Al Akhbar

Al Akhbar: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab

Preparing Arabic Language Teachers in Indonesia: Agency and Identity in Islamic Teacher Education Contexts

Frida Akmalia[1]; Hastowohadi[2]

[1] Universitas Syekh Nawawi Banten, Serang, Indonesia
[2] National Chung Cheng University, Taiwan

Email: *fridaakmalia26@gmail.com*

Abstract

This study explores how Arabic language teachers in Indonesia construct and negotiate their professional agency and identity within Islamic teacher education contexts. Drawing on an ecological perspective, the study examines how teacher preparation is shaped by interactions between individual beliefs and practices and institutional, cultural, and policy environments. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through interviews, reflective accounts, and document analysis involving Arabic language teachers and teacher educators in Islamic higher education institutions. The findings indicate that teachers' agency and identity emerge dynamically across interconnected ecological layers, including classroom practices, institutional expectations, professional communities, and religious–educational discourses. While curriculum structures and normative views of Arabic as a religious subject both enable and constrain teacher agency, participants actively reinterpret these conditions to align pedagogical practices with professional commitments. This study contributes to teacher education scholarship by highlighting Arabic language teacher preparation as a site of complex identity work and agentic negotiation, extending research on teacher agency beyond English-dominated and Western contexts.

Keywords: *Arabic language teachers; teacher agency; professional identity; Islamic teacher education; teacher preparation*

A. Introduction

Teacher agency and professional identity have become central constructs in contemporary scholarship on teacher education, reflecting growing recognition of teachers as active and reflective professionals who interpret curricular demands and make pedagogical decisions. Research has shown that teachers' capacity to exercise agency is closely intertwined with how they understand and position themselves professionally across educational settings (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015; Jenkins 2020). From an ecological standpoint, agency and identity develop through interactions among individual beliefs, pedagogical practices, institutional arrangements, and wider sociocultural and policy environments (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Neal and Neal 2013). In language teacher education, these dynamics emerge through situated practice, emotional engagement, and professional learning experiences (Varghese et al. 2005; Haneda and Sherman 2018; Derakhshan, Moradi, and Nazari 2024).

Much of the research on language teacher agency and identity has focused on English language education, particularly TESOL and EFL programmes in North America, Europe, and parts of East Asia (Kayi-Aydar 2015; Tao and Gao 2017; Cong-Lem et al. 2024). Scholars have called for research across a wider range of linguistic, sociocultural, and institutional settings to better understand how these processes vary by context (Douglas Fir Group 2016; Peña-Pincheira and De Costa 2021). That question is especially relevant to teachers of languages other than English and to institutions where professional preparation is closely tied to religious, moral, and cultural traditions. The experiences of prospective teachers in such settings remain underrepresented in the literature.

Indonesia provides a context for examining these processes in Arabic language teacher preparation. Islamic higher education institutions prepare Arabic language teachers for madrasahs, pesantren, and other Islamic schools. In these settings, Arabic is both an academic subject and a language through which learners access religious texts. This dual role shapes

expectations concerning teachers' pedagogical competence, moral authority, and religious credibility. Faizin and Ismail (2023) trace how Arabic language instruction in Indonesia has adapted to successive curriculum reforms. At the institutional level, Faizin (2020) identified areas for improvement in teaching materials and instructional arrangements at STAI Attanwir Bojonegoro, where students entered with varying levels of prior experience in Arabic. For prospective teachers, such curricular and institutional conditions form part of the environment in which they learn to exercise pedagogical judgement. Their preparation also takes place amid wider developments in higher education, including internationalization (Knight 2013; De Wit and Altbach 2021).

Although teacher agency and professional identity have received increasing scholarly attention, little is known about how prospective Arabic language teachers negotiate these during their preparation in Islamic institutions. Research has yet to establish how language ideologies, religious expectations, and institutional demands interact with candidates' pedagogical beliefs and decisions. Examining these interactions can clarify how agency and professional identity develop in settings where expectations of language teachers encompass both pedagogical competence and religious credibility.

Drawing on an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1979; van Lier 2008; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015), this study examines how prospective Arabic language teachers in Indonesia exercise agency and negotiate their professional identities during their preparation in Islamic teacher education institutions. It considers how individual beliefs, pedagogical practices, institutional structures, and broader religious and educational discourses interact in this process. By focusing on initial teacher education, the study extends research on language teacher agency and identity to the preparation of Arabic language teachers in Islamic institutions and offers insights for programmes seeking to support candidates' reflection and pedagogical decision-making.

B. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative multiple-site research design to examine how Arabic language teachers in Indonesia construct and negotiate their professional agency and identity within Islamic teacher education contexts. Guided by an interpretive qualitative approach and informed by an ecological perspective on teacher agency and identity, the study sought to capture the dynamic interactions between individual experiences and the institutional, cultural, and policy environments shaping teacher preparation. A qualitative design was considered appropriate for addressing the study's focus on meaning-making processes and lived experiences during teacher education rather than on measurement or generalization (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017).

The research was conducted across three Islamic teacher education institutions in Indonesia, including two public Islamic universities and one private Islamic teacher training college. These institutions were selected to represent variation in institutional governance while sharing comparable mandates for preparing Arabic language teachers for madrasahs and other Islamic schools. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and consisted of eighteen individuals directly involved in Arabic language teacher education. The participant group included twelve Arabic language teachers—eight final-year pre-service teachers and four early-career teachers with no more than three years of teaching experience—as well as six teacher educators responsible for Arabic language teacher preparation. This composition enabled the study to capture perspectives across different stages of professional formation.

Data were generated over a six-month period using multiple qualitative methods to enhance analytic depth and credibility. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, and focused on experiences of teacher preparation, perceptions of professional roles, and responses to institutional expectations. In addition, teacher participants were invited to produce reflective written narratives

addressing their developing professional identities and agentic practices. Relevant institutional documents, including teacher education curricula, course syllabi, and policy guidelines related to Arabic language teacher preparation, were also collected and analyzed to contextualize participants' accounts within broader structural frameworks.

Data analysis followed an iterative and inductive thematic process informed by ecological and sociocultural perspectives. The analysis began with repeated readings of the data to achieve familiarization, followed by open coding to identify recurring patterns related to agency, identity positioning, and contextual influences. Codes were subsequently refined through constant comparison and organized into broader themes that captured interactions across individual, institutional, and systemic levels. Throughout the analytic process, particular attention was paid to how participants enacted, constrained, and reconfigured their agency and professional identities within Islamic teacher education environments. Reflexive memo-writing was employed to document analytic decisions and to acknowledge the researcher's positionality, thereby enhancing transparency and trustworthiness (Saldaña 2011).

Ethical considerations were addressed in accordance with institutional research ethics guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and references to institutions were anonymized. All data were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher. By combining methodological rigor with reflexive and context-sensitive analysis, this methodological approach supports a nuanced examination of Arabic language teacher preparation and aligns with the Journal of Education for Teaching's emphasis on high-quality, ethically grounded research in teacher education.

C. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study based on a thematic analysis informed by an ecological perspective on teacher agency and professional identity. The analysis revealed that Arabic language teachers' agency and identity were constructed through ongoing and dynamic negotiations across multiple, interconnected ecological layers. These layers encompassed individual beliefs and moral commitments, institutional structures and pedagogical arrangements within Islamic teacher education, professional communities, and broader religious–educational discourses and policy frameworks. Rather than emerging as stable or linear outcomes of teacher preparation, agency and identity were found to be relational and context-dependent, shaped by participants' continuous engagement with enabling and constraining conditions across these ecological levels. The themes presented below illustrate how these interactions influenced participants' professional learning and sense of self during the process of becoming Arabic language teachers in Islamic educational contexts.

Individual Beliefs and Moral Commitments as Foundations of Agency

At the individual level, participants' professional agency and identity were strongly shaped by deeply held personal beliefs, prior learning experiences, and moral commitments associated with Arabic as a religious language. Many participants entered Islamic teacher education with a strong sense of vocation, perceiving the role of the Arabic language teacher not merely as a professional occupation but as a form of religious service (*ibadah*). This vocational orientation positioned teaching as a moral responsibility, influencing how participants understood their roles and obligations within teacher preparation programmes. As one pre-service teacher explained, *"Teaching Arabic is not only about grammar or vocabulary. For me, it is about helping students understand the language of the Qur'an. That is why I feel this is more than just a job"* (Participant 3, pre-service teacher).

