Manifestation of Agency by English Language Teachers in Relation to Thailand's Language Assessment Policy

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Article information	Abstract
	The concept of human agency has received increasing attention in the field of education in the past decade. Yet, education researchers, those in the area of English language teaching included, still have much to grapple with in exploring and conceptualizing agency of teachers—or teacher agency. The current study thus aims to contribute to greater understanding of teacher agency in relation to the English language assessment policy of Thailand's higher education. Insights are gleaned from questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews with 26 English language teachers of various nationalities, currently teaching undergraduate-level English, from nine public and nine private higher education institutions across Thailand. Findings reveal five types of manifestation of teacher agency and the various degrees in which personal and ecological factors influence each manifestation type. It also appears that manifestation of teacher agency depends not so much on the direct demands of policy mandates as on the teachers' personal dispositions being mediated—or subjugated—by their institutional culture and structure.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of human agency has long been a widely discussed and intensely debated concept in sociology. Sociologists who study human agency—one of which defines agency as "[t]he capacity to exercise control over one's own thought processes, motivation, and action" (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175)—seek not only to understand its origin but also to explain its relation to social structures. Several schools of thought have emerged as a result, but three are dominant. One group of sociologists believe that humans are producers of social structures and freely take actions on their own will without any societal influence. Another group believe that human actions are influenced by the society, and individuals are therefore the "product of social structures" (Luhman & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 163). Yet, more recent sociologists believe that the relationship is bidirectional rather than dichotomous—that humans are both producers and products of social structures—as discussed and argued in various literature, such as Bandura (1989, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2006), Clegg (2005), Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, and Paloniemi (2013), Fuchs (2001), and Hitlin and Elder Jr. (2007), among others.

In recent years, education researchers who study agency of teachers—or teacher agency—such as Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015), have expressed their favor for a framework proposed in 1998 by sociologists Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that agency should be considered not as a collection of discrete constituents of a person—such as habit, self-goal, life purpose, or personal judgment—but as an interplay of such constituents, and that the dynamics of this interplay vary with respect to social structures and time. This is in line with the belief of education researchers that the goal of studying teacher agency is not to explain the origin of a teacher's social actions but to understand "the phenomenon of [teacher] agency itself and…how [teacher] agency is *achieved* in concrete settings and in and through particular *ecological* conditions and circumstances" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626, emphasis in original). Priestley et al. (2015) also believe that agency is achieved rather than possessed, which means agency is not described in terms of a person having or not having agency but, rather, in terms of how or to what extent a person can exercise agency to perform a particular action at a particular moment within a particular environment. Hence, the ecological perspective is adopted into Priestley et al.'s (2015) teacher agency research.

Even though still an inconclusive concept—and indeed defined differently over the wide range of disciplines in which it is studied (Miller et al., 2018)—teacher agency is increasingly emphasized in education policy, which stresses the importance of teachers acting as "agents of change" (Liyanage et al., 2015; Pantić, 2015; Priestley et al., 2016; Priestley et al., 2015; Robinson, 2012; Van Huy & Hamid, 2015). However, the extent to which change occurs largely depends on the extent to which teachers achieve agency, and the extent to which teachers achieve agency largely depends on the "contingencies of the moment" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). One such contingency is the various types and levels of education policy imposed on teachers, which ironically both enable and constrain teacher agency because of the conflicts between the rhetoric of policy text and the reality of teaching context faced by the teachers (Ollerhead, 2010; Priestley et al., 2016; Priestley et al., 2015; Robinson, 2012). For instance, Liyanage et al. (2015) reported an attempt to promote teacher agency in China through a language education policy called *the New English Syllabus*. Several policy measures were enacted to encourage and enhance teacher agency, including teacher education reform, classroom application of English language teaching theories, and teacher involvement in such matters as textbook selection and curriculum design. Yet, the reality of high-stakes university entrance exams and pressure from both students and parents forced teachers to retain teaching-to-the-test methods. Thus, despite the provided resources and tools, the actual teaching context prevented teachers from exercising their agency as the new policy had intended. Such mismatches—what Hornberger, Tapia, Hanks, Dueñas, and Lee (2018) labeled "the perennial gap between policy and practice" (p. 155)—are also reported in other studies on teacher agency vis-à-vis education policy (e.g., Coffman, 2015; Ollerhead, 2010; Priestley et al., 2016; Robinson, 2012; Van Huy & Hamid, 2015; Van Huy et al., 2016).

Implementation aside, education policies are allegedly created for the betterment of a nation. A case in point can be seen in the English language education policy of Thailand, which frames the scope of this study. Thailand is a relatively small country in Southeast Asia, with a population just under 70 million people (The World Bank Group, 2020). The country's national language,

Thai, is a fairly unique language and is almost exclusively used in all forms of communication in Thailand. Yet, the dominant language of international science, commerce, and politics is English. Hence, Thailand's education policy has always included a section dedicated to English language education policy, as it is deemed that the study of English is a critical component of education that will help Thai citizens participate in the global communities and be competitive beyond Thailand's borders. Undoubtedly, effective teaching of English is central to accomplishing such a goal (Office of the Education Council, 2017).

