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Prospects of exercising teacher agency in facing students' learning difficulties

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ABSTRACT

Teacher agency is generally accepted as a strategy that teachers employ to face educational challenges. This article presents the result of a qualitative case study that examined learning difficulties that university students face during their study and prospects of exercising agency in facing the students' learning difficulties. The current study was conducted at a postgraduate English department in a government University in West Nusa Tenggara. The participants of this study include three students in their third semester in the academic year 2020/2021 and three university English teachers who were purposively selected. Being qualitative in nature, this study used in-depth interviews with the students to obtain data on their learning difficulties. In-depth interviews were also conducted to the university English teachers to collect data on prospects of exercising their agency in dealing with learning difficulties facing the students. The collected data were then analyzed using the following steps: identifying, classifying, describing, and explaining. Data analysis indicated that the students experienced difficulties in reading and writing. The results of the study also revealed prospects of teacher agency exercise in helping students cope with their learning difficulties as enabled by specific conditions related to teachers' pedagogical knowledge and teachers' collaborative cultures.



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Introduction

The importance of teacher agency has been recognized in education policies and curricula in almost all countries in the world. It is interpreted as the active contribution of teachers in creating work and workplace conditions for better quality education. Recent interest in teacher agency by educational researchers has resulted in several notions that consider teacher agency as mediated by the school contexts in which they operate (Biesta et al., 2017), as an effort to achieve desired learning outcomes by controlling or influencing curriculum (Jenkins, 2020) and as a strategy that teachers, as a micro policy actor, employ to face challenges at hand either by dedicating, accommodating and resisting to macro level education policy (Ali & Hamid, 2018). Thus, teacher agency exercise could be understood when teachers, as transformative professionals (Ali & Hamid, 2018), bring about positive changes to the schools and to the students using their professional, pedagogical skills and learning resources available to them.

Greater attention to teacher agency indicates a very positive change in the world of education and education policy as a response to deprofessionalism towards teachers which does not provide enough room and opportunities for teachers to exercise their agency. Teachers' role in the deprofessionalism condition is only limited to implementing prescriptive educational policies formulated and made by policymakers at the macro or national level (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

However, with the current trend where teachers are increasingly being given sufficient room to carry out their agency, teachers could respond to educational policies according to their beliefs and the conditions or context of the school where the teacher carries out teaching and learning activities (Evans, 2015; McKay, 2016). In the Indonesian context, a new paradigm of Indonesian education of *Guru Penggerak dan Merdeka Belajar* (Teacher Motivating and Independent Learning) is a good example of providing sufficient room for teachers to exercise their agency. Under this new Indonesian education paradigm teachers no longer act as a transfer of knowledge but as a facilitator in teaching and learning activities by using materials and approaches or learning strategies that are suitable for the conditions and needs of their students and the context of the school. Some studies show that teachers in Indonesia including in remote area accommodate, rather than resist, the new paradigm (Lestari, 2020; Lestari et al., 2021).

While research on agency has mostly focused on teacher agency in responding to education policies at the macro or national levels (Ali & Hamid, 2018; Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016; Liddicoat, 2014; Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2017; Zacharias, 2013), only a few studies if any, focusing on teacher agency were being done in dealing with student learning difficulties, particularly in higher education. Learning difficulty itself can be defined as a situation where students are less able to face the demands in the learning process which results in the student failing to achieve the learning objectives (McNeill, 2017). Poor working memory capacity is one form of student learning difficulty (Crowder, 2014) indicated by students' lack of ability in thinking analytically and critically, counting, memorizing, comprehending and problem-solving (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). (Andrianatos, 2019), however, has shown that passive reading culture is an important contributing factor of students' learning difficulties.