Such moral positioning significantly informed how participants engaged with teacher education activities. Rather than approaching coursework and

practicum requirements solely as academic tasks, many participants described them as opportunities to cultivate both pedagogical competence and personal integrity. This dual orientation motivated participants to internalize pedagogical knowledge while simultaneously striving to embody ethical and religious ideals expected of Arabic language teachers. One participant reflected, *"When I learn teaching methods, I always think about whether this method reflects good character and respect for the language. I don't want to teach Arabic in a way that feels empty or purely technical"* (Participant 7, pre-service teacher). These accounts illustrate how agency at the individual level was closely tied to participants' efforts to align professional practices with personal and moral values.

Agency was further expressed through intentional decision-making in pedagogical planning and classroom interaction, particularly during practicum experiences. Participants described making conscious choices about teaching materials, examples, and interactional styles to ensure that their teaching supported students' religious understanding as well as linguistic development. An early-career teacher noted, "*Even when the syllabus is very tight, I try to connect the lesson to values or meanings. That is my way of being responsible as an Arabic teacher*" (Participant 11, early-career teacher). These agentic actions highlight how personal beliefs functioned as internal resources enabling teachers to navigate institutional demands while maintaining a sense of professional authenticity.

However, participants also reported moments of tension and uncertainty when institutional expectations conflicted with their self-conceptions as morally grounded educators. Some described experiencing pressure to prioritize examination-oriented content or rigid instructional models that they felt did not align with their pedagogical ideals. In such situations, participants were required to negotiate and recalibrate their professional identities. As one participant expressed, "*Sometimes I feel torn. I want to teach in a meaningful way, but the institution expects us to finish the material quickly and focus on tests. I have to adjust, even though it doesn't fully match my beliefs*"

(Participant 5, pre-service teacher). These tensions often prompted reflective questioning about what it meant to be a "good" Arabic language teacher within institutional constraints.

From an ecological perspective, these findings suggest that individual beliefs and moral commitments functioned as foundational but not autonomous sources of agency. Rather, agency emerged through ongoing negotiation between personal values and contextual pressures encountered within Islamic teacher education. Participants' identities were continuously reshaped as they learned to balance vocational ideals with institutional realities. This dynamic process underscores the importance of recognizing individual moral orientations as a critical, yet contextually mediated, component of agency development during teacher preparation.

Institutional Structures and the Shaping of Professional Practice

Institutional arrangements within Islamic teacher education emerged as a powerful ecological layer shaping how Arabic language teachers enacted their professional agency and constructed their identities. Participants consistently highlighted the central role of standardized curricula, assessment frameworks, and practicum requirements in organizing their professional learning experiences. For many pre-service teachers, these structures provided clarity and direction during the transition from student to teacher, offering a sense of security and professional legitimacy. As one participant noted, "*The curriculum gives us a clear path. As a student teacher, I feel more confident because I know what is expected from me as an Arabic teacher*" (Participant 2, pre-service teacher). In this sense, institutional structures functioned as enabling conditions that supported the initial development of professional identity.

At the same time, participants described how rigid curricular prescriptions and assessment-driven practices constrained opportunities for pedagogical experimentation and agentic decision-making. Several pre-service teachers reported that they felt obligated to prioritize coverage of prescribed materials

over responsive teaching practices that addressed students' needs. One participant reflected, "*Sometimes I want to try a different approach, but the syllabus is already fixed. If I don't follow it closely, I worry that I will be judged as unprepared*" (Participant 6, pre-service teacher). Such accounts illustrate how institutional expectations shaped not only what teachers did in the classroom but also how they perceived the boundaries of acceptable professional action.

Practicum experiences were identified as particularly influential sites where institutional structures intersected with individual agency. Participants noted that practicum requirements often emphasized lesson plan compliance, classroom management, and assessment outcomes, reinforcing procedural notions of teaching competence. An early-career teacher recalled, "*During my practicum, the main feedback was about whether I followed the lesson plan correctly. There was little discussion about why I chose certain methods or how students responded*" (Participant 10, early-career teacher). This focus led some participants to adopt compliance-oriented practices, temporarily setting aside personal pedagogical beliefs in order to meet institutional criteria.