The Thai government has also acknowledged the need to improve the quality of English teachers (Office of the Education Council, 2017). As discussed above, current literature suggests that teacher agency is recognized as an attribute that could instill change in the education system. This is because teachers who are agentive are more in control of their teaching context, more reflexive, and therefore more able to adjust their teaching content and methods as circumstance changes (Pantić, 2015). Agentive teachers also take ownership of their practice and strive for excellence not only in students' performance but also in their own (Pantić, 2015). Thus, teacher agency could lead not only to better teachers but also to better education outcomes.

Yet, Thailand, too, has experienced good-intention-turned-awry situations when education policy clashes with teachers' practices, as the government's well-intended schemes do not answer to the teachers' actual needs, concerns, or teaching contexts (Fitzpatrick, 2011). This is because there is still little research on, hence little knowledge of, teacher agency in the Thai education context. Therefore, the positive impact from implementing the policy as it is intended, notably from having agentive teachers, is not realized. It is thus important to gain better understanding of the concept of teacher agency as well as how it is affected by the contingencies within the teaching context—a prominent one in the context of Thailand's English language teaching being Thailand's English language assessment policy. Such better understanding would help in bringing about an alignment of rhetoric and reality and, consequently, the intended positive impact on the education system (Biesta et al., 2015; Ollerhead, 2010; Priestley et al., 2016; Robinson, 2012).

Research questions

The current study aims to investigate agency of English teachers in higher education institutions in Thailand. Two research questions are addressed in this paper:

1. How is teacher agency manifested within the context of English language assessment policy for higher education in Thailand?
2. What are the factors that contribute to or influence such manifestation of teacher agency?

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned in the earlier section, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) state that agency is manifested through an interplay of three agentic dimensions—the orientation toward the past, the future, and the present—in relation to social structures and time. That is, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) believe that a person has the capacity to bring his or her habit, routine, or past experience (the past orientation or the iterational dimension) and projection of alternative possibilities, goals, or consequences (the future orientation or the projective dimension) into the context of the present (the present orientation or the practical-evaluative dimension) and exercise his or her agency in order to perform a particular action in a given social structure at a particular time. Thus, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) propose that agency be analyzed in terms of how the three agentic dimensions interact with one another as well as with the context—both structural and temporal—under which agency is exhibited (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) consider agency a process, rather than a product, that manifests itself within certain structural and temporal contexts. Hence, one can use this conceptualization to investigate how agency is achieved in a particular environment or ecology. This conceptualization is deemed fitting to teacher agency research, whose primary aim is to understand how teacher agency is achieved and manifests itself as a phenomenon under particular ecological conditions. This ecological perspective on teacher agency research has been proven useful and thus recommended by Priestley et al. (2015) and other related works by this group of education researchers (e.g., Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2016).

Based on the conceptualization and recommendation of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Priestley et al. (2015), the conceptual framework of this study thus constitutes the interconnection of Thailand's English language assessment policy (henceforth "the policy"), agency of English teachers (henceforth "teacher agency"), as well as the three dimensions of agency. This conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1. In the figure, the solid-line arrows show the direction of influence from English language assessment policy to the three dimensions of agency, and from the three dimensions of agency to teacher agency. The dotted-line triangle shows the interplay among the three dimensions of agency operating within the structural and temporal contexts—that is, within the ecology—and, as represented by the solid-line arrow jutting out from the oval, the result of this interplay also influences teacher agency. Together, this visual representation of the conceptual framework illustrates how English language assessment policy exerts influence on the interplay of the three dimensions of agency under certain structural and temporal circumstances. This process, in turn, exerts influence on how teacher agency is exhibited within such circumstances.
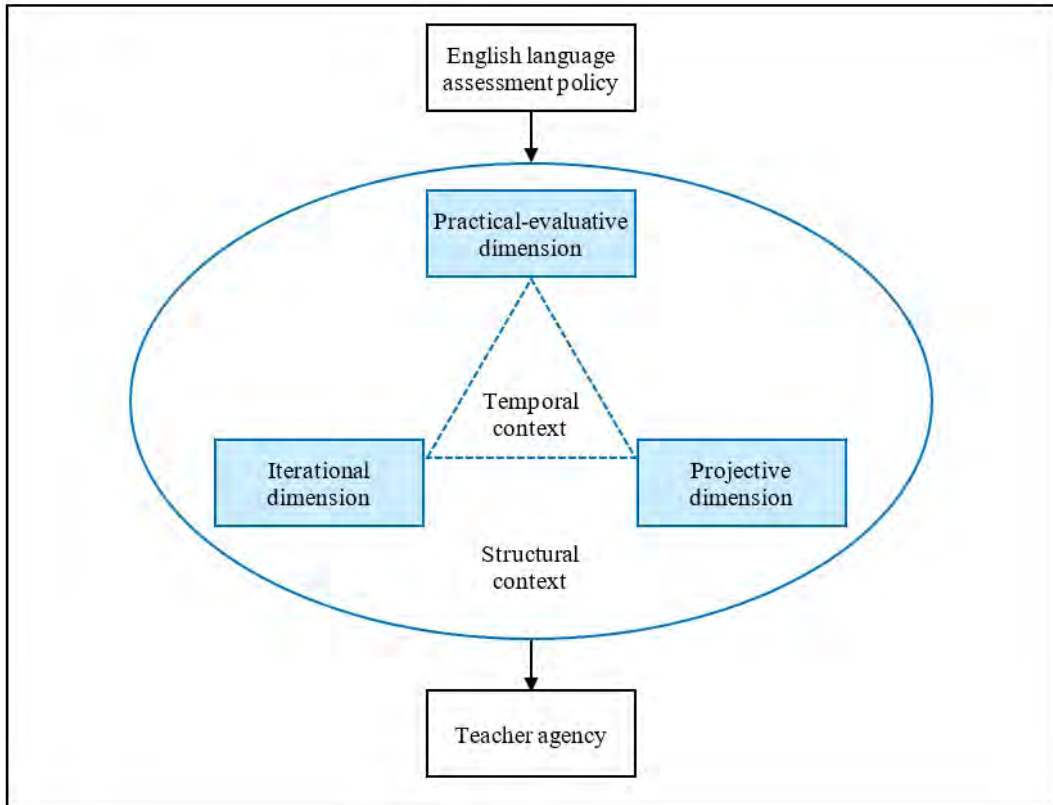
Figure 1 Conceptual framework of the study

