

Investigating the role of teacher agency on adopting plurilingual methodologies in language teaching

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Abstract: This research paper explores the critical role of teacher agency in the implementation and effectiveness of plurilingual strategies in educational contexts. It investigates how teachers' beliefs, identities, and capabilities influence their adoption of plurilingual methods and assesses the impact of these factors on curriculum design. The discussion focuses on the dualistic nature of teacher agency, which can both enable and limit teachers as they deal with the complexities of plurilingual education. The paper reviews literature that illuminates the challenges and possibilities created by teacher agency, providing insights into how it shapes educational strategies and outcomes. It offers recommendations on how teacher education programs can leverage this agency to enhance plurilingual education effectively. This paper not only clarifies essential concepts but also critically examines the role of agency in advancing plurilingual educational practices, deepening the understanding of its application across educational settings.

Keywords: *plurilingualism; language teaching; teacher agency; teacher identity*

1 Introduction

I begin by sharing two personal anecdotes from my journey in language learning and teaching. As a student learning both English and French as additional languages, I was strictly prohibited from speaking any language other than the target language. This restriction meant that I had to avoid using any words, grammatical structures, or phrases that did not align with the language being taught. Although one can control the language that emerges from their thoughts, it is challenging to completely filter out the mental structures inherently shaped by multiple languages. This phenomenon is explored by Abutalebi and Green (2008) through their research on functional neuroimaging, which enhances our comprehension of language control. Their findings demonstrate how cognitive control for switching languages operates in the bilingual brain. I have often noticed similarities between English and French, such as syntactic structures and morphological structures, which further illustrate the interplay between multiple languages in shaping our mental structures. However, I was unable to explicitly utilize these similarities in the classroom, though they often influenced my internal thought processes and language production. This experience aligns closely with the concepts of "translanguaging" and "code-switching", prevalent practices in plurilingual education.

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Moving to my second anecdote, during both my pre-service training and subsequent in-service teaching, I encountered institutional prohibitions against the use of multiple languages in the classroom. This directive resonated with the challenges I faced as a language learner and recalled the implicit lessons from my "apprenticeship of observation" periods (Lortie, 1977). In this context, it positively influenced my teaching approach given that "learners' first language (L1) is a vital contributor to additional language development and to the learners' developing identities as second language (L2) users" (Ellis, 2013, p. 446). Having been students themselves, teacher candidates, like myself, can deeply empathize with the student experience. This empathy profoundly informs our teaching approaches, enabling us to become more student-centered. We are equipped to anticipate student reactions and tailor our teaching strategies to better meet their needs, thus creating a more supportive and effective learning environment. As a teacher, I often felt constrained, especially when certain concepts could only be fully explained through comparisons between the students' native languages and the target language. On occasion, I exercised my teacher agency to engage in "translanguaging," tapping into the students' existing knowledge of their native languages to enhance their understanding of the target language (Garcia, 2019). This pedagogical strategy did not merely facilitate learning; it also significantly improved communication and empowered students by giving them greater control over their bi/plurilingual capabilities.

In today's interconnected and rapidly evolving postmodern landscape, characterized by unprecedented globalization, the field of Applied Linguistics is undergoing profound transformations. These shifts necessitate a fundamental reassessment of educational methodologies, prompting educators to adopt more adaptable and nuanced approaches to language teaching and learning, which are becoming increasingly dynamic and complex (Galante, 2020). This evolution in approach aligns with what Kubota (2016) refers to as the "multi/plural turn," focusing "on the plurality, multiplicity, and hybridity of language and language use to challenge a traditional paradigm of understanding linguistic practices in various contexts" (Kubota, 2016, p. 475). Moving away from traditional, rigid teaching methods, Piccardo (2018) advocates for embracing the inherent diversity and complexity of language use. Central to this progressive shift is the concept of plurilingualism. This approach extends beyond mere multilingual capabilities to deeply encompass cultural knowledge, awareness, and varied social experiences (Council of Europe, 2020). It is crucial for educators to integrate the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students into their pedagogical practices, thereby aligning with the ethos of the "post-method era" (Piccardo, 2018, p.2) which prioritizes flexibility, adaptability, and inclusivity in language education. Expanding on this point, Coste (2014) highlights that in the context of globalization, plurilingualism is essential for valuing linguistic and cultural diversity. It plays a critical role in social inclusion, promoting cohesion through the appreciation of diverse languages and enhancing knowledge acquisition from various perspectives. This approach not only prepares learners for active participation in a globalized economy but also fosters cultural understanding and supports democratic engagement by deepening the understanding of linguistic diversity. Furthermore, plurilingualism is pivotal in identity development, enabling individuals to express complex identities and engage with diverse cultures, thus enriching cultural exchanges and dialogues. This notion aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of "habitus", which describes the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions formed through life experiences, with language playing a crucial role in shaping one's identity and reflecting their social background. Ultimately, by advocating for educational methods that reflect the linguistic realities of students, plurilingualism

