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Research Article

Empowered or Constrained? An Ecological Perspective on Austrian Primary School Teachers' Agency in Foreign Language Education

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in the concept of teacher agency, it remains under-explored among primary school foreign language (FL) teachers. This study uses an ecological framework to investigate how 27 Austrian primary school teachers perceive and exercise their agency in FL teaching through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that agency is fluid and responsive, shaped by personal experiences, institutional support, and broader educational policies. Teachers with high agency may innovate their teaching practices, seek out resources, or advocate for curriculum changes. In contrast, limited agency can result in more constrained practices. Motivation, confidence, and extramural experiences can enhance agency, whereas insecurities regarding language proficiency tend to restrict it. Although classroom autonomy allows for creativity in lesson planning (e.g., choice of materials, CLIL), time constraints and a lack of support can hinder the delivery of consistent FL instruction. The study's results emphasise the need for primary teachers to receive clearer guidance, resources, and institutional recognition in relation to FL teaching.

Keywords: agency; primary school teachers; foreign language education; ecology; Austria

INTRODUCTION

Austrian primary school teachers are trained generalists in eight subjects (e.g., German, mathematics, science, music, etc.)—of which one is foreign language education (FLE) (BMUKK, 2012). To become a primary school teacher, students must complete a five-year programme: four years of bachelor's and one year of master's level study. In the 180 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) bachelor's programme FLE accounts for 6-8 ECTS. The system is used across Europe to transfer and recognise academic achievements, support student mobility, track degree progress, and provide information on curriculum design and quality assurance, depending on the individual university college. At the master's level, students can choose a specialisation, of which one could be English. Currently, Austria is at a major turning point regarding pedagogical interventions with new school reforms, curricula, and new teacher training programmes.

For more than 20 years, the Austrian primary school curriculum included the 'mandatory exercise modern foreign language (FL) lessons (year 1 to 4)' (BMUKK, 2005) covering languages such as English, French, Italian, Croatian, Slovak, Slovene, Czech and Hungarian. In addition, it suggested an integrated FLE in key stage I (year 1 & 2) for 32 yearly weekly hours and for 1 hour per week in key stage II (year 3 & 4). Since September 2023, however, a new curriculum has been inaugurated, lifting the mandatory exercise FLE to a core subject including a form of assessment in year 3 and 4 (BMBWF, 2023). Yet, this has not resulted in any additional time being allocated at a relevant level, either in the primary school curriculum, or in pre-service training at university colleges.

Besides general ongoing challenges primary school teachers face—such as high level of stress, limited resources, lack of support, and FL insecurity (e.g., Anderson & Olsen, 2006; Buchanan, 2010; Flores & Day, 2006; Gierlinger 2021; Gruber & Mercer, 2021)—multiple newly emerged factors (e.g., technology, multilingual dynamics, pedagogical reforms) might affect Austria's primary school teachers' identity and agency as FL educators (Gruber et al., 2020; Gruber & Mercer, 2021; Schöfberger, 2023).

The importance of teacher identity for teacher agency is apparent, particularly in language teaching (Tao & Gao, 2017; van Lier, 2010). This makes primary school FL educators of particular interest as teaching a FL may pose potential challenges on their professional identities and agency. A strong sense of professional identity shapes how teachers perceive their roles, make pedagogical choices, and respond to institutional and contextual constraints. In language education, where teaching often involves negotiating cultural, social, and linguistic complexities, teachers' identities significantly influence their ability to act with autonomy, adapt to learners' needs, and implement innovative practices. To reach an enriched understanding of FLE, recognise the relationship between individuals and the environment, and capture the complexity of teacher agency and the inherent processes, an ecology perspective (Priestley et al., 2015; van Lier, 2008) was adopted for this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Agency in L2 Acquisition

Agency in second language acquisition (SLA) is gaining increasing attention (see, e.g., Feryok, 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2019; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Skinnari, 2020; White, 2016, 2018). Agency can be defined as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). Teacher agency has been identified as a key factor to understand various aspects related to teacher development (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2020), such as teachers' behaviour and actions (Cohen, 2010; Day et al., 2006; Jin et al., 2021), their position in the teaching community, and their sense of their professional roles (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2021; Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016; Gruber et al., 2021). Professional identities are shaped in a constant interplay with the ecology—the relationship between individuals and the environment as an interdependent (re)formation of each other (Duff, 2012; van Lier, 2010). Feeling able to take actions in a specific context is crucial for teachers' empowerment and motivation (Gruber et al., 2020). How empowered a teacher feels and can act on is multifactorial: from socio-emotional to temporal aspects, from past to present experiences and future visions, from apparent to latent aspects, from in- to out-of-school influences (Ecclestone, 2007; Feryok, 2012; Mercer, 2011; Priestley et al., 2015). Thus, teacher agency not only empowers educators to enact their professional roles (Gruber & Mercer, 2021) but is also shaped by how they

perceive their contexts and the extent to which they recognise opportunities for change and action (Sulis et al., 2024). Priestley et al. (2015) present an ecological perspective on teacher agency seeing agency as a temporal achievement, unfolding across past experiences, present conditions, and future orientations. Developing a robust theoretical framework to explore how strong teacher agency can be fostered is essential, as Priestley et al. (2015, p. 149) argue that "strengthening teacher agency is the most sustainable pathway to preserving the best aspects of education while improving areas in need of change".