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Context of the study

This study places its focus on the higher education system in Thailand—specifically on the contextual aspects of the English language assessment policy, the institutions, and the classrooms. The documents that constitute the English language assessment policy in focus of this study are, one, a clause in Thailand's National Education Plan (B.E. 2560–2579) that specifies the English proficiency level, reported in terms of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), that college and university students should achieve upon graduation (Office of the Education Council, 2017) and, two, the announcement to upgrade the English proficiency standards of higher education graduates (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2016). The institutions included in this study are public and private higher education institutions across Thailand, which, at the time of the study, operated under the Office of the Higher Education Commission (now the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation). The classroom environment at each of these institutions undoubtedly varies. However, to maintain focus, the study limits its scope to compulsory English courses, as these are considered the "bare minimum" courses that students must take to fulfill graduation requirement.

Participants

Due to the diversity of nationalities that English teachers in Thailand comprise, it was considered important that the study included participants from a variety of English language backgrounds. Therefore, this study referred to the concept of the three concentric circles by Braj Kachru (1989) to guide participant selection and included teachers who are English as first language speakers (the Inner Circle), English as a Second Language speakers (the Outer Circle), and English as a Foreign Language speakers (the Expanding Circle). To ensure that the characteristics of the participants matched the requirement of the study, two purposive sampling strategies suggested in Creswell (2014) were employed—maximal variation sampling strategy helped to ensure diversity of participants, while snowball sampling strategy helped to ensure that the obtained participants meet the required characteristics. It must be noted that the purpose of including participants of various nationalities and institutional affiliations was so that the sample pool would reflect the population reality of English teachers in Thailand's higher education institutions. It was neither the purpose nor within the scope of this study to compare and contrast participants across groups.

Twenty-six English teachers from 18 higher education institutions across Thailand (nine public, nine private) participated in this study. The participants were given the research information sheet—which detailed the research objectives and methodology, participants' rights, and confidentiality of collected data—to review and aid in their consideration. Those who agreed to participate then provided consent by signing an informed consent form. A summary of categorization and number of participants is laid out in Table 1.

Research instruments, data collection, and data analysis

The three research instruments were questionnaire survey, focus group interview, and semi-structured one-to-one interview. All research instruments underwent peer and expert review, a pilot test, and multiple revisions before actual use. The procedure for data collection started off with completion of the questionnaire survey by all participants. The participants then had the option to take part in either a focus group interview or a semi-structured one-to-one interview or to end their participation at this stage.

While data collected for the study as a whole were of quantitative as well as qualitative in nature, specifically for the two research questions addressed in this paper, qualitative data gathered from focus group interview and semi-structured one-to-one interview were the primary source of information. The interview transcriptions were first analyzed, by means of content analysis, to identify the participants' three agentic dimensions. Namely, the authors took note of words, phrases, or themes that emerged frequently and that could be classified as the iterational dimension, the projective dimension, or the practical-evaluative dimension

Table 1

Categorization and number of participants (N = 26)

Institution type	Gender		Nationality		
	Male	Female	Inner Circle	Outer Circle	Expanding Circle
Public institution					
n	8	5	4	4	5
%	31	19	15	15	19
Private institution					
n	9	4	4	5	4
%	35	15	15	19	15
Total					
n	17	9	8	9	9
%	65	35	31	35	35

Note. Percentage may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

as suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). For example, themes on a participant's childhood upbringing or past experience working outside of education are in line with the iterational dimension. These words, phrases, or themes were then extracted, compiled, and grouped according to their similarities in characteristics.

The next stage of qualitative data analysis involved identifying the interplay of the three agentic dimensions as well as the interaction of these three dimensions with the structural and/or temporal contexts. These are, in essence, the elements presented in the oval part of the conceptual framework of the study, as seen in Figure 1. For example, a participant's childhood upbringing (iterational dimension) exerting influence on her beliefs and purposes in being and becoming a teacher (projective dimension), which in turn exerting influence on her commitment to helping students succeed (practical-evaluative dimension) constitutes an interplay of the three agentic dimensions.

Finally, all analyzed data were brought together, which led to identification of how and why the participants exercised and achieved teacher agency in their teaching context. For example, the policy requirements on how English must be taught and assessed potentially constrained the above-mentioned participant's freedom in her classroom practice. However, with strong beliefs, purposes, and commitment formed through an interplay of her three agentic dimensions, the participant exercised her agency by resisting the policy's mandates in order to act upon what she believed was best for her students—the characteristics of which constitute type 1 of agency manifestation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis reveals that manifestation of agency can be categorized into five types, each of which will be discussed in more detail below.

