

## Teacher Agency in Professional Development Within Islamic Junior High Schools: A Narrative-Ecological Study of EFL Teachers in Indonesia

Anisah Setyaningrum<sup>1\*</sup>, Suminto A. Sayuti<sup>2</sup>, Jamilah<sup>3</sup>

Language Education Sciences, Faculty of Languages, Arts, and Cultures, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia<sup>1,2,3</sup>, English Education Study Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kudus, Central Java 59351, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

\*) Corresponding Author

Email: [anisahsetyaningrum.2023@student.uny.ac.id](mailto:anisahsetyaningrum.2023@student.uny.ac.id)

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### Abstract

This study explores the experiences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at Islamic junior high schools in Indonesia, focusing on how they navigate their professional agency within a context characterized by strong religious values. Employing a qualitative narrative case study methodology and an ecological perspective, in-depth narratives were collected from three EFL teachers through interviews, which were subsequently analyzed using narrative thematic analysis. Rather than seeking broad generalizations, this small-scale study provides a nuanced and contextualized understanding of how teachers' professional agency is shaped in their everyday practice. The findings reveal that teachers' professional agency is influenced by the interplay of their

past experiences, evaluations of current conditions, and orientations toward the future. These dimensions are shaped by the institutional context, particularly the culture of professional development (PD) alongside the prevailing religious and moral norms at the school. The results suggest that Islamic values significantly influence teachers' professional practices. They encourage teachers to engage in self-directed learning and ongoing self-development, despite limited access to formal PD programs. Additionally, religious principles also influence teachers' pedagogical decisions and strengthen their commitment to supporting students' academic success and character development. However, the research also highlights that certain institutional expectations can limit opportunities for pedagogical innovation, prompting teachers to negotiate a balance between curriculum demands and the school's religious norms. Overall, this study underscores the importance of designing professional development programs that are contextually relevant and aligned with local values in educational practice.

**Keywords:** *Teacher Agency, Professional Development, EFL Teachers, Islamic Junior High Schools, Narrative–Ecological Approach*

## INTRODUCTION

Teacher agency has long been a key focus in the study of educational change, particularly from an ecological perspective that views autonomy not as a fixed trait inherent to individuals, but rather as something that is continually shaped through the relationship between teachers and the environments in which they work (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). From this perspective, teachers' professional actions are understood as the result of an interaction between past experiences, current circumstances, and future-oriented goals. Consequently, teachers' practices cannot be separated from their history of experiences, the institutional context of the school, and the professional goals that are continually negotiated in daily life.

However, most research on teacher autonomy remains dominated by institutional perspectives developed within secular education systems. Consequently, the contribution of religious values to the formation of teachers' professional agency has not

been thoroughly explored. In fact, within religious-based educational institutions, moral and spiritual values serve not only as a social backdrop but also influence how teachers interpret their professional responsibilities, make decisions, and carry out pedagogical practices. Therefore, this study aims to expand the ecological perspective by positioning the moral-religious environment as a factor that actively shapes teachers' agency practices.

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the ecological approach has been widely used to explain how teachers respond to curriculum reforms, accountability demands, and the tension between global orientations and local needs in learning (Tao & Gao, 2017; Yuan & Burns, 2017; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). In this context, professional development (PD) becomes a crucial aspect influencing the quality and direction of teachers' practices. Numerous studies indicate that collaborative and reflective professional development models can strengthen teacher agency, whereas overly technocratic and top-down approaches may restrict their professional space (Pantić, 2021; Novoa-Echaurren, 2024). Nevertheless, most of these studies still focus on secular educational contexts, so the influence of religious value systems on teachers' professional development has not been extensively explored.

There are two major gaps in the existing literature. First, research on teacher agency and professional development from an ecological perspective remains dominated by contexts in Western countries and parts of East Asia. These studies generally understand institutional logic through educational policies, professional standards, and accountability systems (e.g., Cong-Lem, 2021; Toivola et al., 2025). Although some research has acknowledged the moral dimension in teaching practice (Day et al., 2006; Buchanan, 2015), religion has not yet been widely positioned as an institutional force influencing how teachers interpret situations and make pedagogical decisions.