An Ecological Perspective on Teachers

The success of deep changes, though, depends largely on the psychological and ecological experiences of the stakeholders, their identities, agency, experiences, emotions, wellbeing, and ability to cope with challenges (Day & Kington, 2008; Talbot et al., 2021), as well as practices and policies on international, national, federal, institutional, or personal levels. Teachers are part of a system that make up their professional lives (Day & Gu, 2010). They are constantly influenced and being influenced by the world around them (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), on different levels with a different intensity of active participation. The teachers, students and parents, their home and work life, the school, society and culture are just some examples referring to relationships and influences on different levels (Hofstadler et al., 2021; Pirce & McCallum, 2015). According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), the layers of the environment are conceptualised, respectively, as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. A microsystem, the innermost layer, refers to the immediate environment where an individual plays a role while developing relationships with other individuals and resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The language classroom could be viewed as the microsystem where teachers' agency is enacted or inhibited by factors relating to teachers and students (Zhang et al., 2023). The next layer is the mesosystem (i.e., the links between an individual's microsystems), followed by the exosystem (i.e., the settings that do not directly include the individual, but that influence their microsystems), and the macro-system (i.e. the broader cultural influences and ideologies; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Converted into teachers at the primary level, we consider the personal level, the classroom level, the institutional, and the national level. Within the personal level we refer to agency aspects depending on interpersonal components, such as motivation, FL experiences and FL confidence. At the classroom level, aspects linked to interrelations among two or more settings the person actively participates in are outlined (e.g., students, methods, implementation, autonomy, etc.). The institutional level refers to specific institutional aspects as key stakeholders (school leaders, colleagues, parents), as well as support and appreciation. Finally, at the national level we refer to the broader cultural and societal context of the individual that refers to policy applications (from the Ministry of Education, local educational authorities, etc.), their professional development (pre-service, in-service) and their perception of the importance of the FLE. We therefore draw on Bronfenbrenner's (2009) ecological perspective to understand how teachers' agency is influenced by the world around them.

Primary School Teachers' Agency as Foreign Language Educators

Increasing attention has been given to young foreign language learners due to the particularities of early FL acquisition and the complexity of primary FL pedagogy (Buchholz, 2007; Gruber et al., 2021). Teaching young learners differs substantially from secondary education, where methods are typically more explicit, structured, and analytical, focusing on forms and grammar. In contrast, primary FL teaching relies on more implicit, holistic approaches that convey meaning communicatively without extra grammatical exercises (Burns et al., 2013; Jaekel et al., 2017; Johnstone, 2009; Jones, 2016; Pfenninger & Lendl, 2017).

Primary school teachers in Austria face high expectations despite limited FL training (Buchholz, 2007; Gruber, 2017; Gruber et al., 2021). Their work is compounded by stress (Anderson & Olsen, 2006; Johnson et al., 2005), scarce resources (Buchanan, 2010; Flores, 2006; Smithers & Robinson, 2003), lack of support (Buchanan, 2010; Flores & Day, 2006), constant professional development demands (Andersen & Olsen, 2006), FL insecurity (Gierlinger, 2021; Gruber & Mercer, 2021), and limited agency (Gruber et al., 2020; Gruber & Mercer, 2021; Gruber et al., 2025b), all

of which may threaten their professional identity (Bovellan, 2014; Skinnari & Bovellan, 2016).

Despite these challenges, few studies have explored primary school teachers' agency. Pappa et al. (2017a) investigated 13 Finnish CLIL teachers, highlighting the link between identity and agency and the role of support systems. Gruber et al. (2025a) studied eleven pre-service teachers, finding that their positioning within a community and confidence as FL learners and teachers are central to their sense of agency. Similarly, Moate and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2020) observed that Finnish pre-service teachers' agency and identity interacted dynamically in CLIL programmes, with initial challenges in reconstructing their language identities leading to new perspectives on language education. In semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six primary school CLIL teachers, Gruber and Mercer (2021) found that, despite their enthusiasm and passion for CLIL, Austrian CLIL teachers ultimately exercised their agency by giving up CLIL due to a limited sense of agency in this specific educator role. In their roles as CLIL teachers, all of these educators became demotivated and disempowered. However, due to their general confidence as primary school teachers, they were able to exercise their agency and actively decide not to continue with CLIL. In the light of these particularities, it is important to understand how primary school FL teachers understand their professional roles, and how agentic they feel as well as in what ways they are able to enact their agency in their own ecologies.

METHODOLOGY

Context and Research Question

This study is part of a larger research project focussing on the implementation process of a new curriculum for early FLE in Austria between 2021 and 2025 joined by ten teacher educators and researchers from four different Austrian federal states. For this study, a sub-team focused on primary school teachers' agency regarding FLE, aiming to explore primary school teachers' agency towards FL learning and teaching. The study was guided by the following research question:

- What contributes to Austrian primary school teachers' agency towards foreign language learning and teaching from an ecological perspective?