Type 1: Resisting or ignoring policy

The first type of manifestation is characterized by teachers demonstrating a high level of agency by resisting or ignoring, rather than effecting, the mandated policy—a characteristic that Priestley et al. (2012) called "negative agency" (p. 193). In this study, there are two teachers (8%) in this type, and the factors that influence them are both personal and external to the individuals. That is, these teachers seem to have strong personal dispositions, whether based on their beliefs, their past experience, or even their upbringing. At the same time, there is a lack of clear communication of the policy, hence the lack of full understanding of both the policy text and its rationale. As these teachers could be considered "strong-headed," they are not willing to do what they neither completely understand nor agree with. Therefore, they demonstrate their agency by resisting or ignoring the policy.

The characteristics of teachers in this type are consistent with what was found by existing literature. In a study whose context revolved around teacher agency and institutional policy, Benesch (2018) found that teachers' "lack of obedience to the explicit rules" was fundamentally an indication of their agency manifestation (p. 68). Additionally, Sloan (2006) and Priestley et al. (2012) pointed out that teachers with more extensive "iterational experiences" and "a well-articulated educational philosophy related to the wider purposes of education" were able to draw on these personal resources to exercise their agency to "enrich or challenge the official discourses in [the] school" (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 209).

An example case representing agency manifestation type 1 comes from Marcy[1], an Outer Circle teacher from a public institution. Marcy has been teaching for quite a few decades and is in fact approaching her retirement. She said that her accumulated teaching experience has formed her strong beliefs in what it means to be a teacher. She is highly committed to the teaching profession, and her aim is to help her students excel. Also, she holds dearly to her heart two principles from her father, which has taught her to be outspoken for the things that she believes is right and to stand firm on her grounds. For Marcy, her iterational dimension works at full force and in combination with her projective dimension to give her the courage—or, in her words, the guts—to confront the management and to continue practicing according to her own beliefs when she feels that there is an unreasonable policy being enforced in her teaching context. An excerpt from Marcy's interview is presented below:

> I don't totally agree with the policy…[It] limits you in some ways that you cannot do this, you can only do this…Why should we not be allowed to do what we believe?…I don't care if I don't finish the curriculum…I'll just be ready to face and explain it to whoever I need to explain it. But I'm more on what is achievable, and what is good for my students…
>
> My father once told me that if there is something that you think is right, say it, voice it out…So, if there is something that I believe is good for everybody, or good for a specific group of people that I serve, I have to say it. If they listen, thank you. If they

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[1] All participants' names are pseudonym.

don't listen, I hope someday they will realize it…That's why I have the guts to talk. The second principle is, my father told me that no one is indispensable…They can just kick you out anytime. So, why not say what you have to say and you believe will be useful and will be good for everybody?…So, with those two principles, I braved, and I survived…

(Marcy, Outer Circle, public institution)

Type 2: Adapting policy or making "room for manoeuvre"[2]

Teachers in the second type of manifestation use agency to accommodate the policy into their practice without altering the ways things have been done in their teaching context—an action described by Priestley et al. (2012) as teachers responding to policy measures by making "room for manoeuvre" (p. 210). In this study, this type of agency manifestation can be seen in nine teachers (35%), making it the highest in number of members. The factors that influence these teachers seem to be an interplay of the characteristics of these teachers and those of the people with whom they work. In particular, both the teachers and their management seem to have a good understanding of the policy, but at the same time they are well aware of their institution's context (e.g., their students' low English proficiency level). This results in collaboration and flexibility in the work environment where the management allows for a gradual achievement of the targeted proficiency level. The teachers then work together to accommodate the policy objectives into their practice, picking and choosing which ones to be adapted or applied to their teaching context and by when.

The characteristics of teachers in this type are similar to what Robinson (2012) found in her ethnographic study of an Australian primary school, where teachers were frustrated by new policy mandates that were in conflict with their current practices. While these teachers neither resisted the policy nor shunned changes, they also believed that neither the policy nor the changes should happen "at the cost of ignoring or subordinating values and practices which were an essential part of the school's educational philosophy" (Robinson, 2012, p. 241). With this firmly-held shared values, the teachers collaborated and demonstrated agency by complying with certain aspects of the policy while circumventing others, so as to meet the policy requirement within their school context yet preserving their values and practices. Interestingly, this practice of selective implementation of the policy was also reported by Prabjandee (2019), who found that secondary school teachers in an eastern province of Thailand "exercise[d] their agency to selectively implement some policy messages" (p. 223), the selection of which was based upon the teachers' interpretation of policy text in relation to their teaching context.