Teacher educators played a crucial mediating role in shaping how institutional structures were interpreted and enacted. Participants emphasized that teacher educators' instructional approaches and mentoring styles significantly influenced their experiences of agency. Supportive and dialogic mentors were described as enabling reflective engagement with institutional requirements, encouraging teacher candidates to justify pedagogical choices and adapt materials creatively. As one participant explained, "*My lecturer always asked us to explain our decisions, not just follow the syllabus. That made me feel trusted as a future teacher*" (Participant 14, pre-service teacher). Such mentoring practices expanded participants' sense of agency by framing institutional guidelines as flexible resources rather than rigid rules.

In contrast, highly prescriptive mentoring models were perceived as reinforcing narrow conceptions of professionalism centered on obedience and content delivery. Participants who experienced directive supervision

reported feeling constrained in expressing their pedagogical identities. One participant commented, *"Some supervisors expect us to teach exactly like them. In that situation, I feel like my role is just to imitate, not to think as a teacher"* (Participant 17, pre-service teacher). These experiences illustrate how institutional mediation can either enable or suppress the development of agentic professional identities.

Viewed ecologically, these findings demonstrate that institutional structures do not determine teacher agency in a uniform manner but interact dynamically with individual beliefs and relational practices within teacher education. Professional practice was shaped not only by formal curricula and assessments but also by how these structures were enacted and negotiated through mentoring relationships. This highlights the importance of institutional environments that balance accountability with pedagogical dialogue in fostering agentic and reflective Arabic language teachers.

Professional Communities and Collective Negotiation of Identity

Professional communities, including peer groups and collegial networks, emerged as significant ecological spaces where Arabic language teachers collectively negotiated their professional agency and identity. Participants consistently described informal interactions with peers—such as discussions after classes, collaborative lesson planning, and online messaging groups—as critical sites for sharing experiences and making sense of the challenges encountered during teacher preparation. These spaces were often perceived as more flexible and supportive than formal coursework, allowing participants to articulate doubts and experiment with pedagogical ideas without fear of formal evaluation. As one pre-service teacher noted, *"When we talk with friends who are also preparing to become teachers, we can be honest about our struggles. It feels safer than in official classes"* (Participant 4, pre-service teacher).

Through these peer interactions, participants developed a sense of collective agency, drawing on shared experiences to navigate institutional demands

and expectations. Collaborative exchanges enabled participants to compare teaching strategies, reinterpret curriculum requirements, and jointly reflect on practicum experiences. One participant explained, "*Sometimes we realize that the problems we face are not just personal. When we talk together, we find ways to deal with the system, not just blame ourselves*" (Participant 8, pre-service teacher). Such accounts suggest that professional communities functioned as relational resources that strengthened participants' confidence and capacity to act within institutional constraints.

Professional communities also played an important role in shaping professional identity by providing reference points for what it meant to be a "legitimate" Arabic language teacher. Participants reported that peer recognition and feedback influenced their self-perceptions and reinforced emerging professional identities. An early-career teacher reflected, *"When my colleagues appreciate my teaching approach, I feel more confident that I am becoming a real teacher, not just following instructions"* (Participant 12, early-career teacher). These moments of affirmation contributed to the development of agentic identities grounded in shared professional values rather than solely in institutional evaluation.

At the same time, participants emphasized that professional communities were not uniformly enabling. In some contexts, collegial networks reproduced dominant norms that prioritized traditional instructional methods and authoritative teaching styles. Several novice teachers described experiencing pressure to conform to established practices endorsed by senior colleagues, particularly in practicum schools. As one participant explained, *"Senior teachers often say that this is how Arabic has always been taught. When they say that, it is difficult to try something different"* (Participant 15, pre-service teacher). Such experiences illustrate how professional communities can act as mechanisms of normalization, constraining innovation and reinforcing hierarchical notions of professional authenticity.

From an ecological perspective, these findings highlight the ambivalent role of professional communities in shaping teacher agency and identity. While

peer networks enabled collective sense-making and mutual support, they also reflected broader institutional and cultural hierarchies that shaped acceptable professional behavior. Participants' agency was therefore enacted through ongoing negotiation within these relational spaces, as they balanced the desire for professional belonging with efforts to maintain pedagogical flexibility. This underscores the importance of recognizing professional communities as dynamic ecological sites that can both support and limit the development of agentic and reflective Arabic language teachers during teacher preparation.