Participants

In order to receive a wide diversity of perspectives, interests and experiences, interviews were conducted in every Austrian province with 27 in-service primary school teachers across the career span: 9 in their early career (1-5 years of teaching experience), 9 in their mid-career (6-15 years of teaching experience) and 9 in their late career (>15 years of teaching experience). Table 1 (see Appendix A) displays the participants' background information. Participants were mainly females (n = 25) and between 23 to 56 years of age. Most of them worked in a state school (n = 26) and were class teachers (n = 23) working full-time (n = 25). All used English as a FL in class. The majority of participants rated their FL skills as "(very) good" (n = 18) and reported using the FL "(very) often" in their private context (n = 11).

Data Collection

Over a period of five months (May 2022 to November 2022), 27 in-depth, semi-structured 1-on-1 online interviews were conducted by nine research members, who received introductory training and written guidelines for comparability. Recruitment emails were sent across Austria so that at least three interviews per province could be elicited. In order to participate in the study, teachers needed to be: a) a primary school teacher and b) an active FL primary school teacher English L1 speakers were not involved due to different contextual background knowledge (e.g., feelings in the FL, education, FL confidence, etc.). After providing consent to take part in the study, teachers completed a background survey (see Appendix A). In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' perceptions, a semi-structured interview protocol with detailed instructions for interviewers was developed. The interview started with (1) introductory questions, before (2) warm-up questions about their professional context, followed by (3) questions regarding their FL background (experiences with FL teaching, feelings towards FL teaching, education in FL teaching etc.), (4) their teaching practice, (5) attitudes towards FL teaching as well as (6) perspectives, expectations, and wishes regarding the new curriculum, ending with (7) concluding remarks. For each section, a series of main questions and optional follow-up questions were created.

The interviews lasted between 23 and 76 minutes, generated a corpus of 161,787 words and 19 hours and 48 minutes of data (see Appendix A), and were conducted in German. After that, the interviews were transcribed in a verbatim manner including hesitation markers, grammatical errors, relevant pauses, and silences. Finally, they had to be translated for publishing reasons. Even though originally the data primarily looked at teachers' perceptions regarding FLE, we were able to see a close link to agency. Therefore, we decided to analyse the data looking at primary school teachers' agency regarding FLE.

Ethics

All participants signed an informed consent sheet, in which they gave their explicit permission to record, transcribe and utilize their data for the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals were free to leave the survey at any point. All data were treated confidentially, keeping records on password-protected computers as well as using pseudonyms. Furthermore, all names, places and other identifying markers have been anonymised to protect the identity of the participants.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis in an inductive-deductive manner based on Mayring's (2021) multi-step process. After the interviews were transcribed, one researcher went over the data creating memos as a base for a first code book. This coding booklet was then adapted based on the interviews and their natural topic development by going through sample interviews line-by-line as well as revisiting the literature in respect to teacher agency. Then, two researchers went over seven sample interviews trialling the coding booklet before discussing and adapting the booklet in six waves. After that, the two researchers went over the seven sample interviews again and met for a final check-up or adjustments that ended in two further adaption rounds of the coding booklet. Later, the agreed-upon coding booklet was shared with the entire sub-research group and the overall coding process began. All interviews were divided and analysed individually by two coders based on the coding booklet using four key macro-codes (personal level, class level, institutional level, national level) and eleven code groups (motivation, FL confidence, FL experiences, students, materials, implementation, key stakeholders, support and appreciation, policy application, professional development, perception of importance of FLE). After a first round of coding, they met to discuss open questions and uncertainties along the process as well as exchange the interviews for intercoder agreement, and the entire set of data was discussed until consensus was reached (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The team then met again to discuss the results and narrow down the focus of the study. Memoing was used throughout all stages to link "coding with the developing of propositions" (Punch, 2009, p. 180). The analysis was informed by an ecological perspective. Findings are discussed in terms of these contexts: personal level, class level, institutional level, and national level, as presented in the following section.

FINDINGS

Adopting an ecological perspective, the analysis revealed that primary school FL teachers' agency is influenced by dynamic, interrelated levels. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (2009) provides a framework for understanding how various factors interact within and across these levels, highlighting the complex interplay that shapes teachers' agency and acknowledging the often indistinct boundaries between these layers. These layers are thus presented in separation but are viewed as dynamically interconnected (Dörnyei, 2010).

Personal level

FL Motivation

Many teachers claimed personal motivation (n = 17) as a reason to self-directedly implement the FL in school. They referred to individual enthusiasm, fun and positivity towards the FL that made them use the FL in and out of school. Their motivation was in many cases (n = 9) linked to extramural experiences such as Erasmus exchanges, au pair or travelling, but also to friends and leisure activities:

> First of all, I also went on a language study trip to Malta this year as part of an Erasmus plus programme. That was a really great experience.