In higher education context, students' low achievement was mostly affected by students' reading and writing skills which are essential skills required for students to survive in higher-education studies (Pirttimaa et al., 2015). More specifically, to be successful in higher education, students should be able to write critically and analytically (Pineteh, 2013). A study by Fook & Sidhu (2015) have shown that reading and writing were the skills that not only undergraduate students but also postgraduate students mostly find difficult. In a Malaysian public university Alghail & Mahfoodh (2016) found that international graduate students mostly struggled with academic reading skills related to note-taking, using their own words in note-taking, finding the meaning of difficult words, identifying supporting ideas/examples, and time management for academic reading tasks completion. Meanwhile, a study by Al-Badi (2015) at a university in Australia found that international graduate ESL students face difficulties in most aspects of academic writing including language use, coherence, cohesion, writing their own voice, finding relevant topics and sources, referencing and citations.

Various studies have shown teachers' approaches to helping students cope with learning difficulties such as by applying problem-based learning (Zelazo & Lyons, 2012), and by applying self-regulated learning (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). Dealing particularly with reading, Iwai's (2016) study at a teacher education program of a mid-size university in the United States showed that explicit instruction in metacognitive reading strategies was effective in helping students deal with academic reading comprehension. In a private university in Indonesia, Ayu's (2021) study revealed that text feature walks strategy was effective to help students in higher education deal with their difficulties in critical reading comprehension of textbooks and informational texts. Regarding writing, a study by Argawati and Suryani (2020) showed that university teachers used project-based learning methods to solve students' problems related to writing skills. The study revealed that the method was effective to develop students' active and critical thinking and collaborative learning necessary for writing.

However, those studies mostly provided a top-down approach to helping students deal with their learning difficulties. They did not examine specific conditions enabling teachers to exercise their agency in coping with the students' learning difficulties. Ng and Boucher-Yip (2017) suggested that the agency exercised by teachers depends on the socio-cultural and professional background of teachers and the culture of the institution in which they operate. Ali and Hamid (2018) identified that sound pedagogical competence, available facilities, and sufficient room for teachers to be creative are necessary conditions supporting teachers to exercise their agency. Ng and Boucher-Yip (2017) and Ali and Hamid (2018) have led the field of teacher agency in English language teaching in higher education contexts. Therefore, this present study draws from Ng and Boucher-Yip (2017) and Ali and Hamid (2018) to expand the previously mentioned conditions which enable teachers to

exercise agency in higher education contexts particularly because none of the studies were conducted in Indonesian higher education contexts. Moreover, those studies focused on teacher agency in responding to educational policy on EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) and academic language development. This present study, therefore, examines the limited prior studies that have revealed prospects of teacher agency exercise in coping with students' learning difficulties in Indonesian higher education.

Method

Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach as the purpose of this research is to provide a detailed description of the learning difficulties of students and how the prospects of exercising agency by the university teachers at a postgraduate English department of Mass University (MU, a pseudonym), a government University, in West Nusa Tenggara. As Merriam and Tidell (2015) point out, for a richer description of one unit and bound system", such as learning English in the classroom, a researcher needs to use a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis.

Since this study intends to identify and explain students' learning difficulties and the prospects of teacher agency in dealing with these learning problems, the 'locality' attached to them needs to be carefully investigated. Although local in scope, university teachers do not always coexist in the same world. They live in different contexts, situations and problems with different teaching and learning activities that bring different challenges which in turn produce different agentive responses. Therefore, a case study is applied to this research. As Stake (2000) emphasizes, a case study investigates what processes occur in a given event and what relationships exist between processes and events within a specific and limited location.

Research Sample and Population

The population of this study was all teachers of the postgraduate English Department at MU comprising fourteen (14) university teachers and all of the third-semester students of the program (13 students) in the academic year 2021/2022. Three (3) teachers, Udin, Yeny, and Mohammad (pseudonyms) were selected purposively as the sample of the study. The number of years of teaching experience at the university was the reason for the selection. Udin has the longest years of teaching experience, which is 25 years, while Yeny and Rahman being respectively 17 and 10 years of teaching experience. Three (3) students, Roro, Iin and Jaelani (pseudonym) were also involved as the sample who were taken purposively by considering their different levels of achievement: high achiever (Roro), moderate achiever (Iin), low achiever (Jaelani).