Consequently, the extent to which religious values permeate daily teaching practice remains vague and has not yet been fully

revealed. In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education research on the role of teachers in educational reform remains dominated by public or secular schools, while madrasahs as Islamic-based institutions are often overlooked. However, madrasahs possess a distinct character that they not only aspire to achieve academic success but also integrate values of morality, spirituality, and society into all learning processes. This distinctive context highlights the necessity of examining how teachers address professional demands within the framework of dominant religious norms that shape their environment.

This study situates teachers' agency within an ecological framework, focusing on Islamic education in Indonesia to address existing gaps in the literature. It examines how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Islamic junior high schools (madrasahs) engage in professional development amidst the educational reform movement, national curriculum mandates, and Islamic values. The concept of teacher's agency is defined as the capacity to interpret, prioritize, and negotiate the multiple demands that frequently converge in their pedagogical practices. Within the context of madrasahs, teachers function in an environment where educational bureaucracy intersects with institutional religious and moral values. As a result, their professional agency is shaped not only by adherence to formal policies but also by their ability to balance and navigate both national curriculum expectations and Islamic principles in their instructional practices.

The religious environment is characterized by its dynamic nature, which can both support and constrain teachers' professional practices, depending on their level of reflectivity and openness to complex pedagogical situations. This study specifically examines EFL teachers in Indonesian madrasah tsanawiyah, who are required to integrate pedagogical competencies, language instruction, and the internalization of moral values, all while adhering to state regulations and religious authority. In this context, it becomes essential to explore how teachers navigate competing demands through professional development that is self-driven, collaborative, and digitally oriented. While formal models of professional

development often follow a top-down structure, non-formal approaches typically empower teachers with more freedom and choice.

Building on this foundation, the study draws on two distinct yet interconnected questions: (1) how EFL teachers in madrasah tsanawiyah perceive and practice their professional agency, and (2) how their surrounding moral and religious environment shapes, encourages, or sometimes restricts these independent efforts in their everyday teaching. This study is expected to make both theoretical and empirical contributions to further developing the notion of teacher agency in religious-based educational institutions, particularly in Global South countries, highlighting the importance of the religious dimension as a key element in teachers' professional practices.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a narrative case study design with a qualitative ecological perspective to understand the professional agency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in a religion-based educational setting. The narrative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to trace teachers' experiences continuously covering the past, current conditions, and future orientations, so that the process of identity formation and professional agency can be understood more holistically (Kim, 2016; Barkhuizen et al., 2025).

An ecological perspective is employed to view agency not as an isolated individual capacity, but as the result of interactions between personal experiences, institutional conditions, and teachers' future orientations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015). In this context, teachers' professional practice is understood as something that is continuously negotiated through their relationships with the social, cultural, and institutional environments in which they work (Tao & Gao, 2017; Nazari et al., 2024).

Rather than developing a new theoretical model, this research adopts an ecological approach to explain how a religious-values-based educational environment shapes the three dimensions of teacher agency: the iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions. The concept of “religious ecology” refers to a system of values, norms, and moral mechanisms that both influence and are influenced by teachers’ professional practices.

In the iterative dimension, teachers’ past experiences are viewed not only as an accumulation of teaching experiences but also as a process of moral and spiritual formation. In the practical-evaluative dimension, teachers’ pedagogical decisions are often influenced by religious considerations deemed to possess normative power. Meanwhile, the projective dimension indicates that teachers’ future orientations extend beyond career development to broader moral, spiritual, and social aspirations.

This framework suggests that religion-based moral authority can function in a dual capacity: on one hand, it strengthens teachers’ capacities; on the other hand, it may also restrict their scope of actions. In this study, teacher autonomy is understood not merely as a form of resistance but also as a process involving adaptation, negotiation, and the selection of actions deemed legitimate within a specific socio-religious context.

