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Negotiating GenAI in Rural Secondary Schools in Indonesia: EFL Teachers' Positioning, Identity, and Agency

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Abstract

The rapid emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is reshaping educational practices, including language education. While existing research has largely examined GenAI's instructional affordances and ethical implications, less attention has been paid to how teachers experience, interpret, and respond to these changes, particularly in under-resourced contexts. This study examined how EFL teachers in rural Indonesian secondary schools enact agency, construct professional identity, and position themselves in relation to the emergence of GenAI. A qualitative case study was employed to examine three rural EFL teachers using a series of semi-structured interviews conducted over a nine-month period. The data were then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Informed by positioning theory and teacher identity and agency, the analysis explores how teachers discursively construct their professional roles, position students, and assign pedagogical meaning to GenAI. Three interrelated themes were identified. First, teachers negotiate GenAI's pedagogical value, recognising its efficiency for instructional support while expressing concern about superficial learning and cognitive development. Second, they preserve professional identity by positioning themselves as guardians of students' cognitive integrity, enacting protective agency against premature reliance on GenAI. Third, they adapt to rural realities of integration, where infrastructural constraints, school policies, and students' informal digital practices shape the conditions of use. The study advances theoretical understandings of teacher agency by highlighting how identity and positioning processes mediate teachers' responses to GenAI and offers insights for supporting AI integration in under-resourced educational contexts.

Keywords: teacher agency, teacher identity, positioning theory, Generative Artificial Intelligence, EFL teachers, rural education

Introduction

The rapid emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is reshaping educational practices across disciplines, including language education. Tools such as ChatGPT, which can generate human-like text and multimodal outputs, have opened new possibilities for instructional support, assessment design, and language-learning activities (Foung et al., 2024; Guan et al., 2025). At the same time, their use has raised concerns regarding academic integrity, superficial engagement, and students' over-reliance on automated outputs (Abubakar et al., 2025). Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, GenAI is often framed as both a promising pedagogical resource and a disruptive force that unsettles established teaching and learning practices (Chapelle, 2025; Fathi et al., 2024).

Beyond questions of instructional effectiveness and ethical risk, the emergence of GenAI raises more fundamental issues about teachers' professional roles, authority, and responsibility. Teaching is not only a technical activity but also a relational and moral practice, shaped by beliefs about learning, students, and what counts as legitimate knowledge (Biesta et al., 2015; Hınız, 2024). From a sociocultural perspective, teachers' responses to GenAI cannot be understood simply in terms of acceptance, proficiency, or readiness (Lantolf, 2006; Yang, 2015). Rather, they involve interpretive and agentic work, through which teachers make sense of new technologies in relation to their professional identities, position their students as learners, and define the pedagogical status of GenAI within classroom practice (Lee et al., 2025; Li et al., 2019).

Teacher agency has increasingly been conceptualised as situated, relational, and mediated by identity rather than as an individual capacity or trait (Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Tao & Gao, 2017). In this view, agency is enacted through teachers' ongoing negotiations with institutional expectations, curricular demands, and local conditions (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Priestley et al., 2015). Positioning theory offers a complementary lens for examining how such agency is discursively accomplished, highlighting how teachers construct themselves, their students, and technologies such as GenAI within particular moral and pedagogical orders (Davies & Harre, 1990; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). Together, agency, identity, and positioning provide a powerful framework for understanding how teachers respond to technological change not only through action but through meaning-making.

Despite growing interest in GenAI in education, much of the existing research remains focused on technological affordances, ethical concerns, or teachers' and students' perceptions (Hınız, 2024; Karataş et al., 2024; Riser, 2025). While these studies offer valuable insights, they often under-theorise the ways in which teachers actively negotiate their roles and practices in response to GenAI. In particular, there is limited research examining how teachers enact agency through identity work and positioning processes, especially in under-resourced contexts where infrastructural constraints, school policies, and community norms strongly shape which forms of technology use are possible (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025).

In this study, identity work refers to how teachers construct and reconstruct their understanding of who they are as teachers, while positioning refers to how they locate themselves, their students, and GenAI within classroom relationships and pedagogical responsibilities. Drawing on Norton's (2013) view of identity as individuals' understanding of their relationship to the world and their perceived possibilities for action, this study examines how identity shapes teachers' understanding of their professional roles. Building on Li's (2023) argument that positioning influences both identity construction and agency, the study conceptualises teacher agency as mediated by how teachers position themselves, their students, and GenAI within classroom practice. Rural educational settings, in particular, remain underexplored despite presenting distinct challenges and opportunities for AI

integration, including unstable internet connectivity, limited access to digital resources, and uneven levels of digital literacy among teachers and students (Aguliera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Samane-Cutipa et al., 2022).