> It was very intense, English was spoken constantly in class. … I would really recommend this to anyone who teaches English to keep looking around and doing things like this so that you can continue to develop your foreign language skills. (B3_line 41–47)

FL Confidence

Another factor that appeared to determine the teachers' sense of agency was how confident they felt in the FL. Feeling competent as teachers and having a sense of control over teaching is critical to agency (Gierlinger, 2021; Jimenez Munoz, 2021; Pappa et al., 2017a/b) in order to seize opportunities and position themselves as the expert professional. Confidence (n = 22) was, for the majority of teachers, linked to or based on these extramural interactions mentioned above (e.g., Erasmus, trips, watching TV, activities).

While some were confident from the beginning of their teaching career due to prior knowledge in school, education or extramural aspects, others referred to being "rather unsure at the beginning, because I simply did not know how to do it". Nevertheless, they became "more and more confident over time" (K2_line 27–28) by growing as a teacher—in education, pedagogy, didactics and methods—and consequently also in the FL. Individuals, such as OÖ2, revealed that in class with young learners she felt confident, but "on the outside" (line 63) when asked to exchange with adults, she experienced insecurity.

Others (n = 6) still mentioned feeling generally insecure, questioning themselves as they barely use the FL and thus lack vocabulary, leaving them with a shortage of agency and a feeling of "helplessness" (V2_line 183). When teachers do not feel agentic, self-doubt might predominate, which may make them feel disempowered and might challenge their agency as FL educators (Gruber & Mercer, 2021) and, subsequently, a potential reduction of the FL usage in class. As Bown (2009) explains, "to effectively manage learning and regulate emotional responses, learners must be aware of their own agency and must believe themselves capable of exercising that agency in all learning contexts" (p. 580). Thus, self-regulatory learners, which also the teachers as constant and ongoing FL learner are (Barkhuizen, 2017; van Lier, 2004), are those who recognise their role as active agents and use various strategies to shape their learning experiences and manage their motivation and emotions effectively.

Classroom level

Implementation

Data revealed that teacher autonomy and pedagogical flexibility could be seen as enablers of teacher agency. Teachers who reported having a certain degree of autonomy in their classroom practice seem to demonstrate higher levels of agency (n = 27). They adapted teaching materials, experimented with cross-curricular language integration (i.e., CLIL), and tailored activities to pupils' interests. This autonomy allowed them to align language teaching with their own strengths and the classroom's social-emotional setting: "[w]e don't get stuck on anything; we take a variety of things that seem good to us, so it doesn't matter whether they're flashcards, books or movies" (S1_line 318–321). Similar ideas were taken on by another teacher, who put forward that she started a topic and then realised that the numbers are not there yet:

> Then I get the boxes with the 'numbers' and we do it immediately. This means that I have a modular system and can react to any situation at any time. That's how the curriculum and the support material should be structured—not so rigidly in books. It is probably quite nice, but it's better to be more modular. You can simply put things together because that's teaching. You can't start a topic and then have to stick to it; if something else comes up, you're limited if you're just teaching body parts, for example. If I already have another topic in the class, I can expand on it. I think it's somehow more comprehensive. (K3_line 550–565)

Children's enthusiasm and responsiveness were frequently addressed in the data as motivating factors that reinforced teachers' commitment to language teaching (n = 18). Where students showed curiosity or retained language elements over time, teachers felt affirmed in their efforts, increasing their willingness to innovate: "[…] they just love that, and then we talk about the keywords again, or I introduce a memory game or a board game at the end to reinforce it"

(S2a_line 212–231). Similar experiences were also expressed by another teacher in Carinthia who stressed that:

> This is how I've structured my lessons, and I've had very good results. Sometimes I just ask the children what would interest them. Then I can respond to that. Sometimes they say they would like to do something with animals, for example. Once, they said they wanted to learn about London. So, we did a lesson on London (K3_line 566–570).

These statements demonstrated the significant influence of individual approaches and personal convictions on specific teaching activities. It also became clear that some teachers consciously distanced themselves from the official curriculum and relied on their intuition and experience instead: "If I'm completely honest, I don't even know what's in the curriculum because I just do it on my own initiative" (T1_line 285–286).

It seemed that some teachers focused on experiencing a FL, rather than relying on isolated vocabulary exercises or grammatical structures (n = 14). Instead, they tried to build an emotional relationship with the FL, as the following statement underlines:

> Yeah, it's about showing them that a FL is so much more than just vocabulary, forms and numbers. It's about showing them the life of the language. Maybe you'll realise that languages like Italian live through you, through what you do and how you act. We just want to show you that in the first four years… In my class, for example… I know they will already know all the colours, but it's so important to me that they just speak it and have fun with it, and that they don't worry about knowing the vocabulary. (T2b_line 425–433)

During the interviews, the teachers reported greater confidence and willingness to teach when curricular resources (i.e., CLIL) were appropriate, visually engaging, and flexible (n = 14). The ecological "fit" between materials, student needs, and teacher preferences seemed to be crucial when it came to foster a sense of agency: "For the introduction, I always use word cards, and then I also use sentence structures such as "I like", "She likes" and "He likes" (S1_line 368–370). Another teacher explained that they do a lot of integrative English: "We "switch" a lot, depending on what fits the topic" (S 3_line 90–97). One teacher even stressed that they do not really do English units:

> For me, it all flows into the lessons. I always use phrases in all subjects, such as maths, German, science and PE. By teaching them phrases and repeating them constantly, they remember them. I translate for them, but that's how they remember and answer, and how they understand what it actually means. (T1_line 57–61)

Although there were many examples of teachers actively and creatively exercising their professional agency, it should not be overlooked that this ability to act was not unrestricted. Despite conducive conditions, there are also inhibiting factors that can limit teachers' professional agency. These factors included both structural framework conditions and individual perceptions. Some interviewees (n =12) reported that FL teaching often took a back seat in everyday school life due to competing demands from other subjects and activities. The tight timeframe made it difficult to engage with language content continuously and in depth: "[…] but then I'm a bit conflicted myself with the bike test, other content tests and homework and then I am coming along […] in the end I stopped my English classes" (S2a_line 376–403).

Despite these structural challenges, several teachers demonstrated their ability to maintain professional agency in creative ways. For example, they incorporated language learning into daily routines by using songs or short storytelling sessions during transitions: "I always start with … I introduce myself, talk about the weather and the date, and so on. It only takes 5–10 minutes to briefly repeat everything once […]" (S1 _ line 262–285)—strategies that took little time but had a lasting impact. Additionally, some teachers found co-teaching arrangements or informal collaboration with colleagues beneficial. These supportive practices functioned as micro-ecological resources, helping them to navigate constraints and maintain flexibility in their teaching: "For example, I have a friend from England who… She always sends me short videos showing what London really looks like. That's how I try to spark interest and motivation in the subject" (S2a_line 376–401).

Another key strategy was the use of project- and action-oriented activities, which allowed learners to engage with the FL in meaningful contexts. These included practical tasks such as cooking with English recipes, crafting, or listening to songs related to cultural themes: "We also cook, so we look at English recipes, do crafts and listen to carols" (Salzburg 2a_line 402–403). Through such activities, teachers created authentic language experiences that supported vocabulary acquisition and cultural understanding in an engaging way. Similarly, thematic lessons such as one focusing on plants and nature demonstrated how content and language could be effectively linked:

> In one lesson, we talked about spring flowers, and we made a bingo game with different things that we saw on our trip. We went into the woods and collected and identified different plants. Then we did the same activity in English and played a bingo game with the children using the most common flowers, such as snowdrops, cauliflower and daisies. (S3_line 328–334)

These examples demonstrate how teachers used their professional autonomy to respond adaptively to the opportunities and limitations of their specific teaching contexts. Within the classroom's ecological system, they creatively made use of available resources, such as materials, routines and peer support, to create learning opportunities that align with curricular goals and students' interests. By doing this, they were continuously negotiating between institutional structures and their own pedagogical values, thereby highlighting the nature of agency.

Institutional Level

Support

A recurring theme across the data was the lack of institutional and collegial support, which tended to undermine the collaborative dimension of teacher agency. As one participant stated: "So far, I haven't received any support. Some schools have native speakers. Our school hasn't had that yet […] Support has always come from books, not other people" (K2_line 70–73). This suggests that teacher agency was often driven by individual initiatives rather than peer or institutional support networks. The absence of support from colleagues or specialists, particularly in smaller or rural schools, left teachers to rely on static resources rather than dynamic, dialogic and collaborative opportunities. The ecological interplay here revealed a siloed setting, where institutional structures failed to recognise or address the specific needs of the teaching staff, thus impeding deeper pedagogical growth.

Teachers often navigated their roles with a strong sense of internal motivation and professional integrity, despite limited structured pedagogical support. One teacher reflected: "[…] and my boss says, 'You're doing a great job. The parents aren't complaining, and the children are happy. Just keep doing what you're doing." (OÖ1_line 114–115) While autonomy is a positive feature of agency, this also highlighted a lack of structured institutional mechanisms to support reflective practice. Within the ecological context of the school, such comments from administrators suggested a low-intervention environment, where the teacher was left to interpret success through anecdotal feedback rather than an environment which enhances or critically challenges pedagogical choices in FL instruction.

Despite these constraints, teachers (n = 10) expressed clear aspirations for structural reforms that could enhance the value and sustainability of FL teaching practice. One teacher voiced a strong desire for validated resources and centralised support: "Accordingly, I would also very much like to have a website from the local educational authorities where the material is tested. Yes, the curriculum is checked, and yes, I would like that" (V1_line 386–389). Another teacher added:

> I think it's important that the lessons are valuable and produce results. Personally, it would be best that it's not the class teacher who does it, but rather a teacher who has time for the lesson. That way, quality and quantity will come out of it. I just want it to be valuable without the teacher being overworked or overwhelmed. That's how I see it. (V2_line 619–625)

These statements indicate that teachers do not reject institutional involvement but rather wish for meaningful forms of support that respect both their professional autonomy and well-being. National and institutional

structures were thus identified as key factors influencing agency—either by enabling pedagogical clarity and consistency or, when absent, by placing a burden on individual teachers to fill systemic gaps.