Data Collection

Data collection technique employed in this study involves in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were applied to interview both teachers and students. Interviews with the students were conducted to obtain data about the students' learning difficulties. Interviews with the lecturers focused on collecting information about the prospect of agency exercised by the lecturers.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was employed as a method of data analysis in this study. Data analysis starts by examining all data obtained from interviews with the university teachers and the students. After reading, studying, and reviewing the data from the interviews, the next step is summarizing all the collected data by sorting out the main things related to the research questions. The next step was looking at the overall picture of the research results which the researcher could draw conclusions and verify so that the data becomes meaningful.

Results and Discussions

The analysis focuses on the students' learning difficulties and the prospects of teacher agency exercised by three university teachers at the postgraduate English department of MU in facing the learning difficulties. The findings revealed that reading and writing are the major learning difficulties that postgraduate students have in learning. The study also found that teachers' pedagogical knowledge and collaborative culture enabled teachers to exercise agency in helping students to cope with students' learning difficulties.

Students' learning difficulties

From the interview it is clear that the students were aware they were mostly struggling with reading and writing. Some of their comments include:

'I know that reading and writing are the most essential skills in higher education, and these are the area that I am struggling most'. (Iin)

'To be able to read academic text efficiently and critically is still struggling for me. Writing is another aspect that I find so difficult and I am worried because there are many writing assignments. I need to complete in this study'. (Jaelani)

'Students' marks are based on how good they are doing writing assignments and a good writing needs a lot of writing. Unfortunately, I am still struggling with these two skills'. (Roni)

Struggling with reading, the students admitted that reading takes a long time and understanding the reading materials is hard due to difficult vocabulary. This can be seen from the interview result below:

'I have so many problems with reading for understanding and analysis'. The vocab is mostly high level.' (Iin)

'When I read the course readers given by the lecturers, I get so confused. I tried to skim and scan, but I have to do it many times to get the main points of the reading material. So, it takes a long time to me.' (Jaelani)

'Most of the vocab in the reading material is difficult. I need to check it in the dictionary first, so it takes me quite a long time to understand the reading'. (Roro)

The students also had inadequate skills in taking notes while reading, although they were informed about the usefulness of taking notes for efficient reading:

'I have been informed many times that to read efficiently, I also have to take notes while reading, but I am not quite able to take good notes.' (Roro).

From the data, it is indicated that the students' problems with reading comprehension were mostly due to low mastery of formal or academic vocabulary and ineffective taking notes. These findings are therefore similar to Alghail and Mahfoodh's (2016) result of study.

The students' reading difficulties seemed to be one of the reasons why they could not comply with all the suggested readings given by the lectures. To understand them, they heavily relied on their lecturers' explanations:

'I can't read all the suggested readings, but some important readings are usually explained by the lecturers'. (Jaelani).

'The lecturers usually provide power point slides to present the main points covered in the selected reading materials including reflective questions related to the topic of the reading'. (Iin)

Heavy reliance on the lecturers' explanations of the reading content implies students' passiveness in reading. While the lecturer's PowerPoint slides helped students understand difficult concepts important in the reading material, the slides seemed to nurture non-reading culture, thus inhibiting students' reading development (Andrianatos, 2019).

The students realised that becoming dependent on the lectures' explanations could demotivate them to develop their reading ability. However, they were also aware that their reading difficulties greatly contributed to their writing problems:

'My writing is poor. This would not happen, if only I had a lot of reading, at least to get some ideas'. (Iin)

However, having limited ideas was not the only writing aspect that the students found difficult. The students found difficulties in many important aspects of writing:

'I feel that I already put a lot of effort in writing essays assigned by all the lecturers in all subjects. But I still get unsatisfying and even poor marks. Only one student, I noticed, get a good mark.