A case to illustrate this manifestation type is Kasem, an Expanding Circle teacher from a private institution. Kasem reported that his management is very knowledgeable of the policy and is well aware of the students' low English proficiency level. Thus, as per his management's consideration, it is not required that all students achieve the proficiency level designated by the policy. With the management's flexibility and realistic point of view, Kasem then collaborates with his colleagues to initiate ways that can make the policy objectives work in their teaching

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[2] Terminology taken from Priestley et al. (2012)

context. For Kasem, all three agentic dimensions work in tandem with the structural context to bring about teacher agency that is both individual (himself) and collective (himself together with his colleagues). An excerpt from Kasem's interview is presented below:

> We're fortunate that our management is quite open-minded…and we all look at things as they are in reality. We won't set goals that look pretty on paper but can't be reached in the end…because we look at many factors—the students as well as the learning time…So, we take those things into consideration and set institutional goals that we can realistically attain…

> [Since the policy took effect] we have taken things more seriously in that we try to place the policy according to our institution's strategic roadmap—in terms of the development of students' English proficiency—how much this year, how much next year, how much the year after next. We apply the policy to the context of our institution, not that every student has to achieve B2 as strictly said in the policy. That level is too luxurious…The required level is too difficult for us to attain. So, we adapt. We use our own reality as a basis.

> (Kasem, Expanding Circle, private institution)

Type 3: Adopting or appropriating policy

The third type of manifestation is characterized by teachers using agency to integrate the policy into their teaching context and form new practices. There are 4 teachers (15%) in this type, and the factors of influence seem to come from all working levels of the institution. At the highest administrative level, the teachers reported that the national policy and their institutional policy are aligned. At the immediate supervisory level, the teachers reported that their management has a realistic picture of the current institutional context as well as a clear vision and direction—in relation to the national policy—for their institution. In addition, the management is open-minded and encourages inclusive communication of the policy, involving not only teachers but also related personnel. Thus, at the implementation level, this produces a work environment in which everyone can bring out their agency to work together to create an English language curriculum that aims toward achieving both national and institutional policy goals.

While some literature, such as Robinson (2012) and Johnson and Johnson (2015), discussed the action of teachers adopting or appropriating the policy into their practices, the previous literature did not find a complete adoption. Particularly, the authors have not yet come across literature which reports an alignment between the national policy and the institutional policy and, in which case, an exercise of teacher agency that enhances the achievement of both policies. The authors are cautious to make any claims, however, that the discovery of this type of agency manifestation is one-of-a-kind, as there may be similar instances that have yet to be explored or reported. Still, the authors must note that this type of agency manifestation is unique to a certain extent because, even in this study, teachers from only two institutions—one public, one private—belong to this type.

A case in point comes from two Expanding Circle teachers from the same public institution, Jitti and Orapan. The two teachers reported that there is a large portion of students in their institution whose English proficiency is quite low. Fortunately, their management realizes this fact and at the same time has a clear direction for what needs to be done in order to reach higher levels of attainment and achieve the proficiency goals stated in the national policy. This clear direction is also reflected in the management's actions—the management would call for meetings both in big groups as a form of whole-department communication and in smaller groups as a form of working-team collaboration, so as to push forward toward the direction of both the institutional policy and, in the end, the national policy. For Jitti and Orapan, their practical-evaluative dimension—which brings about their actions in the present—is strongly informed by the projective dimension—the direction and goals envisioned by the management and empowered to the teachers—which gives rise to both individual and collective agency. An excerpt from a focus group interview with Jitti and Orapan is presented below:

> [Our institution's English language policy] started off with a roundtable with instructors from various faculties even before this national policy came out…And when the national policy came out, we found that they [institutional policy and national policy] are in line. So, we created a curriculum that's in accordance with the CEFR levels as well… Our department is small. Everyone knows one another and can talk freely. Everyone can get involved in everything…Everyone plans together and works together. So does the management.
>
> (Jitti, Expanding Circle, public institution)

> We live with our reality…Our management team has vision. They know what to do next and what for…They may not buy in with our ideas all the time, but…they are quite open and encouraging. They make us feel that we can share, we can think, and we can talk to them directly. They are open-minded.

> In our meetings, we have to decide on every issue, from budgeting to policy, and this involves everyone, both faculty and staff…If you ask our full-time instructors about this policy, they'll know it because we've talked about it…If you ask how we trickle down our policy, there are many ways. One is formal meetings. Two is LINE [instant messaging] groups. The current management actually likes to create small groups for the working teams in the department…This makes communication easy.
>
> (Orapan, Expanding Circle, public institution)

Type 4: Strictly following policy

As with agency manifestation types 2 and 3, the factors of influence of agency manifestation type 4 are also primarily the teachers themselves and their management, but the scenario cannot be more different. The teachers in this type—comprising three teachers (12%)—reported that their management is pressured to pass the Ministry of Education's annual inspection and, hence, to meet the national policy objectives, and this pressure is consequently passed down to the teachers. Yet, the teachers in this type lack the power to resist the management's demand despite their disagreement with or resistance to what they are required to do. The

teachers report having little freedom to bring their pedagogical beliefs into practice, and hence their agency cannot be fully achieved.

In contrast to manifestation type 3, manifestation type 4 is perhaps most commonly found in existing literature. In fact, most literature on teacher agency reports that teacher agency is constrained in some ways or compromised to some degree. For example, Ollerhead (2010) found the achievement of teacher agency to be contingent on teachers' perceptions of policy demands. Priestley et al. (2012) found that while some aspects of the ecology enhanced teacher agency, some inhibited it, such as a system that evaluated teachers through students' exam results, thus forcing teachers to give up their pedagogical beliefs for teaching by the book. Liyanage et al. (2015) similarly found how the national entrance examination in China inhibited teachers from exercising their agency because teachers had the obligation to help students pass the test. In a similar vein, Phan and Hamid (2017), Van Huy and Hamid (2015), and Van Huy et al. (2016) reported how policy dumping—an abrupt enactment of policy taken directly from other countries—caught teachers unprepared and left them confused, thus compromising teacher agency.