### **Participants and Sampling Strategy**

The study involved three English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers from Islamic junior high schools in Central Java, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), considering the suitability of the institutional context that strongly incorporates religious values into the curriculum, teaching practices, and professional cultures.

Selection criteria included a minimum of five years of teaching experience, active involvement in professional development activities, and a willingness to participate in narrative interviews. This study encompasses different types of institutional contexts, including public madrasahs, private madrasahs, pesantren-based school. Rather than simply as a tool of statistical

generalization, this diversity is an essential resource for enriching comparative analysis.

Despite being few in numbers, deeper insights into the experiences and narratives reflections are illustrated in this article. This study included only three participants who were drawn from a local convenience sample. However, they were purposively chosen based on their direct experience related to the central goal of this research, specifically their perspectives on aspects of school culture that involve internalizing religious values, and their roles in professional development. A cross-case analysis was then used to identify patterns of similarities and differences in teachers' experiences of agency across various institutional contexts.

**Table 1.** Participants' Profile

Teacher	Teaching Experience	School Type	PD Engagement	Special Role
A	19 years	Public Islamic Junior High School for Female Students Only	MGMP, online PD	Classroom teacher & MGMP Organizer
B	15 years	State Islamic Junior High School for both Male & Female Students	Monthly training, digital PD	Classroom teacher & Language coach
C	7 years	Boarding-based Islamic Junior High School for Male Students Only	MGMP, competitions	Classroom teacher & Language coach

### Data Collection

Data were collected over a three-months period, from December 2025 to February 2026, through two to three rounds of semi-structured narrative interviews conducted in Indonesian. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, allowing participants sufficient opportunity to reflect deeply on their professional experiences. The interview guide was developed to be adaptable, aiming to uncover inspiring stories about professional development, teaching practices in English as a Foreign Language

(EFL), and the influence of religious values on the daily learning process.

The phased interview process addressed significant professional experiences, the influence of Islamic values on teaching methods, and the creative strategies teachers employ to balance curriculum demands with institutional values. The initial phase involved exploring participants' general experiences, followed by in-depth discussions to clarify emerging issues. Subsequently, unique experiences were examined in greater detail to enrich a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' active roles. The interviews also highlighted career trajectories, the dynamics of pedagogical decision-making, future aspirations, and the teachers' experiences in navigating institutional challenges. By employing a narrative approach, the professional experiences of teachers can be analyzed temporally and contextually (Barkhuizen et al., 2025 ; Kim, 2016).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted through a combination of narrative and thematic approaches within an ecological framework. To gain a comprehensive understanding of each participant's professional journey, the analysis process is iterative, beginning with repeated readings of all transcripts. The coding phase combines deductive codes with inductive codes that emerge directly from the data based on three dimensions of agency: iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective. Thus, it is ensured that the analysis remains grounded in the theoretical framework while accommodating the empirical dynamics observed in the field. As recommended by Nowell et al., (2017) and Miles & Huberman, (1994), initial codes are developed into themes through a continuous process of comparison. To preserve the integrity of participants' experiences, the resulting themes are situated within their respective narrative contexts.

A collaborative review of the findings in in-depth discussions is conducted to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. This helps minimize potential interpretive bias through critical reflection. Additionally, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify

patterns of similarity and difference among participants, with particular attention to the influence of institutional contexts on teachers' agency practices.

### **Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Researchers' Positionality**

Data validity was ensured through the triangulation of interviews and follow-up narratives, accompanied by the researcher's ongoing engagement throughout the research process. To enrich the interpretation, identify potential biases, and refine the thematic categories as suggested by (Lincoln & Guba, 1988; Tracy, 2013), discussions were held with two other researchers specializing in qualitative research and English language education.