National Level

Policy Application

When referring to the national level, many teachers (n = 11) appreciated the openness of the old curriculum (back then current; BMUKK, 2005) allowing them "freedom and autonomy" (K2_line 184–185) in implementation and integration of content as contribution to their lived agency (e.g., V1). At the same time, individuals (n = 4) referred to anticipated changes of grading in the new curriculum (BMBWF, 2023) as a hurdle hindering their agency by producing "pressure" (K1_line 376) and "taking away autonomy" (T1_line 315–316) as well as the "fun component" (K1_line 378). Giving teachers freedom to design is not only motivating but also empowering (Gruber & Mercer, 2021). Allowing them to implement the FL autonomously to the needs of their specific context can shape their agency positively (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2021). Conversely, if individuals feel pressured and constrained, their ability to act independently may be reduced, leading to only a minimal implementation of the expected policies. The empowerment of educators through the autonomy to craft and design their professional roles can have significant positive effects on their overall wellbeing. This autonomy is associated with increased job satisfaction and motivation among teachers (Day & Qing, 2009; Duckworth et al., 2009; Pappa et al., 2017a). Consequently, this enhancement in teachers' professional satisfaction and motivation is likely to foster a more positive and engaging learning environment, thereby leading to heightened motivation and satisfaction among students (Roffey, 2012).

Professional Development

It was felt by several teachers (n = 13) that the pre-service education, as part of their professional development, was positive and supportive, and provided a solid foundation in methods and didactics, which was helpful in implementing the FL in primary school: "I have to say that I still benefit from the foundation we were given back then!" (B3_line 149–150). However, while the majority spoke highly of the openness and willingness of university college professors to help, they also mentioned a fundamental lack of courses during their pre-service education that was "disappointing" (NÖ3_line 88). It was also noted that these courses were only referred to as "basic", which created a perception that "English was not present" (K3_line 122) in addition to the feeling that the limited amount of interaction with the FL during their education did not contribute significantly to their individual FL competences development (n = 12).

Furthermore, many teachers (n = 13) said they had not had the opportunity "to see or do a FL lesson" during their internship (K1_line 113). In addition, they expressed that they would have "liked to have had more opportunities to try things out, but that the focus was more on mathematics, German and science" (OÖ2_line 162–163). Those who spoke highly of internships (n = 3) acknowledged that they were "fortunate" to have participated in "three FL lessons" during their education (NÖ1_line 156–157), which provided them with a sense of what could work and thus enabled them to become agentic in implementing the FL. It appeared that in-service trainings in the FL might be lacking and those offered "do nothing for me" (NÖ3_line 100–101) (n = 3), despite the majority (n = 18) underscoring "the importance of FLE per se for the environment" (NÖ1_line 144–145) and fostering the openness towards the language (NÖ2).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the multifaceted nature of primary school teacher agency within the Austrian educational context. Findings from our study suggested that teachers show high personal motivation towards FLE often linked to extramural experiences. As shown in other studies (e.g., Schurz & Sundqvist, 2022), these extramural experiences are associated with effective self-regulated learning (Bown, 2009), in which learners recognise themselves as active agents in their own learning and develop strategies to shape and construct their individual learning environments. As Bown (2009) mentioned, such strategies not only enhance their academic achievements but also positively influence their motivation and affective responses (p. 578).

Furthermore, the study confirms that FL confidence played a major role in their feeling of agency. In Austria, primary school teachers are trained generalists with limited training but high expectations regarding FLE (Buchholz, 2007; Gruber, 2017; Gruber et al., 2021; Gruber et al., 2025a/b). In accordance with findings from previous studies (e.g., Gierlinger, 2021; Jimenez Munoz, 2021; Pappa et al. 2017a/b), confidence and control in teaching are critical components of an individual's sense of agency, influencing teacher practices (Nazari et al., 2022) through a close interaction of identity and agency and the transformation of their professional voices (Bovellan, 2014; Skinnari & Bovellan, 2016). As Jimenez-Munoz (2021) and Pappa et al. (2017a/b) note, a diminished sense of confidence can significantly impair teachers' autonomy. Further, Gierlinger (2021) as well as Gruber and Mercer (2021) emphasise the necessity of confidence for both teachers and learners, suggesting that a robust sense of self-efficacy is essential for effective FL instruction. Therefore, fostering environments that bolster teacher confidence is imperative for sustaining their agency.

While some teachers felt confident, others experienced insecurity due to limited FL use. As Bown (2009) notes, effective self-regulated learning requires awareness of one's agency and belief in its exercise. Self-regulated teachers, including FL educators (Barkhuizen, 2017; van Lier, 2004), actively shape their learning, managing motivation and emotions through diverse strategies. This underscores the importance of teacher autonomy and metacognitive skills, which are essential for fostering adaptive, sustainable learning environments.