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how EFL teachers in rural Indonesian secondary schools experience, interpret, and enact their agency in response to the emergence of GenAI. Drawing on positioning theory and teacher identity agency, the study examines how teachers discursively construct their professional roles, position students as learners, and assign pedagogical meaning to GenAI within everyday practice. By focusing on under-resourced rural contexts, the study offers a context-sensitive, theoretically grounded account of teacher agency in the GenAI era.

Literature Review

GenAI in Language Education

Since the release of ChatGPT in late 2022, GenAI has rapidly become a focal point of research in language education. Early discussions were primarily dominated by conceptual and review-based studies that highlighted GenAI's transformative potential while also raising concerns about academic integrity and misuse. For example, a large-scale review by Deng et al. (2025) synthesised findings across studies and concluded that AI-supported learning can enhance academic performance, learner motivation, and higher-order thinking skills. Such optimistic accounts have contributed to a dominant narrative positioning GenAI as an educational innovation with broadly positive outcomes. However, this narrative has also been questioned, with scholars cautioning that these reported benefits may be overstated because much of the early evidence has been drawn from conceptual and review-based literature rather than empirical classroom research (Weidlich et al., 2025). This early body of work thus reflects an emerging tension between enthusiasm for GenAI's potential and uncertainty about its educational implications.

As empirical research expanded, a growing number of studies documented positive effects of GenAI on language learners, including improved language performance, increased motivation, and greater learner autonomy (Chapelle, 2025; Fathi et al., 2024; Gozali et al., 2024). GenAI has also been credited with supporting inclusive practices by providing diverse learning materials and flexible access to language input (Hınız, 2024), as well as promoting engagement through its adaptability to different learning tasks (Karataş et al., 2024). While these findings underscore GenAI's pedagogical promise, they primarily focus on learner outcomes and tend to treat GenAI as a neutral instructional tool. Less attention is given to how learning processes are shaped by students' actual use of GenAI, particularly regarding cognitive effort, sense-making, and critical engagement.

Concerns about the depth and quality of learning have become more prominent in recent scholarship. While some scholars argue that fears surrounding GenAI are exaggerated and stem from a limited understanding of how GenAI systems operate (Medina, 2024), empirical evidence suggests that students often use GenAI for surface-level tasks such as paraphrasing, rewriting, and answer generation rather than for higher-order thinking or more profound meaning-making (Fischer et al., 2024). These patterns raise important pedagogical questions about whether GenAI supports or undermines the development of critical thinking and creativity. Importantly, several studies reported that teachers express concern that uncritical reliance on GenAI may discourage sustained cognitive effort and reduce opportunities for productive struggle in language learning (Abubakar et al., 2025; Al-Kadi, 2025). This tension between efficiency and learning depth signals a shift in the literature from outcome-focused evaluations toward questions about pedagogical responsibility and mediation.

Research focusing on teachers presents a more ambivalent picture of GenAI integration. On the one hand, studies highlight teachers' concerns about academic integrity, plagiarism, and the potential erosion of teacher authority (e.g., Jeon & Lee, 2023; Kostopolus, 2025; Riser, 2025). On the other hand, emerging work points to GenAI's potential to support teaching practices, particularly in lesson planning, material adaptation, assessment design, and feedback provision (e.g., Al Ghaithi et al., 2026; Jeon & Lee, 2023; Pollino et al., 2025). For instance, Han and Li (2024) demonstrate how AI-generated feedback can be combined with teacher input to enhance students' EFL writing, reinforcing teachers' central role in pedagogical judgement rather than replacing it. Similarly, Saydazimova and Saydazimova (2025) found that teachers in Uzbekistan generally held positive attitudes toward AI and had progressed from initial adoption to collaborative use of GenAI tools. However, many had not yet developed the expertise required to act as innovators in AI-enhanced teaching. Nevertheless, much of this literature continues to frame teachers primarily as users or implementers of GenAI, focusing on functional benefits while offering limited insight into how teachers negotiate their professional roles and responsibilities in relation to GenAI.

Taken together, the literature indicates that the educational value of GenAI is neither inherent nor fixed, but contingent on how it is interpreted, regulated, and enacted in practice. While existing studies provide valuable evidence of GenAI's affordances and risks (Abubakar et al., 2025; Choi et al., 2025), they tend to focus on technological outcomes, perceptions, or patterns of use. Consequently, less attention has been given to how teachers actively negotiate the opportunities, tensions, and responsibilities associated with GenAI in their everyday professional practice. Understanding these processes is important for developing a more nuanced account of how emerging GenAI technologies are incorporated into language education.