Participants were invited to review the initial interpretations of the research through member checking to strengthen the dialogic and participatory aspects of the research process. Clarifications provided by participants were incorporated to refine and expand the analysis (Birt et al., 2016). After receiving a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives, all participants provided consent and retained the right to withdraw at any stage without facing consequences. All identities were anonymized, and research data were securely stored to maintain confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The researcher's cultural proximity to the research context proved to be a significant asset in understanding local nuances and participants' experiences. Nevertheless, reflexivity was upheld through the use of reflective journals and discussions with the research team to minimize interpretive bias and ensure the accuracy of the analysis (Barkhuizen et al., 2025 ; Tracy, 2013).

## **FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

### **Findings**

This section presents the empirical findings from multi-round narrative interviews with three EFL teachers (Teacher A, Teacher B, and Teacher C) in Islamic junior high schools. Instead of treating their accounts as isolated personal stories, the analysis conceptualizes them as expressions of teacher agency that are socially, institutionally, and

morally situated. In particular, agency is understood to emerge from the interaction between (1) biographical experience (iterational dimension), (2) situated classroom judgment (practical-evaluative dimension), (3) future-oriented aspirations (projective dimension), and (4) the mediating role of professional development (PD).

In these three dimensions, teachers' active roles are influenced not only by pedagogical and institutional factors, but also by the moral-religious ecology within Islamic education. The teaching of English is implicitly positioned as part of a moral responsibility, a service (*khidmah*), and a process of character formation. Although these aspects are rarely stated explicitly, they are consistently influential in how pedagogical decisions are morally justified.

**Table 2.** Cross-Case Synthesis of Agency Dimensions in Islamic School Context

Dimension	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Refined Analytical Pattern
Iterational	Educational marginalization in schooling	Familial encouragement and discourse	Early exposure to global moral environment	Biographical resources are interpreted through moral-ethical valuation, shaping commitment to teaching English as service
Practical-Evaluative	Adaptation of language use for inclusivity and student dignity	Humanizing pedagogy framed by student respect ( <i>ta'dzim</i> )	Motivation through structured competition aligned with discipline norms	Pedagogical judgment reflects negotiation between communicative goals and Islamic moral expectations of respectful, non-coercive teaching
Projective	Continuous improvement of moral responsibility	Self-growth linked to pedagogical <i>amanah</i> (trust)	Mentoring framed by <i>dakwah</i> -oriented educational continuity	Future agency is expressed as a ethical responsibility to sustain moral and academic guidance for students

### ***Iterational Dimension: Biographical Experience as Morally Reframed Resources***

The participants' narratives indicate that their life experiences cannot be understood merely as motivational background; rather, they are actively reinterpreted through moral and religious perspectives that are distinctive to the context of Islamic education. Thus, past educational experiences are not treated as neutral memories but are reconstructed as ethical references that form the foundation for their current professional commitments.

In the case of Teacher A, his early experience of receiving inadequate English language instruction in a madrasah setting is not understood merely as an academic limitation, but was also interpreted as a moral responsibility to address injustices in educational practices. His statement below illustrates this repositioning.

*"I learned English with a teacher who was not an English teacher... I did not have many opportunities to receive English training based on the correct methodology."*

This experience becomes a moral anchor that legitimizes his continuous professional upgrading. Teacher A noted, "I studied for three months in Pare and participated in various training programs, including MGMP." Rather than simply describing professional development, Teacher A frames it as a form of responsibility (*amanah*) toward his students, reflecting the Islamic moral expectation that knowledge should be delivered responsibly and accurately.

Teacher B's trajectory shows a different but complementary pattern, where English learning is intertwined with aspirations that are subtly infused with moral values, influenced by family and role models. His inspiration derives not from his teachers, but from his brother, whom he credits for shaping his identity within a value-oriented household. He mentioned, "The inspiration did not actually come from my teachers, but from my older brother."

In the Islamic school ecology, such familial influence functions as a moral legitimization of educational aspiration, where ambition is acceptable insofar as it aligns with constructive, socially meaningful goals. The description of English as “the most important thing” not only reflects enthusiasm for the language itself but also indicates a focus on meaningful contributions, which aligns with Islamic values regarding the importance of useful knowledge.