makes language education more inclusive and adaptable, effectively equipping students for a diverse and interconnected world.

Nevertheless, plurilingual practices will be of no use if not practiced by the practitioners which in our case are teachers, and indeed agency here plays a great deal. Agency holds a dualistic nature; it both liberates and confines. Therefore, it is essential to define it in relation to the challenges it presents. Priestley et al. (2015) refers to agency as a vague concept:

Agency remains an inexact and poorly conceptualized construct in much of the literature, where it is often not clear whether the term refers to the individual capacity of teachers to act agentially, or to an emergent 'ecological' phenomenon dependent upon the quality of individuals' engagement with their environments (p. 135).

This description highlights the ambiguity surrounding the conceptualization of agency: Is it a purely individual trait, referring to a teacher's own capacity to act, or an "ecological" phenomenon that emerges from the interactions and influences of one's environment? Consequently, it appears that teacher agency cannot be defined in isolation, as it inherently embodies a dualistic nature. The concept of agency, in its dualistic essence, captures the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own choices, while simultaneously recognizing the constraints imposed by social structures, institutions, or other external forces (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). This dualistic view acknowledges both the autonomy of individuals and the contextual factors that shape and sometimes limit this autonomy. On one hand, agency empowers individuals, allowing them to initiate and control their actions, make strategic decisions, and shape their own lives according to personal, professional, and social contexts. This aspect of agency highlights the autonomy individuals possess to navigate their environments actively. On the other hand, agency is also characterized by various constraints that limit or influence individual actions. These constraints, which may be social, cultural, economic, or political, define the boundaries within which individuals operate, stemming from societal norms, institutional rules, economic conditions, or the influence of powerful entities. Agency, thus, "is positioned as a relational effect. According to this view, agency is a matter of personal capacity to act, combined with the contingencies of the environment within which such action occurs" (Priestley et al., 2012, p.196). For instance, in educational settings, teachers may exercise agency in adapting their teaching methods to the needs of their students, but their autonomy is often restricted by curricular demands, standardized tests, and administrative policies. Understanding this dualistic nature of agency is essential as it underscores the complexity of human behavior, recognizing both the potential for individual initiative and the influence of external limitations, thereby informing more nuanced approaches to policy and system design.

Following a comprehensive engagement with the concept of plurilingualism and teacher agency, this research paper is poised to examine the role of teacher agency in influencing the integration and effectiveness of plurilingualism strategies within educational settings to address two principal questions:

1. How does teacher agency influence the integration and effectiveness of plurilingual strategies?
2. What are the implications of teacher agency for the development of plurilingual identities in educational contexts?

This paper will delve into the influence of educators' beliefs, identities, and perceived capacities on the adoption and implementation of plurilingual methodologies, and will evaluate how these elements affect curricular decisions and classroom practices in educational settings. Building upon a foundational understanding of plurilingualism and agency, this paper aims to scrutinize the dualistic nature of language teacher agency and its implications for the effective integration of plurilingual practices, alongside its potential to enrich language teacher education. The analysis begins by defining plurilingualism and teacher agency, clarifying their interconnections. It will then examine literature that spotlights scenarios where teacher agency has faced obstacles or forged opportunities within educational programs, seeking to delineate the impact of agency on educational strategies and outcomes. Utilizing these insights, the paper will suggest how teacher education programs can strategically make use of teacher agency within plurilingual contexts. The conclusion will integrate these insights and propose future directions for research to further explore the vital roles of these concepts in advancing language education.