Rural Education Context in Indonesia

Educational reform in Indonesia unfolds unevenly across urban and rural contexts, with rural schools facing long-standing structural and systemic challenges that shape teachers' professional practices and learning opportunities. While urban schools tend to benefit from stronger infrastructure, access to professional development, and institutional support, rural schools often operate under conditions of limited resources, professional isolation, and constrained instructional support (Ahiaku et al., 2025; Bjork, 2005). Teachers in rural areas frequently encounter inadequate teaching materials, heavy workloads, uneven digital literacy among students, and limited opportunities for sustained professional learning- circumstances that complicate the enactment of curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025; Samane-Cutipa et al., 2022). These disparities result in qualitatively different reform experiences, where rural teachers must rely more heavily on individual judgment and contextual adaptation.

A defining feature of rural education in Indonesia is the persistent digital divide, which has direct implications for integrating emerging technologies such as GenAI. Data from Statistics Indonesia indicate that many rural schools in Indonesia continue to face unreliable internet connectivity, limited access to digital devices, and infrastructural constraints related to electricity and transportation (BPS, 2021). As a result, formal classroom use of digital technologies is often restricted or uneven, even as students increasingly encounter digital tools informally through mobile phones, social media, and online platforms outside school (Zaim et al., 2025). Studies have shown that such uneven access exacerbates educational inequalities and limits teachers' capacity to engage meaningfully with digital pedagogies (Kim & Wargo, 2025; Mustafa et al., 2024). In this context, expectations for AI-supported learning, often articulated at policy or curricular levels, may be misaligned with the material realities of rural schooling.

Despite growing global interest in GenAI in education, empirical research examining how rural Indonesian teachers engage with GenAI remains extremely limited. Existing studies have largely focused on higher education or urban settings (Cahyadi et al., 2022; Zaim et al., 2025), offering little insight into how teachers navigate emerging technologies under conditions of infrastructural constraint and limited professional support. As a result, current understandings of GenAI integration risk overlooking the distinctive realities of rural schooling and the ways local conditions shape teachers' responses to technological change. Addressing this gap requires closer attention to teachers' experiences and decision-making within the specific sociocultural and material conditions of rural education.

Teacher Agency, Identity, and Positioning in the GenAI Era

Understanding teachers' responses to educational change requires a theoretical lens that moves beyond individual attitudes or technical competence. Sociocultural perspectives on teaching emphasise that teachers' actions are shaped by historically situated practices, institutional expectations, and moral commitments rather than by tools alone (Lantolf, 2006; Yang, 2015). In this sense, the emergence of GenAI in education is not merely a technological development, but a professional and ethical challenge that calls for careful theorisation of how teachers interpret change, define responsibility, and legitimise pedagogical action. To address this complexity, the present study draws on an integrated framework of teacher agency, professional identity, and positioning theory to examine how teachers respond to GenAI within contextually constrained conditions.

Contemporary accounts of teacher agency increasingly reject deficit or trait-based models that frame agency as an individual's motivation or capacity. Instead, agency is conceptualised as ecologically and relationally achieved. It emerges through the interaction of teachers' professional histories, available resources, institutional structures, and sociocultural norms (Ahearn, 2001; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). From this perspective, what teachers can do is inseparable from the conditions in which they work. This view is particularly salient in under-resourced settings, where infrastructural limitations, policy constraints, and community expectations delimit the range of pedagogical possibilities. An ecological conception of agency also recognises protective and selective forms of action, such as strategic restraint and boundary-setting, as legitimate expressions of agency rather than indicators of resistance or inertia (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Bowen et al., 2021; Priestley et al., 2015). In the context of GenAI, agency may therefore be enacted through mediation, regulation, and deliberate non-use, rather than through enthusiastic adoption.

Tao and Gao (2017) emphasise that teacher agency is closely intertwined with professional identity, which is widely theorised as dynamic, relational, and morally grounded rather than fixed or singular. Dialogical perspectives on identity highlight how teachers inhabit multiple, sometimes competing positions—such as innovator, caretaker, assessor, or guardian—depending on situational demands (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Norton, 2013). Research in language teacher education has consistently shown that teachers exercise agency in ways that align with their professional identities (Ashton, 2022; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Lasky, 2005; Tao & Gao, 2017). At the same time, both identity construction and the enactment of agency are shaped by the social and structural conditions in which teachers work. Consequently, identity shapes what teachers perceive as legitimate, necessary, or risky in their practice (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). During periods of educational reform or technological disruption, identity tensions often intensify as teachers negotiate expectations to innovate while preserving pedagogical values, learner development, and relational trust (Darvin, 2025). These tensions are likely to become even more pronounced with the emergence of GenAI. Teachers must balance expectations to demonstrate technological responsiveness with concerns about students' cognitive integrity, creativity, and authentic learning.