Teacher C’s case introduces an additional dimension: how early exposure to global media is continuously filtered through an Islamic educational environment grounded in distinct moral and cultural foundations. The desire to communicate with foreigners is not merely understood as a form of global cosmopolitanism but rather as cross-cultural curiosity that remains purposeful and framed by ethical and moral boundaries. Teacher C said, “I had this dream when I was little, to meet foreign people... I wanted us to chat and communicate.”

This aspiration becomes pedagogically meaningful because it is later aligned with the school’s moral mission of preparing students for global engagement without losing cultural and religious identity.

Across cases, iterational agency is therefore not merely biographical; it is morally mediated remembering, where past experiences gain significance only when aligned with the ethical expectations of Islamic education.

### ***Practical-Evaluative Dimension: Pedagogical Judgment within Moral-Religious Classroom Ecology***

Teachers’ classroom decisions are best understood as situated judgments that operate within both institutional constraints and implicit moral expectations of Islamic schooling, such as respect, emotional restraint, and student dignity (*adab* and *akhlak*).

Teacher A’s use of songs and role-play is not only methodological innovation but also an attempt to ensure that learning remains engaging without violating norms of classroom propriety: “I have fun through songs... and role-playing.” His

occasional use of Indonesian is not a pedagogical deficiency but a contextual ethical choice to avoid excluding students and to preserve learning dignity. He added, "Sometimes my students do not understand, so I use Indonesian... just a little English."

Student responses are interpreted as moral affirmation rather than only cognitive achievement, indicating that relational harmony is a key evaluative criterion. Teacher A claimed, "They were happy to meet me because I gave them opportunities to use English."

Teacher B articulates his pedagogical approach as "humanizing learning," a concept that resonates strongly with Islamic educational values of compassion (*rahmah*) and respect for learners. He said, "I am more inclined towards humanizing the learning environment." His use of comics and improvised infrastructure (borrowing projectors) reflects not only creativity but also a moral commitment to ensuring access to learning despite structural constraints. This approach aligns with the ethic of educational care.

Conversely, teacher C's engagement in competitions exemplifies how motivation is structured through disciplined excellence, a value that is highly compatible with Islamic schooling norms that emphasize effort (*ikhtiar*) and disciplined striving. Teacher C remarked, "Students get bored in class... competitions increase their excitement." It is important to note that competitions serve not only as motivational tools but are also embedded in a moral narrative that emphasizes the pursuit of excellence without neglecting character formation.

Across both cases, practical-evaluative agency is therefore characterized by context-sensitive pedagogical ethics, wherein instructional choices are perceived as both pedagogical and moral acts.

### ***Projective Dimension: Future Agency as Ethical Continuity of Educational Responsibility***

Future-oriented professional agency among participants is not merely as a form of professional development, but also as an extension of their ethical responsibilities in the field of education.

Teacher A's commitment to continuous learning was clearly interpreted as a moral responsibility to remain relevant and not fall behind younger teachers. He said, "I don't want to be left behind... I continue to improve myself." In the context of Islamic education, this aligns with the principle of lifelong learning, which is viewed as an ethical obligation.

Teacher B connects professional development with responsibility across multiple dimensions—personal growth, administrative alignment, and instructional improvement. He said, "We need to improve as professionals, personally, administratively and instructionally." The framing of improvement here reflects not only competency-building, but also a moral expectation of being a trustworthy educator (*amanah*).

Teacher C's mentoring role is particularly significant for illustrating projective agency as sustained moral transmission (*tarbiyah*). He said, "I was entrusted to be a mentor or coach for competitions." This focus on engaging external guests reflects a more comprehensive vision of education, one in which education is positioned as a source of moral inspiration for the broader community, rather than being limited solely to the process of individual instruction. Thus, a proactive role in this context is not merely seen as an aspiration but constitutes an ethical extension of the teacher's function as a moral educator within the framework of the Islamic education system.