2 The Role of Teacher Agency in Navigating Pedagogical and Curricular Challenges in Plurilingual Education

Moving away from purism is indeed the first step in adopting a plurilingual identity or reaching that revelation that each person has the capacity of being a potential plurilingual (Galante, 2020). To cite from Piccardo (2013), there exist no true monolingual speakers, only "unaware plurilinguals" (p. 606) do exist. Likewise, Piccardo (2018) unpacks the transformative shift in language education from viewing the inclusion of languages other than the target language as detrimental, to recognizing their pedagogical value:

... a shift from considering any presence – even minimal – of other languages as a contaminating influence, a hindrance to progress in proficiency in the defined target language, to seeing the value of other languages as enabling tools to compare and contrast linguistic elements, to study etymological aspects, and to reflect upon culturally related syntactic and semantic choices. Making space for the etymological dimension of words and for the culturally embedded nature of expressions and idioms is a first important step for scaffolding such "noticing." Thus, languages of origin and/or other languages that an individual has an even partial knowledge of find their place and *raison d'être*. (p.12)

It is indeed beneficial to take this "contamination" as an asset rather than a drawback. Even neuro-linguistically speaking, the profound impact of plurilingualism on the brain is increasingly recognized as an asset in cognitive and linguistic development. Engaging in plurilingual practices stimulates the brain by enhancing cognitive flexibility and strengthening problem-solving skills. Research indicates that the cognitive demands of managing multiple languages can lead to improved executive function, as the brain navigates between different linguistic systems, fostering deeper connections within neural networks (Abutalebi & Green, 2016). Studies have shown that bilingual and multilingual individuals often exhibit greater mental flexibility, better task-switching capabilities, and more effective conflict resolution skills compared to monolinguals (Bialystok et al., 2012). Plurilingual individuals often display heightened metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to appreciate and understand the structure of languages more comprehensively (Van de Craen & Mondt, 2003).

What matters the most is how teachers' plurilingual identities affect pedagogical practices that are part of the curricular decisions. Constructing and reflecting upon one's teacher identity allows educators to critically examine how their personal experiences and backgrounds influence their professional roles. As teachers become more aware of their own plurilingual identities, they

are better equipped to support plurilingualism in their students, advocating for a pedagogy that values linguistic fluidity and cultural hybridity (Valencia et al., 2020).

Teacher identity mediates and shapes teacher agency, especially in classroom practices amid changing student populations and shifting educational policies (Toom et al., 2015, Kayi-Aydar, 2015, as cited in Tao & Gao, 2017). This is closely intertwined with the development and expression of plurilingual teacher identities. This connection underscores how plurilingual teacher identities profoundly influence educational practices by enhancing teacher agency and responsiveness to diverse linguistic and cultural student needs. Agency endows teachers with the autonomy and capacity to make intentional, reflective decisions that directly shape their pedagogical methods and curricular frameworks. Maclellan (2017) argues that agency can be the "most important pedagogical resource" (p.253). Leveraging this agency, teachers actively elect to integrate multiple languages into their instruction, viewing these languages not as obstacles but as valuable tools that enhance students' understanding and engagement. However, the nature of agency is inherently dualistic; it can be both liberating and restrictive. To fully explore this complexity, it is essential to conceptualize agency in a dialectical manner. This perspective acknowledges that while agency enables educators to innovate and adapt teaching practices, it is also framed by the constraints of existing educational structures and cultural norms. As Priestly et al. (2015) put forward:

[Agency] denotes a 'quality' of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves. Viewing agency in such terms helps us to understand how humans are able to be reflexive and creative, acting counter to societal constraints, but also how individuals are enabled and constrained by their social and material environments. (p.192-193)

Teachers operate within these boundaries, navigating between leveraging their professional autonomy to enrich learning experiences and adhering to standardized educational requirements. This dynamic view of agency not only highlights its potential to transform educational practices but also acknowledges the challenges teachers face in implementing these changes within the constraints of current educational frameworks.