An example for agency manifestation type 4 comes from Mitch, an Inner Circle teacher in a private institution. Mitch reported that all aspects of the English courses—e.g., the syllabi, textbooks, class exercises, and assessments—are revised as per the management, or, supposedly, as per the policy goal, without involvement of the teachers. Mitch now has less freedom to bring his pedagogical beliefs into practice, and, despite his disagreement, he feels that he has no choice but to accept the situation. Thus, it seems that the structural context of Mitch's institution exerts considerable influence on the teacher, so much so that none of the three agentic dimensions could operate strongly enough to result in teacher agency. An excerpt from Mitch's interview is presented below:

> It used to be we had a little bit more freedom with what we were doing…More and more, they [the management] are under more pressure to follow and to have this kind of results from tests, you should be here after this test. And so, it's getting more and more bookish and more and more writing and exam-based…We got too much about this [CEFR] level…and we have so many different categories where we test them [the students] on…A lot of pressure. I'm not sure that's the right way to go.
>
> [Researcher: Is there anything in this particular course that you see or have to do that is a result of this policy?] Oh, almost all of it…So, it's getting more and more strict that way…They [the management] are looking at the scores. And then they're adjusting the syllabus…We had some more freedom about how we do one thing and the other. Now, because of these tests…all the students have to be doing the same thing at the same time. And so, the teachers don't have that freedom anymore…So, now it's like, this is week six and scores, scores, scores…They [the management] want to put all these together from all the courses, from all the sections, so they can have these exact numbers and charts. Squiggly lines.
>
> (Mitch, Inner Circle, private institution)

Type 5: Exercising complete agency due to lack of policy awareness

Finally, the fifth type of manifestation is characterized by teachers not following the policy, due not to resistance or ignorance of policy but to lack of policy awareness. Eight teachers (31%) in this study belong to this type, making it the second-highest in number of members. The primary factor of influence for teachers in this type is the complete lack of communication of or attention to policy in the workplace. First, there seems to be a short-term mentality, focusing only on day-to-day operation. Although the teachers may not personally possess such a mentality, the work culture or the urgency of the matters pushes them toward this short-term orientation. Second, teachers are excluded from the communication loop due to their nationality (e.g., meetings are seldom arranged in English for foreign teachers) or their limited role (e.g., only those with managerial roles are involved in policy-related issues). Therefore, the teachers in this type resort to their own strategy in order to resolve the daily matters that are presented to them without the need to consider—or, more aptly, without the knowledge of—the policy requirement.

Similar to manifestation type 3, manifestation type 5 does not seem to have been reported elsewhere. Once again, the authors are cautious of claiming uniqueness. It can be presumed that past research may have screened participants based on awareness or knowledge of the policy, recruiting only those who are aware or knowledgeable. However, for this study, the authors did not use awareness or knowledge of policy as screening criteria so that the pool of participants would reflect the reality.

The lack of attention to the policy in the workplace of teachers in this type could possibly lead to the short-term mentality, as Biesta et al. (2015) and Priestley et al. (2015) noted how teachers who lack clear vision of education tend to focus only on the "here and now" of the situation. Yet, with the intention to take action in the best interest of their students, many of these teachers exercise agency in the way that Hiver and Whitehead (2018) described as "[acting] intentionally within the complex teaching contexts in which they are situated and to make a deliberate difference in that setting" (p. 78).

Vignettes representing agency manifestation type 5 are from two teachers—Ganda, an Expanding Circle teacher, and Henry, an Inner Circle teacher—from two public institutions of similar tier. Ganda reported that, as she is Thai, she is involved in all meetings. However, policy is never discussed—only such pressing operational matters as class size being too large or certain courses not having enough teachers. As for Henry, he reported that, as per his institution's rule, foreign teachers do not have the rights to take administrative roles. Additionally, foreign teachers are not always invited to or included in meetings, and even when there are meetings for foreign teachers, policy is never among the communicated topics. Thus, the two teachers in this example reported having to use their past working experience—both in teaching and in other fields—to navigate through their current working life. For both Ganda and Henry, their iterational dimension is the main source of their agency, with their projective dimension and practical-evaluative dimension operating independently of the policy requirement. Excerpts from their interviews are presented below:

No one tells me [how to teach]. I figure it out myself…There's no policy handed to us… So, if you ask whether I'm following the policy, I will say no. Everyone teaches independently…If talking specifically about policy, my department is not talking about it much. We are still solving our daily problems such as we're having too many students in a class. We only talk about issues like this…I don't really know if I'm following the policy. I actually do what I think should be done, so I don't think policy plays any role [in my action]…I do because I think I have to do, not because of the policy.

(Ganda, Expanding Circle, public institution)

But those [national] policies do come from above, right?…Especially the problem is just we [foreign teachers] are not involved in that. We're just not involved in policy-level discussion…We're not invited…We're just not part of the discussion. [A close colleague who is Thai] she said, well, at public universities, foreign staff are second class citizens, she said, just so you know…It doesn't sound nice. But it's not far from the truth. [It's not] that self-conscious, deliberate, sort of racist kind of thing. It's just the way it has been. But you certainly get that feeling that you're sort of left out of decision-making processes and whatever.