### ***Professional Development (PD) as a Mediating Space for Agency Formation***

Professional development (PD) has emerged as a vital avenue for fostering teachers' agency by providing access to new ideas, learning resources, and professional networks. In the context of Islamic schools, PD is perceived not only as a means to enhance

pedagogical competences but also as a platform for the formation of professional identity that is closely tied to the moral values and spirituality of teaching. Through various PD experiences, teachers negotiate institutional demands, personal beliefs, and their moral responsibilities as educators.

Teachers' participation in PD occurs through both formal and informal channels, each offering unique experiences. Formal PD opportunities, such as MGMP and institutional training, are regarded as sources of professional legitimacy, access to instructional materials, and opportunities to build professional communities. However, some participants feel that these formal settings do not fully address the contextual needs presents in the classroom. Teacher A explained:

*"I always save the materials and try to develop myself from there because opportunities for personal development are limited. MGMP is sometimes not optimal."*

This statement indicates that formal PD tends to support a form of agency oriented toward compliance with institutional demands and professional regulations, leaving little room for developing contextual autonomy. Nevertheless, participating in cross-regional training offers a broader space for professional reflection. Teacher B stated, "I was in a group with teachers from Sumatra and Aceh... sharing experiences made me more grateful and reflective."

Interactions with teachers from diverse social and geographical contexts broaden participants' professional perspectives while strengthening their emotional and reflective awareness.

On the other hand, informal and digital PD actually provide a more flexible space for the development of personal initiatives. Digital platforms, particularly YouTube, allow teachers to select and adapt teaching practices to suit their classroom needs. Teacher A shared, "I watch and mimic how they teach English in real-life situations. I download those videos and save them as teaching materials."

The practice of self-directed learning signifies a shift towards greater autonomous agency; however, it remains negotiated through moral and professional considerations to ensure alignment with Islamic educational norms and the need of students.

Beyond digital spaces, collaboration among teachers constitutes a crucial part of the PD experiences. The practice of sharing knowledge is perceived as a collective moral responsibility within the professional community. Teacher A stated, “We share with one another because knowledge doesn’t need to be kept to oneself.”

This perspective suggests that PD fosters agency that is relational and collective in nature. Meanwhile, reflection on personal experiences also plays a role in professional learning. Teacher C reflected,

*“When I was still a novice teacher, I once yelled at a student and tore up their book... I deeply regretted it, and since then I have disciplined students in other ways.”*

Such reflections illustrate that professional agency develops through continuous reflection on the emotional and moral experiences that contribute to the development of more ethical and humane teaching practices.

**Table 3.** Professional Development as Mediated Teacher Agency in Islamic School Context

PD Form	Example	Agentic Affordance	Constraint	Refined Interpretation
Formal (MGMP)	Teacher association training	Access to institutional legitimacy pedagogical norms	Limited and contextual responsiveness	Supports compliance-based agency aligned with system expectations
Digital	YouTube-based pedagogy	Self-directed learning and flexibility	Fragmented pedagogical coherence	Enables selective moral-pedagogical adaptation
Collaborative	Peer mentor sharing	Reflective relational agency	Informality and lack of structure	Functions as moral-professional identity formation space

In this study, the role of teachers is not merely individualistic or technical in nature; it is but is intricately woven into the moral and religious ecology of Islamic education. Personal experiences are transformed into a moral calling, with each pedagogical decision grows from a foundation of care and respect. These findings confirm that initiatives in Islamic schools go beyond basic English language teaching practices, extending into broader pedagogical, relational, and moral realms. These factors subsequently shape a distinctive, contextual professional identity that is grounded in ethical values.