Religious–Educational Discourses and Policy Influences

At the macro level, broader religious–educational discourses and national policy frameworks played a significant role in shaping participants' understandings of professional legitimacy and the scope of their agency as Arabic language teachers. Across interviews, participants frequently referred to dominant institutional and societal narratives that positioned Arabic primarily as a sacred language closely associated with religious authority and moral responsibility. This positioning carried strong expectations that Arabic language teachers demonstrate not only linguistic accuracy but also exemplary moral conduct. As one participant explained, *"When people hear that you teach Arabic, they expect you to represent Islam properly. It is not only about teaching well, but about who you are as a person"* (Participant 9, early-career teacher). Such expectations shaped how participants understood the boundaries of acceptable professional behavior.

For some participants, this religious positioning was embraced as a meaningful and motivating aspect of their professional identity. They described feeling honored to teach a language associated with the Qur'an and Islamic scholarship, viewing this role as a source of moral purpose and social recognition. A pre-service teacher noted, *"Teaching Arabic gives me a sense of pride because it connects me directly to the religious tradition. It makes me more careful and committed as a teacher"* (Participant 1, pre-service teacher). In these cases, macro-level discourses functioned as enabling forces that strengthened

participants' sense of professional legitimacy and reinforced their vocational commitment.

However, other participants experienced these same discourses as constraining, particularly when they limited recognition of Arabic as a living, communicative language that could be taught through innovative pedagogical approaches. Several participants expressed concern that an exclusive focus on accuracy and textual mastery marginalized communicative competence and learner-centered practices. As one participant reflected, *"Sometimes Arabic is treated as something untouchable. If we try new methods, people worry that we are not respecting the language enough"* (Participant 13, pre-service teacher). These tensions revealed how macro-level ideologies shaped not only pedagogical expectations but also teachers' perceptions of professional risk when deviating from established norms.

National curriculum standards and teacher certification policies further reinforced these religious–educational discourses by formalizing expectations regarding content coverage, assessment, and teacher competence. Participants described how policy documents emphasized mastery of grammatical structures and canonical texts, leaving limited space for pedagogical adaptation. A teacher educator observed, *"The curriculum gives clear targets, but it also sends a message about what counts as 'real' Arabic teaching. That message influences how student teachers see themselves"* (Participant 16, teacher educator). Such policy frameworks shaped the conditions under which agency could be enacted during teacher preparation, often privileging compliance with standardized benchmarks over reflective experimentation.

In response to these macro-level influences, participants adopted varied strategies to negotiate their agency and professional identities. Some engaged in strategic compliance, adhering closely to policy requirements while privately holding alternative pedagogical beliefs. Others practiced selective adaptation, incorporating communicative activities within the boundaries of officially sanctioned curricula. A participant explained, *"I follow the curriculum, but I adjust my teaching style quietly. That is my way of surviving as a*

teacher" (Participant 18, early-career teacher). In a few cases, participants described subtle forms of resistance, such as reframing pedagogical innovation as supportive of religious understanding rather than as a departure from tradition.

Viewed ecologically, these findings illustrate how religious–educational discourses and policy frameworks constitute powerful macro-level conditions that shape teacher agency and identity during preparation. Agency did not manifest as open opposition to dominant norms but as context-sensitive negotiation within ideological and regulatory constraints. This highlights the importance of understanding teacher preparation as embedded within broader discursive and policy environments that both enable and delimit the possibilities for professional action.

Agency and Identity as Emergent Ecological Processes

Across these interconnected ecological layers, the findings indicate that Arabic language teacher agency and professional identity are best understood as emergent, relational, and continuously negotiated processes rather than fixed outcomes of teacher preparation. Participants' narratives revealed that agency did not originate solely from individual intention or competence but emerged through sustained engagement with multiple contextual conditions, including institutional regulations, professional relationships, and dominant religious–educational discourses. One participant reflected on this interconnectedness by stating, *"I realized that my way of teaching is not just my own decision. It is shaped by the institution, my mentors, my friends, and what people expect from an Arabic teacher"* (Participant 6, pre-service teacher). This perspective underscores the ecological nature of agency as situated within overlapping systems of influence.