'My lecturer said my writing is not well-organized, and hard to understand. Even he said that my writing is like that written by undergraduate students. It is mostly descriptive and lack arguments.' (Roro)

As the students were still struggling with most academic writing aspects, high expectations of academic writing in higher education that students should be able to write critically and analytically (Pineteh, 2013) was not successfully achieved. Despite the difficulties, prospects of exercising teacher agency in helping students cope with their learning difficulties are available which can be seen in the following session.

Prospects of exercising teacher agency in helping students overcome learning problems

Based on the data analysis, it was found that there were prospects of teacher agency related to overcoming students' learning difficulties as enabled by teachers' pedagogic knowledge and collaborative culture developed by teachers.

In general, the teachers are of opinion that their pedagogical skills were supportive to help students' learning difficulties. The interview results showed that the teachers had good skills in handling their classes by providing logical stages of problem-based learning activities which could minimize students learning difficulties. Muhammad for example explained:

'My classes are characterized by having some steps from asking students to define problems related to the topic of the lessons, then exploring what alternative solutions to the problems before they decide on the most effective solutions which then are presented orally or in written way. Using the steps, the students would get used to identify problems and solutions including the ones related to their own learning.'

While Muhammad focused on the logical staging of a lesson, Yeny said that she likes using problem-based learning to encourage students' active participation which could develop critical thinking necessary for their writing and reading:

'In problem-based learning, students are to analyze issues down into its basic parts and evaluate the validity of the information. This is a critical thinking skill which is required in doing academic reading and writing'.

From the data, it is indicated that problem-based learning was potentially used by the teachers to help students to cope with reading and writing difficulties. This study, therefore confirms a study in another context (Zelazo & Lyons, 2012) which found that problem-based learning was used in higher education to cope with students' learning difficulties. Moreover, it is also clear from the interview that the teachers' use of problem-based learning with clear learning goals and logical staging of lessons was also intended to help students overcome their learning difficulties, and this is where a teacher can exercise his agency (Ali & Hamid, 2018).

The prospect of teacher agency to overcome students' learning difficulties was also enabled by collaborating with other teachers to help improve students' English competence. Based on interviews with all the lecturers, they said that they were ready to take turns contributing to fill out a session on a program called "Assistance with English" which was already provided in the postgraduate English department. For example, Udin said:

'Working together with other lecturers to identify students' difficulties in academic English skills are very possible here especially because we have a program called Assistance with English. So far, all teachers have collaborated in developing academic reading and writing material, even TOEFL material. All students are welcome to join this program, especially those who feel they have problems with academic English skills.'

As teachers' involvement in the Assistance with English program was voluntary, the teachers' contribution in developing learning materials and in teaching them in the program shows their dedication to students' learning improvement, which is a form of agency exercise (Ali & Hamid, 2018). The program, as Yeny reported, had been successful particularly because it had good team teaching, with all teachers sharing ideas and giving feedback to each other. As Yeny further confirmed that this practice had existed since the postgraduate program was established, it can be said that the teachers work under a supporting institutional culture which is an important condition allowing teachers to exercise agency (Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2017). Therefore, with the teachers' pedagogical skills and collaborative culture supporting teacher agency exercise, students of the postgraduate program would be assisted in minimizing their learning difficulties at least in dealing with academic reading and writing.

Conclusions

This study revealed that academic reading and writing are key areas of difficulties experienced by students of the postgraduate English department of MU in which teacher agency exercise is needed. The prospects for exercising agency by teachers in helping students with learning difficulties will be available when teachers have sound pedagogical knowledge. Teachers' pedagogical knowledge alone, however, is not sufficient to make teacher agency exercise happen as teachers need to work in a team to be effective in coping with students' learning problems. This study, therefore, implies the importance of not only personal agency but also collective agency in helping with students' learning. As this study is limited to addressing research problems in one government university in Indonesia, future research is needed to be conducted in different higher education settings.

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