## **Discussion**

### ***Teacher Agency as an Ecological and Temporally Situated Achievement***

Findings of this study indicate that teacher agency was not only temporally situated but also subtly mediated by religious–moral orientations embedded in the institutional ecology of Islamic junior high schools. Teachers’ narratives consistently connected past experiences, present pedagogical judgments, and future aspirations; however, what becomes particularly salient in this context is how these temporal dimensions were often filtered through moral-religious understandings of teaching as an act of responsibility (*amanah*) and service (*khidmah*).

Teacher A’s reflection on previous experiences, when the English language instruction they provided was perceived as ineffective, was understood not only as a form of dissatisfaction with their pedagogical practices but also as a moral responsibility to avoid “disappointing students” or neglecting the trust placed in them by their students.

In line with this, Teacher B’s emphasis on patience and care when working with students who consistently show low academic achievement was repeatedly framed within his moral responsibility as a Muslim educator, rather than being positioned solely as evidence of his professional competence. Although such pedagogical responses—such as using songs, role-plays, or bilingual explanations—could be observed in secular contexts, this

study shows that they were frequently justified through a discourse of moral accountability rooted in Islamic ethical sensibilities.

This finding slightly nuances ecological models of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015). While these frameworks convincingly explain agency as temporally constructed, the present data suggest that in faith-based settings, temporal orientation is often interwoven with moral-religious interpretation of the self.

It is important to note that this study deliberately avoids making excessive generalizations. Given the involvement of only three teachers and a limited period of fieldwork, the study does not aim to test systematic causal relationships between Islamic values and agency. Rather, it highlights how these values are manifested, expressed, and interpreted through the teachers' narratives as they reflect on their experiences and professional practices.

Therefore, the primary contribution of this study lies in the contextual and illustrative findings it offers, rather than serving as a basis for broad generalizations. This research adds a new perspective to the literature on temporality in teacher agency, as discussed by Zhang et al. (2025) and Tao and Gao (2021), by revealing that in the realm of moral and religious education, temporal narratives are often imbued with ethical nuances. However, the results of this study do not suggest that similar patterns are necessarily observed in all Islamic educational institutions.

### ***Contextual Judgments and the Practical-Evaluative Dimension***

Teachers' practical-evaluative agency emerged through continuous adaptation to classroom realities, yet these decisions were not value-neutral. Although various strategies such as the use of songs, comics, or digital videos have been widely discussed in the EFL pedagogical literature, this study conceptualizes these approaches not merely as teaching techniques, but as tools linked to a moral discourse. This discourse aims to honor students and ensure that the learning process proceeds without causing frustration or humiliation.

Teacher C, for instance, believes that the use of humor and code-switching between English and Indonesian serve as pedagogical strategies that create a comfortable classroom atmosphere and reduce students' anxiety about making mistakes. This approach is linked to the Islamic value of rahmah (compassion). This framework is not intended to assert that such strategies are intrinsically Islamic, but rather to demonstrate how Islamic ethical terms and concepts influence the interpretation and legitimization of the pedagogical decisions teachers make in their daily classroom practice.

On the other hand, these findings also indicate limitations in applying the ecological agency framework in isolation. Although the framework is highly effective in explaining contextual assessment processes (Priestley et al., 2015), it pays insufficient attention to how moral language and ethical values help guide the affective dimensions of these assessments. In the context of this study, pedagogical decisions are not merely responses to various situational constraints, but also reflect direct expressions of the teachers' moral commitments and professional identities within a religiously grounded educational environment.

### ***Professional Development as an Agentic Space***

The findings indicate that professional development (PD) operated as a differentiated space of agency, where teachers distinguish between formal institutional PD (e.g., MGMP, workshops) and informal or digitally mediated learning (e.g., YouTube tutorials, peer sharing). Formal PD is generally understood as a structured program that provides access to institutional networks, but it often fails to adequately address the real dynamics of the classroom.