Participants' accounts further illustrated that agency was enacted relationally rather than autonomously. Teachers described making professional decisions through careful consideration of how their actions would be received by students, colleagues, supervisors, and institutional authorities. An early-

career teacher explained, "*Before trying something new, I always think about how my students and my supervisors will see it. Agency is not about doing whatever I want, but about choosing wisely within the situation*" (Participant 12, early-career teacher). Such reflections highlight how agency involved strategic navigation of constraints and opportunities rather than unfettered choice. Identity, in turn, was shaped through these agentic engagements, as teachers continuously repositioned themselves in relation to their contexts.

The findings also suggest that moments of tension and constraint played a productive role in the development of agency and identity. Participants frequently described experiencing misalignment between personal pedagogical commitments and institutional or policy expectations. Rather than resulting in disengagement, these tensions often prompted reflective negotiation and identity reconfiguration. As one participant noted, "*When my ideals don't match the system, I have to rethink who I am as a teacher. Sometimes I adjust, sometimes I resist quietly*" (Participant 9, early-career teacher). These moments of friction served as catalysts for professional learning, illustrating how agency and identity evolved through ongoing negotiation with contextual demands.

From an ecological standpoint, professional identity emerged as a layered and evolving construct shaped by participation across different systems over time. Participants' identities were not static labels acquired at the end of teacher education but were continually reshaped through practicum experiences, mentoring interactions, peer collaboration, and engagement with policy discourses. A teacher educator observed, "*What we see is not a finished identity when students graduate. Their identity keeps changing as they respond to new environments and expectations*" (Participant 16, teacher educator). This observation reinforces the view of teacher preparation as an open-ended process rather than a terminal stage of professional formation.

Taken together, these findings highlight the inseparability of agency and identity within an ecological framework of teacher education. Agency was enacted through identity positioning, while identity was continuously

reshaped through agentic engagement with contextual conditions. Understanding Arabic language teacher preparation through this lens foregrounds the importance of designing teacher education programmes that acknowledge complexity, encourage reflective negotiation, and support teachers' capacity to act meaningfully within diverse and often competing ecological influences. This ecological view underscores that becoming an Arabic language teacher in Islamic contexts is not a linear process of skill acquisition but a dynamic process of professional becoming shaped by sustained interaction across multiple layers of influence.

D. Discussion

This study set out to examine how Arabic language teacher agency and professional identity are constructed within Islamic teacher education contexts in Indonesia. Drawing on an ecological perspective, the findings demonstrate that agency and identity are not individual attributes acquired through teacher preparation but emergent processes shaped through dynamic interactions across multiple ecological layers. This section discusses how the findings extend existing scholarship on teacher agency and identity, while offering contextually grounded insights into teacher preparation in religiously framed educational settings.

Consistent with ecological conceptualizations of teacher agency (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015; Bronfenbrenner 1979), the findings reveal that agency is enacted relationally rather than autonomously. Participants' professional actions were shaped by their personal moral commitments, institutional structures, professional communities, and broader religious–educational discourses. This supports prior research emphasizing that agency is not a matter of individual capacity alone but emerges through engagement with contextual affordances and constraints (Kayi-Aydar 2015; Jenkins 2020; Zhang, Liu, and Peng 2023). However, this study extends existing work by illustrating how agency is negotiated within Islamic teacher

education, where religious meanings attached to language intensify moral and professional expectations.

The findings regarding individual beliefs and moral commitments highlight the central role of vocation and ethical responsibility in shaping teacher identity. Similar to previous studies on language teacher identity (Varghese et al. 2005; Derakhshan, Moradi, and Nazari 2024), participants positioned themselves as moral agents whose professional identities were inseparable from personal values. In the Indonesian Islamic context, Arabic was not merely a subject of instruction but a religiously charged medium, reinforcing identity constructions grounded in service and moral exemplarity. While such positioning strengthened commitment and purpose, it also generated identity tensions when institutional demands conflicted with personal pedagogical ideals. These tensions echo findings from identities-in-practice research that view identity formation as contingent and negotiated rather than stable (Derakhshan et al. 2024; Nazari, Nejadghanbar, and Hu 2024).