This study highlights that autonomy strengthens teachers' agency by enabling adaptive responses to limited resources and opportunities. Supported by Austria's national curriculum (BMUKK, 2005; BMBWF, 2023), autonomy allows educators to shape FL instruction at personal, classroom, and institutional levels, redefining professional roles to fit contextual needs. This empowerment fosters motivation, wellbeing, and a positive teaching environment (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2021; Day & Qing, 2009; Pappa et al., 2017a), creating an interdependent relationship between autonomy, agency, and teacher and student satisfaction (Roffey, 2012).

From the findings, it can be concluded that teachers who reported greater autonomy displayed stronger agency. This is also consistent with research identifying autonomy as a key factor in agentic behaviour (Gruber & Mercer, 2021). These teachers adapted content, implemented cross-curricular approaches (e.g., CLIL), and tailored instruction to pupils' interests. In terms of the emotional and motivational drivers of agency, teachers' decisions to develop thematic, culturally rich, student-led activities illustrate the influence of emotional and relational factors on pedagogical choices (Trent & Nguyen, 2021). Several teachers distanced themselves from rigid curricular structures, promoting experiential and holistic language learning instead. They emphasised 'living the language' rather than teaching isolated vocabulary or grammar. Although structural barriers such as time constraints, testing pressures, and limited curricular emphasis on foreign languages were recognised as obstacles, many teachers developed micro-strategies to maintain their sense of agency.

A recurring theme in the data was the lack of institutional and collegial support, which significantly constrains the collaborative dimension of teacher agency in FL instruction. While teachers often demonstrate strong personal motivation and a commitment to pedagogical quality, they frequently operate in siloed environments. This aligns with the ecological understanding of agency as context-dependent and shaped by the interaction between individual capacity and environmental affordances (Dady & Gu, 2010; Duff, 2012; van Lier, 2010). Although autonomy enables teachers to adapt creatively, the absence of structured, reflective support systems places the full burden of innovation on individuals. Teachers' calls for validated materials and time for collaboration reflect a desire for supportive frameworks that enhance, rather than undermine, professional autonomy (Pappa et al., 2017a). Strengthening teacher agency thus requires institutional investment in collegial networks and contextualised support structures that acknowledge both the complexity of FL teaching and the realities of everyday school life.

A significant finding from this research indicated that participants, regardless of their career stage, expressed a need for more professional development opportunities . The majority of teachers claimed the lack of courses with basic content and little chance for own

professional FL development and interaction—ongoing in internships with little chance to see or do a FL lesson—as is in line with Birsak de Jersey (2021) and Loder-Büchel (2015). For trainee teachers it is crucial to engage, observe, plan, do, and review a FL lesson to develop skills, didactical and methodological, in order to became confident and consequently an agentic FL educator (e.g., Cameron, 2001; Papp, 2011; Big-Kreis, 2015; Birsak de Jersey, 2021; Medgyes, 2001). In response to the needs of both pre-service and in-service teachers, it is recommended to expand existing provisions and promote additional extramural opportunities that support educators' individual foreign language (FL) development. By strengthening their language skills and pedagogical techniques—closely linked to their confidence and motivation—teachers will be better equipped to implement these competencies effectively in the classroom, as outlined above.

Policymakers and educators must collaborate to create supportive environments that prioritise teacher autonomy while ensuring consistency and quality in FLE across Austrian university colleges and primary schools. This requires aligning institutional expectations with classroom realities and fostering a culture that values professional agency as a cornerstone of effective language teaching. The findings of this study stress an urgent need for systemic investment in teacher autonomy, confidence, and agency across Austria's educational framework. Since agency is directly linked to teachers' motivation and their capacity to deliver engaging, student-centred FLE, education policy must embed autonomy at all levels. Empowering teachers through trust, professional voice, and responsive structures is essential for sustaining high-quality language instruction. Addressing the persistent lack of collegial support is equally vital. Establishing school-based learning communities and cross-institutional networks, alongside access to validated teaching materials, can reduce isolation, encourage innovation, and foster long-term professional growth.

Limitations of this study include reliance on one-off interviews, a single data instrument, and a limited temporal scope. Teacher agency is fluid and context-dependent. Thus, longitudinal, multi-method research is needed to capture its evolving complexity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of teacher agency within the context of Austrian primary school FLE reveals a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by an interdependence of individual, contextual, and systemic variables. These practices illustrate the complex negotiation between institutional constraints and personal pedagogical values, positioning teacher agency not as a binary, but as a fluid, evolving process influenced by multiple ecological layers (Priestley et al., 2015). Thus, this study underscores the imperative need for educational stakeholders to cultivate environments that not only bolster teacher confidence and autonomy but also facilitate continuous professional development, thereby enabling educators to adeptly navigate the complexities of FLE.

Drawing on the foundational framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (2009), it is apparent that understanding teacher agency necessitates considering the interplay of factors rather than isolating them. The findings of this research illustrate that agency is inherently contingent upon the unique voices and contextual variances of educators (e.g., Sade, 2009; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2020). The interactions within teachers' social and environmental ecologies yield diverse outcomes, reinforcing the necessity of comprehending these dynamics holistically (Gruber & Mercer, 2021).