(Henry, Inner Circle, public institution)

As demonstrated by the examples above, common vignettes from the 26 interviews are categorized into five agency manifestation types and can be placed on a continuum according to the extent that English language assessment policy influences teachers' practice or agency. Figure 2 presents this continuum as it is incorporated into the conceptual framework of the study. The furthest left-hand side of the continuum is where the policy has lesser degree of influence on teacher agency, and the furthest right-hand side of the continuum is where the policy has higher degree of influence. There is also a type that does not seem to fit into the continuum, which is placed in the dotted box. To reiterate, the first type of agency manifestation, which lies on the furthest left-hand side of the continuum, is "resisting or ignoring policy." Moving slightly to the right of the continuum, the second type is "adapting policy or making 'room for manoeuvre'" (Priestley et al., 2012). The third type on the continuum is "adopting or appropriating policy." The fourth type, which lies on the furthest right-hand side of the continuum, is "strictly following policy" where teacher agency is severely constrained or subjugated. Finally, the fifth type, which does not seem to fit into the continuum, is "exercising complete agency." In line with Benesch (2018), who suggested that agency is "dialogic, emergent, and discursive" (p. 61), it is important to note that each type of agency manifestation discussed in this study is context-dependent and dynamic—there are no clear-cut boundaries between the adjacent types. In addition, teachers in each type may exhibit different strengths of manifestation, such that, taking type 1 as an example, one teacher may display stronger resistance to the policy than does the other.
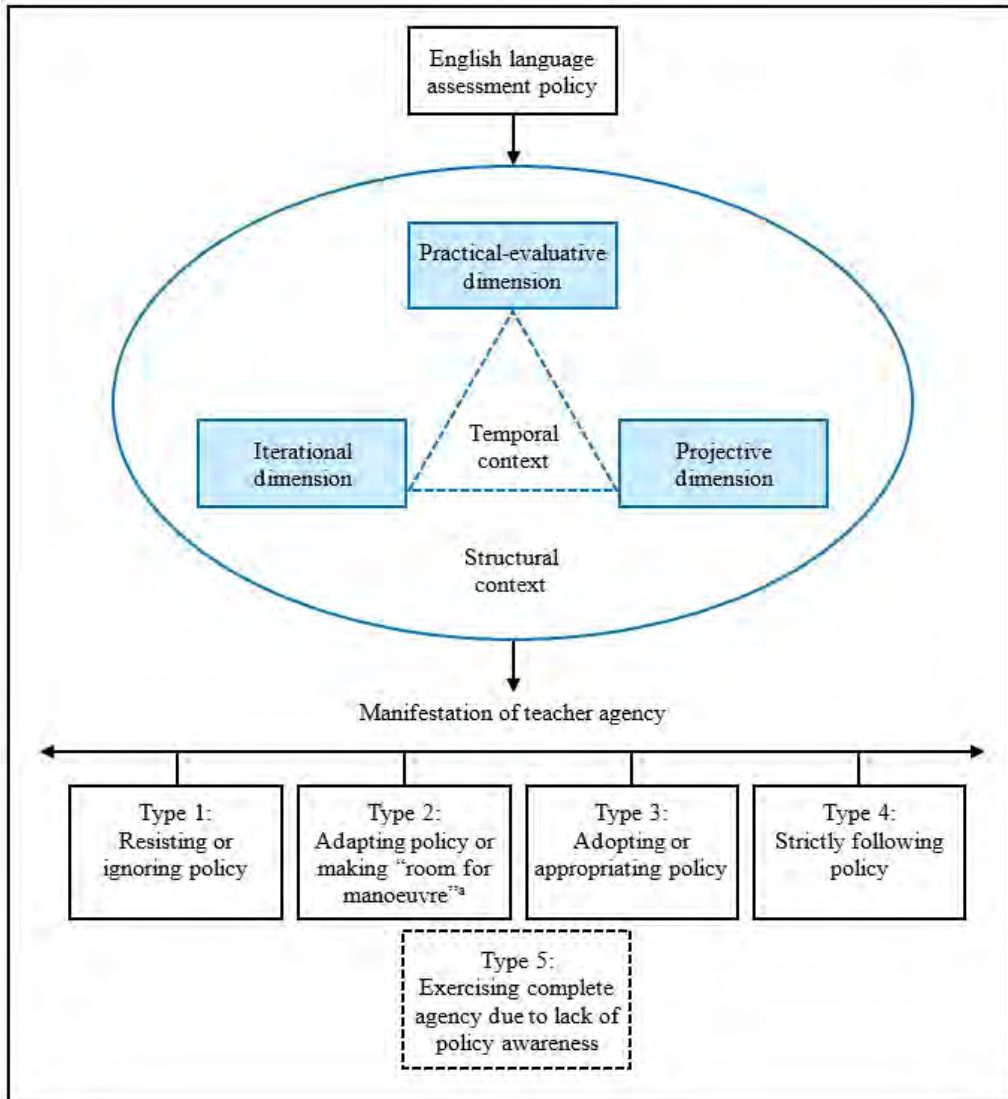
Figure 2 Five manifestation types of teacher agency.
[a] Terminology taken from Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, and Miller (2012)

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper portrays how agency of English teachers is manifested in light of the English language assessment policy for higher education in Thailand. As has been discussed among scholars of many disciplines to which the concept of human agency has been applied, several factors are at play when agency is to be discerned.