Professional development (PD), whether conducted informally or through digital platforms, still requires more in-depth study. On the one hand, teachers benefit from the flexibility and ease of access offered by these various forms of PD. However, several studies highlight challenges that cannot be ignored. One such challenge is the independent use of digital materials without adequate guidance or pedagogical validation, which raises concerns

about the quality and consistency of teaching practices. Furthermore, when learning relies too heavily on peer networks, it often merely reinforces existing habits and practices rather than fostering critical reflection and ongoing renewal in teachers' professional development. In some situations, teachers adopt strategies from YouTube or their colleagues without adequately adjusting them, to the unique context and learning needs of their students.

This perspective slightly alters the optimistic view of digital PD as a space that automatically empowers (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018; Trust et al., 2016). In this study, while engagement in digital spaces does expand access to learning resources, the resulting autonomy does not occur automatically; it greatly relies on teachers' ability to critically evaluate and contextualize external information. Thus, digital professional development is better understood as a framework that offers various opportunities rather than as a space that is inherently transformative.

On the other hand, formal professional development structures, such as MGMPs, are not entirely restrictive. Although they are often viewed as forums with a rather uniform approach, in practice, these forums can also allow teachers to adapt curriculum requirements to local contexts and needs. This demonstrates that the relationship between formal and informal professional development is not dichotomous, both can be empowering or limiting, depending on how teachers integrate them into their professional practices.

### ***Faith-Based Schooling and the Moral Mediation of Agency***

The findings suggest that teaching practices in Islamic junior high schools are shaped by a moral framework that is integral to teachers' professional identities, which in turn subtly influences their autonomy. Teachers are not only responsible for imparting knowledge, but also play a vital role in instilling moral values and shaping students' character. In practice, Islamic values are not seen as rigid rules governing every educational decision. Rather, they serve as a cultural and moral foundation that helps teachers understand the meaning of their professional responsibilities. For example, the willingness to mentor students outside of class hours or to foster a

collaborative learning culture is not merely viewed as an additional task, but as a form of care and dedication that holds moral and spiritual value. In this way, the educational process becomes more meaningful, nurturing, and capable of enriching students' learning experiences holistically.

These findings align with studies on values-based education (Johnson et al., 2024), but should not be generalized into broad theoretical claims regarding Islamic education as a whole. Given the study's small-scale narrative design, the findings are best interpreted as contextual interpretations rather than evidence of systemic patterns.

From the perspective of the Global South, this study describes the role of teachers within specific cultural and institutional contexts. The concept of "provincializing" dominant theories (Connell, 2007; Santos, 2017) is approached in an exploratory manner, rather than as a definitive conclusion. This research does not offer an alternative theory; rather, it provides empirical findings that contribute to enriching comparative studies of education and religion across diverse contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examines how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at Islamic junior high schools in Indonesia construct and exercise their professional autonomy amid various institutional demands, professional development dynamics, and religious and moral values. Through an ecological-narrative lens, this study reveals that teacher agency resembles a river, continuously shifting its course, shaped by the past experiences, current pedagogical considerations, and future aspirations.

The findings indicate that teachers do not simply adhere to policy and institutional demands; instead, they act as interpreters who negotiate meaning through Islamic values that are deeply rooted in their profession. Values such as compassion, moral responsibility, and integrity serve as a compass in making pedagogical decisions and shaping their understanding of

autonomy. Here, religious values are not just external rules; they breath moral life into every step of daily teaching.

However, the study also uncovers an ambivalent side. The religious and moral ecosystem can serve as fertilizer that enriches teachers' commitment and ethical sensitivity; yet, if too rigid, it can hinder the growth of pedagogical innovation. Similarly, professional development opportunities—whether formal or digital—do not automatically expand autonomy, as their impact is heavily determined by how teachers interpret and integrate these opportunities into their institutional context.

Given the qualitative and contextual nature of this study, the results are not intended for generalization. Further research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across different institutions and regions to observe variations in the practice of teacher autonomy in Islamic education. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to understand how teachers' active roles evolve over time, particularly in response to changes in educational policy. Exploring the perspectives of students and school leaders, as well as examining the role of digital professional development platforms, will enrich our understanding of how teacher autonomy is negotiated within a complex educational ecosystem.

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