Moreover, this study accentuates the critical role of educators' perceptions of contextual factors, as highlighted by Sulis et al. (2021), in shaping the educational system's behaviour and outcomes. Recognising and addressing discrepancies in FL learning experiences are pivotal for fostering agency and identity development among teachers. As such, embracing past experiences as integral to one's ongoing development as a FL learner is essential for realising one's potential as an agent within this domain.

Overall, the complexity and individuality of teacher agency require tailored approaches that account for the diverse settings in which educators operate in order to make empowered and ultimately agentic FL educators.

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Authors' contributions

M-TG: Conception of the Work, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Drafting Article, Revision Article, Final Approval.

PK: Data Analysis, Drafting Article, Revision Article, Final Approval.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the FORUM PRIMAR Research Committee as well as the Private University College of Teacher Education Augustinum Research Committee. All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrollment and data collection in the study.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-assisted technologies

In the preparation of this work, the author(s) used DeepL in order to translate the German transcripts. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed, verified the accuracy, originality, and appropriateness of any GenAI-assisted outputs, and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication**.**

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Appendix A: **Table 1.** *Overview of Participants and Interviews*

No.	Province	Abbreviation	Gender	Age	Career Stage (Yrs. of Exp.)	Employment	Additional Education in FL & Current Studies	Self-perceived FL Competence Level	Usage of FL	Interview Length	Words of Interview
1	Burgenland	B1	F	28	Early (1)	Full-time team-teacher	Current master student	Good	Very infrequent	33:20	4452
2	Burgenland	B2	F	30	Mid (8)	Full-time class teacher	Further education "English in primary schools"	Good	Sometimes	32:48	3982
3	Burgenland	B3	M	46	Late (25)	Full-time class teacher		Adequate	Sometimes	49:20	5478
4	Lower Austria	NÖ1	F	24	Early (1)	Full-time class teacher		Very good	Often	42:20	5834
5	Lower Austria	NÖ2	F	27	Mid (5)	Full-time class teacher		Adequate	Infrequent	23:09	3076
6	Lower Austria	NÖ3	F	47	Late (25)	Full-time class teacher & mentor teacher	Summer courses in English	Good	Often	49:44	7514
7	Vienna	W1	F	24	Early (2)	Full-time class teacher	Study focus: English	Very good	Often	1:12:23	11290
8	Vienna	W2	F	36	Mid (10)	Full-time class teacher		Adequate	Sometimes	42:47	5061
9	Vienna	W3	F	50	Late (27)	Full-time class teacher		Very good	Often	1:16:59	9919
10	Upper Austria	OÖ1	F	38	Early (1)	Part-time class teacher	Current bachelor student	Adequate	Infrequent	31:56	5283
11	Upper Austria	OÖ2	F	42	Mid (15)	Full-time class teacher		Adequate	Very infrequent	38:31	5768
12	Upper Austria	OÖ3	F	50	Late (30)	Full-time team teacher		Adequate	Sometimes	40:24	5578
13	Salzburg	Sa1	F	27	Early (5)	Full-time class teacher & special needs teacher		Good	Often	1:06:50	9272
14	Salzburg	Sa2	F	37	Mid (14)	Full-time class teacher	Diff. English certificates	Very good	Sometimes	55:40	7245
15	Salzburg	Sa3	F	52	Late (30)	Full-time class teacher (private school) & college lecturer		Adequate	Often	39:21	5267
16	Styria	St1	F	23	Early (1)	Full-time class teacher		Good	Often	40:17	5069
17	Styria	St2	F	42	Mid (8)	Full-time class teacher	English at secondary schools	Good	Almost always	38:39	3884
18	Styria	St3	F	44	Late (22)	Full-time class teacher (private school)	Further education "Teaching English to Young Learners"	Adequate	Infrequent	37:37	3976
19	Carinthia	K1	F	28	Early (4)	Full-time team teacher		Good	Infrequent	36:31	5644
20	Carinthia	K2	F	50	Mid (15)	FL and mentor teacher		Adequate	Often	22:38	2732
21	Carinthia	K3	F	51	Late (30)	Full-time class teacher		Good	X	51:18	7908
22	Tyrol	T1	F	37	Early (3)	Full-time class teacher		Very good	Sometimes	40:23	4748
23	Tyrol	T2	F	38	Mid (15)	Part-time class teacher	Erasmus intense courses	Good	Sometimes	52:35	9901
24	Tyrol	T3	F	45	Late (20)	Head and class teacher	Diff. in-service trainings	Very good	Often	57:24	7442
25	Vorarlberg	V1	M	30	Early (3)	Full-time class teacher		Good	Often	46:03	5690
26	Vorarlberg	V2	F	43	Mid (11)	Full-time class teacher		Good	Sometimes	34:41	4626
27	Vorarlberg	V3	F	56	Late (36)	Full-time class teacher		Good	Sometimes	36:50	5148
			F=92.6% M=7.4%	*M*=38.7	*M*=13.6					*M*=44min	*M*=5992.1