First and foremost, as per Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Priestley et al. (2015), it is imperative that the whole ecology be taken into account. Therefore, researchers of teacher agency need to look not only at factors residing within an individual but also at those surrounding him or

her, and all such factors must be looked at as an interplay, not as a congregate of constituents. In the context of this study, manifestation or achievement of teacher agency is influenced by varying extent of personal and external factors, as suggested in the research findings and existing literature. The research findings thus fit the research framework. Additionally, this study has also found that manifestation of teacher agency appears to be contingent not only on multiple factors but also on multiple layers of influence, which is consistent with what Hornberger et al. (2018) reported as the "multilayered nature" of language policy implementation (p. 178). In the context of this study, the structural environment—such as the culture, regulation, or stewardship (or lack thereof) of the institution—acts as a layer between the teachers and the English language assessment policy. Exercise and achievement of agency by English language teachers in this study seems to depend not as much on the direct demands of the policy mandates as on the fact that the teachers' personal dispositions are mediated—or subjugated— by their structural environment, hence resulting in the five manifestation types of teacher agency as illustrated in this paper.

Structural environment is important to the achievement of teacher agency, as reported by van der Heijden, Beijaard, Geldens, and Popeijus (2018) when they surveyed over 1,000 teachers in the Netherlands. These researchers found that "supportive school contexts are important for enabling teachers to act as change agent," with "participative decision-making" and "vision building" being the most pertinent enabling structural aspects and "leadership behavior" being key to the success (van der Heijden et al., 2018, pp. 359, 365). Findings from this study seem to reflect those of van der Heijden et al. (2018) in that teachers in this study do not seem to be directly affected by the enactment of the policy. Rather, they are affected by how—and how severely or how strictly—the institutional management passes down the policy to them. Thus, even though it is the same policy being passed down, there are differences in the degree that teachers need to wade, if not also fight, their way through their structural environment to exercise their agency. It is even more interesting to see that teachers in similar types of institutions—at times within the same institution—but with different nationalities may not necessarily have to undergo the same level of mediation or subjugation, as seen from the two teachers representing manifestation type 5. In contrast, teachers from different institutions, regardless of nationalities, may undergo similar types of professional and dispositional negotiation when their institutional management is of similar mentality, as seen in the teachers representing manifestation types 2 and 3. It can therefore be gleaned from findings of this study that achievement and manifestation of teacher agency is indeed dependent and contingent on the ecology that is both multi-faceted and multi-layered.

Another important point raised by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Priestley et al. (2015) is that agency is a phenomenon that is dynamic—a process, not a product—and is contingent on the structural and temporal contexts in which it is manifested. Therefore, to see how the dynamics unveil, research on teacher agency would be better studied over a period of time. However, such is the limitation of this study. With the limitation of time and resources, this study could only capture teacher agency at a certain point of time. The authors would like to suggest that future research be conducted longitudinally and incorporate more research instruments—such as classroom observation and retrospective interview—to gain deeper insights into the phenomenon of teacher agency.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of the study, yet hope that this research has made contributions to the field of English language education in both theoretical and practical fronts. In terms of theoretical significance, it is hoped that findings from this study would enhance understanding of the concept of teacher agency in the context of English language education in Thailand. As there is a wide range of nationalities of English teachers presently teaching in Thai educational institutions of all levels, it is important to understand what constitutes agency of these teachers—how and how much their agency is enabled, constrained, exercised, achieved, and in the end translated into the quality of English language education. In terms of practical significance, it is hoped that better understanding of teacher agency in the context of English language education in Thailand could be beneficial to every level of policy stakeholder—from policy makers at the national level, to policy administrators at the institutional level, to policy implementers such as teachers at the classroom level. For instance, future policy planning and drafting could take voices of English teachers into consideration—treating teachers "as policy actors rather than mere implementers" (Phan & Hamid, 2017, p. 52)—or, better yet, involve teacher representatives in the policy-making processes so as to formulate a policy that is practical and implementable.

Besides taking in voices of teachers, it is equally important to help teachers develop such voices—that is, to provide them with professional development. As Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat (2017) found, lack of qualified teachers is one of the key issues leading to unsuccessful language policy implementation. Thus, professional development programs can and should be arranged—either at the national level or at the institutional level or both—not only to communicate the policy text but also to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for policy implementation. Such programs could be designed according to the teachers' English language backgrounds for optimum relevance and applicability.

In addition, as noted by Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, and Jimarkon Zilli (2017), work contexts play an important role in teachers' professional development and encouragement of their agentic actions. Work contexts that are laxed may on the surface seem ideal for empowerment and hence manifestation of teacher agency, but such contexts could in fact be problematic as teachers lack directions and shared goals in their work. On the flip side, work contexts that are prescriptive, which may potentially turn repressive, could prevent professional development and manifestation of teacher agency from flourishing. This is thus an area in which institutional management could step in to foster the creation and sustenance of an ecology that would enhance the achievement of teacher agency in the classroom as well as in the institution on the whole.

Such hope may be far-flung but, if and once realized, could lead to a far-reaching positive impact on English teachers, who are the key agents not only in the implementation of the English language assessment policy but also in the advancement of the overall English language education in Thailand.

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