Outcome	Nexus Interpretation
Ani	Adapting material for a learner needing additional support	Facilitator/motivator → differentiated worksheet →judgment about participation and appropriate support	Reflection reinforced the need to adapt instruction to individual circumstances	Identity positioning was connected to differentiated pedagogical action through context-sensitive judgment
Siti	Teaching Mathematics during TKA preparation	English-teacher identity experienced as under tension → Accepted responsibility for Mathematics instruction → Student and institutional needs were judged urgent enough to require action beyond the usual subject role	Later described herself as more flexible, patient, and caring	Strongest evidence of recursive identity negotiation: identity tension → judgment → action → reflection → broader professional self-understanding
Susi	Explaining time through familiar local activities	Context-responsive positioning → local oil-palm and fishing examples → judgment that relevance could support comprehension	Reported greater student engagement and increased confidence in contextual teaching	Cultural/contextual positioning informed agency through a judgment about relevance and comprehension

The clearest evidence of recursion appears in Siti's trajectory; Ani and Susi's accounts show direct connections among identity, pedagogical action, and situated judgment without a prominent recursive loop. Recursion is therefore treated as a conditional feature of the Nexus rather than a uniform process across all cases.

This interaction was especially evident in multilingual practices, where teachers negotiated whether to prioritize English exposure, use Bahasa Indonesia, or draw on local languages based on professional responsibilities, constraints, and learning consequences.

The findings further illustrate these connections in specific episodes. Ani's facilitator identity was linked to differentiated support, while Siti's decision to slow instruction and translate key sentences reflected agency informed by judgments about comprehension and fairness. These interpretations are based on narrated decisions rather than direct observation. Figure 4 therefore presents the Nexus as an interpretive framework grounded in participants' narrated experiences.

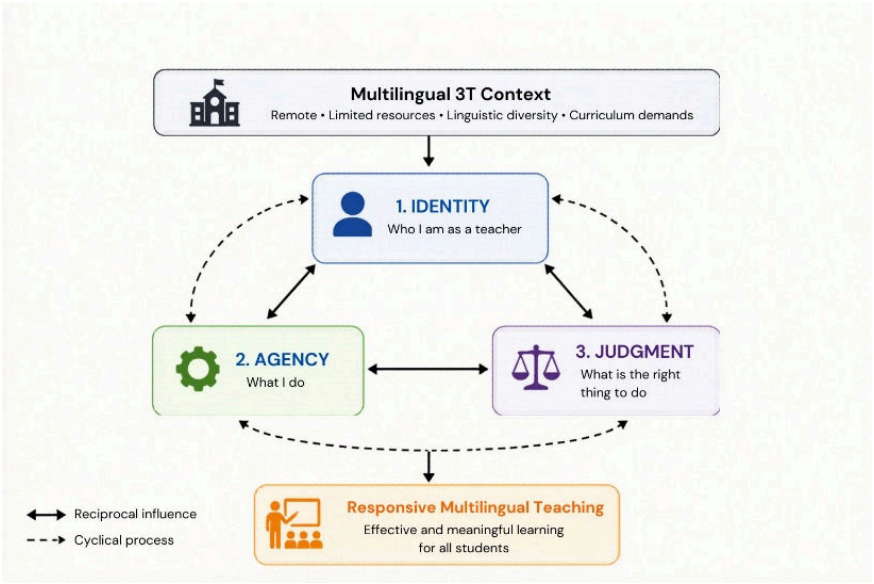


Figure 4. Identity-agency-judgment nexus in multilingual 3T classrooms

The Identity-Agency-Judgment Nexus contributes an integrated interpretation of teacher professionalism in multilingual rural contexts. Rather than introducing new constructs, it specifies how identity positioning, adaptive action, and professional judgment become analytically connected within situated multilingual teaching episodes.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how three EFL teachers in Hanau District, Seruyan Regency negotiated professional identity, exercised agency, and made professional judgments in narrated classroom episodes. The analysis suggests a contextually grounded, recursive nexus in which identity positioning, action, and judgment inform one another.

Its theoretical value lies in articulating an Identity-Agency-Judgment Nexus for understanding teacher professionalism in multilingual rural contexts. The findings suggest that teachers' responses emerge from the interaction between how they understand their professional roles, what actions they perceive as possible, and how they evaluate those actions in relation to students' needs. This perspective extends discussions of multilingual pedagogy by showing that practices such as code-switching and lesson adaptation are grounded in professional interpretation and ethical decision-making.

Practically, these findings carry direct implications for pre-service teacher education and rural professional development programs. The three cases suggest that teacher education could better prepare candidates for multilingual classrooms with scarce resources. Teacher educators might incorporate structured case-based training and clinical simulations centered on ethical decision-making, translanguaging strategies, and multi-level lesson differentiation. Professional development in rural

regions could include reflective peer discussion of such dilemmas. These suggestions are drawn from three narrated cases and need validation in other contexts.

The conclusions are analytically, rather than statistically or contextually, transferable. While empirical findings remain bounded to Hanau's localized conditions such as linguistic constellations (Dayak Pembuang, Banjarese, Bahasa Indonesia), extreme staffing deficits, and palm-oil socioeconomic rhythms, what transfers across settings is the underlying analytic architecture: how teachers in underserved schools mobilize adaptive agency through situated, ethically grounded professional judgments when navigating policy-reality discrepancies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

PMCP conceived the study and designed the methodology. PMCP collected and analyzed the data. SN and SW contributed to manuscript drafting and revision. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No generative artificial intelligence tool was used to collect, generate, analyze, code, or interpret the empirical research data. Artificial intelligence assistance was utilized exclusively for language polishing, grammar refinement, and sentence-level clarity in preparing the final English manuscript. The authors explicitly confirm that all AI-edited passages were independently and rigorously audited against original participant journal entries, verbatim interview recordings, Indonesian-to-English translation notes, empirical analytical tables, and cited scholarly sources. The authors assume full and sole intellectual responsibility for the factual veracity, conceptual arguments, and scholarly integrity of the manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS STATEMENT

The authors declare no competing interests.

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