According to Esteve (2020), "teacher agency emerges both from the interaction between resources and contexts and from teachers' perceptions and their use of them" (p.418). Teacher agency is shaped by the dynamic interplay between the external resources and contexts of teaching environments and the internal perceptions and actions of educators. It involves both tangible and intangible assets that teachers adapt based on the norms and expectations of their specific contexts. Crucially shaped by teachers' individual beliefs and attitudes, agency enables educators to actively interpret and navigate their environments, making informed, autonomous decisions. This capacity facilitates innovation in teaching practices and the enhancement of student learning experiences. Essentially, teacher agency signifies the creative and responsive adaptation of resources, guided by professional judgment and pedagogical beliefs, to meet the needs of diverse educational settings. However, the agency afforded by creativity in language teaching is not unlimited. It is bounded by the curriculum, institutional policies, and broader educational goals. Teachers must navigate these constraints while trying to incorporate innovative and effective teaching methods. This balancing act between fostering creativity and adhering to educational standards is a key aspect of the professional agency (Coffey & Leung, 2020).

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Ramanathan and Morgan (2007) discuss "practitioner agency" within educational contexts, framing teachers as critical mediators and active participants rather than passive recipients of policy. In the domain of language policy and planning, practitioner agency is seen as an integral aspect of the processes. This perspective shifts the focus towards understanding the everyday contexts in which policies are interpreted and negotiated, reflecting local constraints and possibilities. "Practitioner agency" relates to the ability of educators, researchers, and administrators to interpret and enact policies within their specific teaching, learning, and researching environments (Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007). This notion of agency emphasizes the importance of considering the complexities and contradictions of teacher identity formation, and how practitioners navigate and sometimes resist the strategies and techniques of governmental power within their local contexts. Through these direct experiences and conflicts, practitioners foster relevant and creative innovations around policy, highlighting their role as key stakeholders and partners in the realization of policy practices. The definitions of agency presented by Esteve (2020) and Ramanathan and Morgan (2007) illustrate the dualistic nature of agency as both an asset and a challenge in educational contexts. This dualism is evident in the ways agency serves as a resource for positive change and innovation, while also presenting challenges that require careful navigation and negotiation by educators. Agency enables teachers to utilize resources innovatively and participate actively in the interpretation and implementation of policies, highlighting its role as a catalyst for educational change and adaptation. However, agency also presents challenges, requiring educators to navigate complex roles and contradicting policies, often demanding resistance to restrictive governmental strategies. Additionally, the effectiveness of agency is heavily dependent on individual educators' beliefs and their capacity to align these with external expectations, adding a layer of variability and difficulty. Thus, agency serves as both a dynamic facilitator of innovation and a challenging element that demands continual negotiation and reflexivity from educators, making it a central theme in discussions about educational development and efficacy.

Teachers' plurilingual identities can profoundly impact their pedagogical practices and a plurilingual pedagogy fosters "affirmation of student and teacher identity and promotion of agency" (Chen et al., 2022, p.1). A teacher who identifies as plurilingual is likely to see the value in a plurilingual approach, promoting a learning environment that respects and integrates multiple languages and cultures. According to a study conducted by Galante & dela Cruz (2021), "rich repertoire, lived experiences, awareness of differences and similarities, transculturalism, adaptation and integration, translanguaging, and openness" (p.1) are the reasons behind identifying as plurilingual, and plurilingual teachers also align these facets with their pedagogical practices. This alignment fosters a personal and professional congruence that reinforces their agency. Essentially, engaging with plurilingualism in educational practices helps teachers see their own identities mirrored in their work, thereby increasing their sense of empowerment and ability to advocate for inclusive pedagogies (Wernicke, 2018). This sense of purpose enhances their ability to act independently and make pedagogical choices that support a dynamic and inclusive learning environment, thus further empowering them to advocate for and implement plurilingual education effectively. However, the dualistic nature of agency means that even with strong plurilingual identities, teachers must still contend with systemic and structural barriers that may limit the full expression of these identities within educational settings. The dualistic nature of agency, when related to plurilingualism and plurilingual identities, highlights both the potential for transformative educational practices and the challenges posed by existing frameworks.