At the institutional level, the study underscores the dual role of teacher education structures in enabling and constraining agency. Standardized curricula, assessment regimes, and practicum requirements provided participants with professional legitimacy and a sense of direction, aligning with research that highlights the structuring function of institutional frameworks in teacher preparation (Meijer, Verloop, and Beijaard 2002; Kang and Pacheco 2021). At the same time, rigid curricular prescriptions limited opportunities for pedagogical experimentation, reinforcing compliance-oriented professional identities. The mediating role of teacher educators was particularly salient, supporting previous findings that mentoring practices significantly shape how institutional expectations are interpreted and enacted (Haneda and Sherman 2018; Kang and Nam-Huh 2022). This suggests that agency is not only shaped by structures themselves but by how those structures are pedagogically mediated within teacher education programmes.

The role of professional communities further illustrates the relational nature of agency and identity. Peer groups functioned as important sites for collective sense-making and emotional support, enabling participants to develop shared strategies for navigating institutional demands. This finding aligns with research emphasizing the social and dialogic dimensions of teacher learning and agency (Peña-Pincheira and De Costa 2021; Kibler, Valdés, and Walqui 2020). However, professional communities also reproduced dominant norms, particularly when senior colleagues positioned traditional instructional practices as markers of professional authenticity. This ambivalence reflects the nested and networked nature of ecological systems (Neal and Neal 2013), where the same relational spaces can simultaneously enable and constrain agentic action.

At the macro level, religious–educational discourses and national policy frameworks exerted a powerful influence on participants' professional identities and perceived legitimacy. The sacralization of Arabic within institutional and policy narratives reinforced expectations of linguistic purity and moral authority, shaping what counted as "proper" Arabic teaching. While some participants embraced these discourses, others experienced them as limiting, particularly when they marginalized communicative and learner-centered approaches. These findings resonate with broader critiques of policy-driven standardization in teacher education (Knight 2013; De Wit and Altbach 2021) and extend them by highlighting how religious ideologies intersect with policy frameworks to shape teacher agency in faith-based contexts.

Taken together, the findings contribute to the growing body of literature that conceptualizes teacher agency and identity as inseparable and ecologically situated (Tao and Gao 2017; Nazari et al. 2024). This study advances the field by foregrounding Islamic teacher education as a critical yet underexplored site for examining these processes. It demonstrates that agency in such contexts is rarely enacted through overt resistance but more often through strategic compliance, selective adaptation, and subtle negotiation. These

forms of agency challenge narrow interpretations that equate agency with autonomy or opposition, instead highlighting its context-sensitive and relational character.

For teacher education, these findings suggest the need to design programmes that explicitly acknowledge the complexity of agency and identity formation. Rather than positioning teacher preparation as a linear process of skill acquisition, programmes should create reflective spaces that allow pre-service teachers to critically engage with institutional expectations, professional norms, and religious discourses. Supporting such reflective negotiation is particularly important in Islamic teacher education, where moral, pedagogical, and policy demands intersect in ways that deeply shape teachers' professional becoming.

E. Conclusion and Implications

This study demonstrates that Arabic language teacher agency and professional identity in Indonesian Islamic teacher education are emergent, relational, and ecologically situated processes rather than fixed outcomes of formal preparation. Teachers' agency developed through ongoing negotiation across personal moral commitments, institutional structures, professional communities, and broader religious–educational discourses. These findings extend ecological perspectives on teacher agency by foregrounding the complex interplay between religious meanings and educational practices in language teacher preparation.

The study has important implications for teacher education. Programmes should move beyond technocratic models of competence development and create reflective spaces that support teachers in critically engaging with institutional expectations and ideological frameworks. Teacher educators play a crucial mediating role and should be supported to adopt dialogic and mentoring-oriented pedagogies. Policymakers are also encouraged to allow greater curricular flexibility to enable pedagogical innovation while

respecting religious traditions. Such approaches can foster agentic, reflective, and context-responsive Arabic language teachers.

References

Beelen, J., and E. Jones. 2015. "Redefining Internationalization at Home." In *The European Higher Education Area: Between Critical Reflections and Future Policies*, edited by P. Curaj, A. Matei, L. Pricopie, R. Salmi, and J. Scott, 67–80. Berlin: Springer.

Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cong-Lem, N., K. D. Truong, B. Zhu, and Z. Long. 2024. "Identity Transitions, Experiences, and Agency: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Asian International TESOL Doctoral Students." *Language Learning Journal*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2024.2349052

Creswell, J. W., and V. L. Plano Clark. 2017. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

De Wit, H., and P. G. Altbach. 2021. "Internationalization in Higher Education: Global Trends and Recommendations for Its Future." *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 5 (1): 28–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1820898

Derakhshan, A., F. Moradi, and M. Nazari. 2024. "Conceptualizing the Role of Practice Level in Language Teacher Identity Construction: An Identities-in-Practice Study." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 34 (2): 797–811. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12533

Douglas Fir Group. 2016. "A Transdisciplinary Framework for SLA in a Multilingual World." *Modern Language Journal* 100 (Supplement 2016): 19–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12301

Faizin, K. 2020. "Evaluasi Kurikulum Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab di STAI Attanwir Bojonegoro." *Al-Idaroh: Jurnal Studi Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 4 (1): 74–85. https://doi.org/10.54437/alidaroh.v4i1.139

Faizin, K., and Ismail. 2023. "History of Arabic Curriculum Development in Indonesia." *Lahjah Arabiyah: Jurnal Bahasa Arab dan Pendidikan Bahasa Arab* 4 (2): 103–117. https://doi.org/10.35316/lahjah.v4i2.103-117

Haneda, M., and B. Sherman. 2018. "ESL Teachers' Acting Agentively Through Job Crafting." *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* 17 (6): 402–415. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2018.1498340

Jenkins, G. 2020. "Teacher Agency: The Effects of Active and Passive Responses to Curriculum Change." *Australian Educational Researcher* 47 (1): 167–181. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00334-2

Kang, H. S., and Y. J. Nam-Huh. 2022. "TESOL Practicum in the Pandemic Era: The Emotions and Strategies of Teacher Candidates." In *Innovating the TESOL Practicum in Teacher Education*, edited by C. Pu and W. E. Wright, 52–63. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003193937

Kang, H. S., and M. B. Pacheco. 2021. "Short-Term Study Abroad in TESOL: Current State and Prospects." *TESOL Quarterly* 55 (2): 817–838. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3014

Kayi-Aydar, H. 2015. "Teacher Agency, Positioning, and English Language Learners: Voices of Pre-Service Classroom Teachers." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 45: 94–103. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.09.009

Kibler, A., G. Valdés, and A. Walqui, eds. 2020. *Reconceptualizing the Role of Critical Dialogue in American Classrooms: Promoting Equity Through Dialogic Education*. New York: Routledge.

Knight, J. 2013. "The Changing Landscape of Higher Education Internationalization—For Better or Worse?" *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* 17 (3): 84–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2012.753957

Meijer, P. C., N. Verloop, and D. Beijaard. 2002. "Multi-Method Triangulation in a Qualitative Study on Teachers' Practical Knowledge: An Attempt to Increase Internal Validity." *Quality & Quantity* 36: 145–167. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014984232147

Nazari, M., H. Nejadghanbar, and G. Hu. 2024. "Language Teacher Educator Agency: An Ecological Perspective of Contributions for Identity Construction." *International Journal of Educational Research* 126: 102367. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102367

Neal, J. W., and Z. P. Neal. 2013. "Nested or Networked? Future Directions for Ecological Systems Theory." *Social Development* 22 (4): 722–737. https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12018

Peña-Pincheira, R., and P. I. De Costa. 2021. "Language Teacher Agency for Educational Justice-Oriented Work: An Ecological Model." *TESOL Journal* 12: e00561. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.561

Priestley, M., G. Biesta, and S. Robinson. 2015. *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. London: Bloomsbury.

Saldaña, J. 2011. *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tao, J., and X. Gao. 2017. "Teacher Agency and Identity Commitment in Curricular Reform." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 63: 346–355. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.01.010

van Lier, L. 2008. "The Ecology of Language Learning and Sociocultural Theory." In *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, edited by P. Creese and N. H. Hornberger, 53–65. Dordrecht: Springer.

Varghese, M., B. Morgan, B. Johnston, and K. Johnson. 2005. "Theorizing Language Teacher Identity: Three Perspectives and Beyond." *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* 4 (1): 21–44. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327701jlie0401_2

Zhang, Q., Y. Liu, and J. Peng. 2023. "Unpacking EFL Teachers' Agency Enacted in Nested Ecosystems in Developing Regions of Southern China." *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* 43: 100775. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2023.100775