Understanding and navigating this dualism is crucial for educators who aim to foster a more inclusive and dynamic approach to language education.

3 The Dualistic Nature of Teacher Agency in Plurilingual Education

This topic encapsulates the core elements discussed in the present studies and literature, focusing on how teacher agency manifests in two contrasting ways within the context of plurilingual education environments. It examines the enabling and constraining influences on teachers as they navigate between their professional identities and pedagogical practices, particularly in relation to plurilingualism versus monolingualism in educational settings. This discussion will cover the dynamic interplay between teachers' training, attitudes, and the systemic pressures they face, highlighting both the challenges and transformative potentials in adopting plurilingual approaches to language teaching.

An instance of this can be seen in the study by Galante et al. (2020) within a plurilingual framework in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at a Canadian university. This illustrates how teacher agency, often influenced by the capacity for independent and collective reflective decision-making, significantly influences the integration of plurilingual practices in language education. The proposed framework for collaboration between the researcher and instructors, which highlights four key elements- "administrative support, instructors' openness to using languages other than English in class, weekly collaboration checks, and the learner-centered nature of tasks" (pp. 129-130)- relates directly to the concept of teacher agency. These elements collectively empower instructors to make reflective and autonomous decisions, thereby fostering an environment where plurilingual practices can be more effectively integrated into language education. This framework supports teacher agency, which not only facilitates successful collaboration but also enhances the implementation of plurilingual tasks within the educational setting. Ellis (2013) notes, "[Plurilingual] teachers' successful experiences led them to express optimism that they and, by extension, students, could become successful L2 learners" (p. 465). This optimism likely influences teachers who recognize and embrace the benefits of plurilingualism, such as increased student engagement and empowerment to implement plurilingual instruction more frequently. Thus, they showcase the liberating aspect of agency that promotes innovative and inclusive pedagogical strategies. Conversely, those adhering to a monolingual perspective, despite occasional engagement in plurilingual practices, face internal conflicts due to the clash between ingrained monolingual beliefs and new plurilingual methods (Pauwels, 2014). This conflict highlights the restrictive aspect of agency, where teachers are constrained by previous conditioning and dominant policies favoring monolingual instruction.

The identities of teachers, whether plurilingual or monolingual, play a crucial role in shaping their pedagogical choices. Teachers with a plurilingual identity are more likely to adopt diverse linguistic practices, while those with a monolingual identity may resist such integration. This dynamic is evident in a study by Galante (2020), which explores how teachers' personal beliefs and past experiences, such as being discouraged from using multiple languages in the classroom, influence their current teaching methods. In one example from the study, a teacher's approach to language use in the classroom undergoes a significant transformation. Initially, this teacher strictly enforced a monolingual policy, rooted in his past experiences at an Egyptian private school where Arabic was discouraged in favor of more prestigious languages. This background led him to impose an "English only" rule in the EAP program he taught. However, as the teacher began to reflect on the necessity of this restriction, he experienced a sense of guilt and started questioning his approach. This introspection ultimately led to a shift in his educational philosophy,

where he no longer felt guilty about allowing multiple languages in the classroom. Instead, he grew confident in the pedagogical value of embracing plurilingualism. This transformation highlights a profound change in the teacher's identity and pedagogical beliefs, moving from a restrictive language policy to a more inclusive and effective educational approach. The study underscores the transformative journeys of teachers as they reconcile their internal convictions with external pedagogical demands. This reconciliation is a key aspect of teacher agency, where the shift from passively adhering to established norms to actively engaging in pedagogical innovation is essential for successfully integrating plurilingual practices in educational settings. In a related context, the study on the impact of linguistic super-diversity (Pauwels, 2014), as discussed in Esteve's (2020) framework, aligns with these observations, positing that teacher agency is shaped by the interaction between resources, contextual factors, and educators' perceptions. Teachers with sufficient training in language pedagogy and positive attitudes towards plurilingualism exhibit stronger agency, integrating plurilingual practices effectively. Those lacking training or holding negative attitudes towards plurilingualism show restricted agency, often sticking to monolingual methods and resisting plurilingual integration. These dynamics underline the necessity of professional development and positive pedagogical beliefs to enable teachers to effectively navigate and respond to the complexities of diverse educational environments.

Additionally, Wernicke (2018) further explores the symbiotic relationship between agency and plurilingual identity, demonstrating how plurilingualism can act as a catalyzing agentive resource. This study shows how plurilingualism empowers teachers to redefine their professional identities and navigate the constraints imposed by native-speaker ideologies. By using plurilingualism as a conceptual resource, teachers will be able to assert their competence and authority in language teaching, challenging the traditional native/non-native dichotomy and enhancing her legitimacy and effectiveness as an educator. Collectively, these studies underscore the complex interplay between teacher agency, identity, and plurilingual practices, emphasizing the need for supportive and safe educational environments that facilitate transformative teaching approaches.

4 Implications

This research paper on the role of teacher agency in adopting plurilingual methodologies in language teacher education has several significant implications for pre-service language teacher education. Firstly, it emphasizes the necessity of moving away from monolingual teaching norms towards a more inclusive plurilingual approach. This shift can better prepare pre-service teachers to handle the linguistic and cultural diversity they will encounter in their professional careers. By training teachers in plurilingual strategies, education programs can equip them to utilize students' linguistic resources as assets, thereby enhancing learning and fostering a more inclusive classroom environment. Secondly, the paper reveals the importance of teacher agency in the effective implementation of plurilingual education. Pre-service programs need to encourage teachers to explore and assert their agency, empowering them to make pedagogical decisions that support the integration of multiple languages in their teaching practice. This involves not only adopting plurilingual methodologies but also advocating for their use amid potential institutional and societal constraints. Thirdly, the dualistic nature of agency, both liberating and restrictive, highlighted in this paper, suggests that teacher education programs should focus on developing reflective practitioners who can critically evaluate and navigate the constraints imposed by educational policies and norms. This goal can be achieved by fostering a critical awareness among pre-service teachers of the socio-political dynamics of language use in education, enabling them

to challenge and transform these dynamics effectively. Additionally, integrating plurilingual approaches into teacher education programs can significantly enhance teachers' professional identities. By acknowledging and nurturing these identities, programs can help pre-service teachers recognize their potential as agents of change in increasingly diverse educational landscapes.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored the profound impact of teacher agency on the adoption and effectiveness of plurilingual methodologies within language education. Through this analysis, it has become clear that teacher agency is not only about the choices educators make but also about the systemic and contextual factors that influence these choices. The dualistic nature of agency, as both a liberator and a constraint, accents the complex dynamics that teachers navigate when implementing plurilingual practices.

This paper has highlighted how a plurilingual approach, underpinned by supportive teacher identities and agency, can transform language teaching by fostering a more inclusive and dynamic classroom environment that respects and leverages linguistic diversity to enhance learning. It argues for a critical reevaluation of existing pedagogical norms and curricular frameworks to better accommodate and promote plurilingual education. This paper encourages educational institutions and policy-makers to recognize and support the agency of language teachers. This aim can be achieved by providing professional development opportunities focused on plurilingual strategies. Additionally, this paper calls for revising educational policies to reflect diverse linguistic realities. Ultimately, this investigation into the role of teacher agency within plurilingual education settings reaffirms the necessity of a paradigm shift towards more inclusive and adaptive language teaching practices, which will be crucial in preparing students to thrive in an increasingly interconnected, plurilingual world.

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank Dr. Geoff Lawrence for his invaluable support and guidance in writing this paper.

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