While agency and identity explain why teachers act in particular ways, positioning theory provides analytic tools for examining how these actions are discursively enacted and justified (Li, 2023). Positioning theory focuses on how individuals locate themselves and others within interactional and narrative contexts, thereby constructing rights, duties, and moral orders (Davies, 1990; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). In educational settings, teachers may position students as developing learners, themselves as responsible authorities, and technologies as supportive tools or disruptive threats. This perspective is especially valuable for studying GenAI, as it often appears in teachers' accounts as an actor-like presence that reshapes epistemic responsibility, authorship, and accountability. Through positioning, teachers negotiate the pedagogical status of GenAI and legitimise decisions to regulate, restrict, or repurpose its use in the classroom.

Taken together, agency, identity, and positioning provide a coherent theoretical framework for examining teachers' responses to GenAI as situated social action rather than individual preference. Agency captures teachers' capacity to act within and against constraints. Identity illuminates the moral and professional commitments that guide those actions, while positioning reveals the discursive processes through which teachers make their actions intelligible and legitimate (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018; Li, 2023; Norton, 2013). Despite growing interest in GenAI in language education, few studies have integrated these perspectives to examine how teachers respond to technological change, particularly in under-resourced rural contexts. Existing research has paid limited attention to how contextual constraints shape teachers' negotiation of GenAI and their responsibility for mediating its use in classroom practice. By adopting this integrated framework, the present study offers a theoretically grounded account of how rural Indonesian EFL teachers enact agency through negotiation, protection, and adaptation in response to the emergence of GenAI. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do EFL teachers in rural Indonesian secondary schools interpret and negotiate the pedagogical value of GenAI in English language teaching and learning?
RQ2. How do these teachers enact agency through identity construction and positioning in responding to the emergence of GenAI within rural school contexts?

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design (Duff, 2008). A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given the study's aim to capture teachers' meaning-making processes, professional reasoning, and contextually situated practices (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Furthermore, teacher agency is understood as contextually embedded; therefore, a case study design is particularly appropriate for examining how agency is enacted within specific educational settings. Consistent with Tisdell's (2025) conception of an interpretive case study, the study sought to understand how teachers made sense of and responded to the emergence of GenAI within their professional contexts. At the same time, the study was exploratory in nature because GenAI represents a relatively recent phenomenon in language education, and little is known about how teachers in rural schools navigate its opportunities and challenges (Yin, 2018). The purpose of this study was not to produce statistically representative findings or claims about all Indonesian EFL teachers. Rather, it aimed to generate contextually grounded insights into how a small group of teachers interpreted and responded to GenAI within their rural educational settings. As an exploratory and interpretive case study involving only three participants, the findings are necessarily context-bound and should not be interpreted as representative of rural Indonesian secondary schools more broadly. Instead, they offer contextually situated insights that readers may

consider in relation to similar educational settings, while recognising that their applicability beyond the cases studied is inherently limited (Lincoln, 1988; Yin, 2018).

Participants

The study focused on three EFL teachers, referred to by the pseudonyms Rudy, Astrid, and Iman, working in rural Indonesian junior secondary schools. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to identify teachers who could provide rich insights into the study's focus. Selection was guided by several criteria: (a) participants were English teachers in rural secondary schools, (b) they actively engaged in professional learning opportunities through the local English teacher professional community (MGMP), and (c) they were recommended by the head of the local MGMP, who had extensive knowledge of teachers working across rural schools in the region. The three teachers were selected from a larger doctoral project because they explicitly discussed GenAI and reflected on its implications for their teaching practices during interviews.

All three teachers worked in schools located in a mountainous rural region characterised by limited technological infrastructure, restricted student access to digital devices, and school and community norms that regulate technology use, including no-phone policies during classroom learning. Although they varied in professional experience, pedagogical orientations, and responses to GenAI, all were simultaneously navigating the growing presence of AI technologies in education. Collectively, these participants provide complementary perspectives on how teacher agency, identity, and positioning are enacted in response to GenAI within under-resourced rural school contexts.

Data Collections

The data were collected over a nine-month period through three in-depth semi-structured interviews and two shorter follow-up semi-structured interviews with each participant. The initial interviews explored teachers' experiences of curriculum reform, formative assessment, and classroom practice. The subsequent interviews followed an iterative design, with interview protocols refined to explore issues that had emerged in participants' earlier accounts. Consequently, while the broader doctoral project was not originally designed to investigate GenAI specifically, the topic emerged as a salient issue as teachers reflected on contemporary changes in their professional practice. Where participants had previously discussed GenAI, subsequent interviews included more focused questions to clarify and deepen understanding of how their perspectives evolved and how GenAI influenced their pedagogical thinking and classroom practice. This article therefore draws specifically on interview data from the three participants whose discussions of GenAI developed across multiple interviews and provided sufficiently rich data for focused analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and conducted in accordance with the researcher's institutional ethical approval (Reference No. 4000029239).

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach, which emphasises the interpretive, iterative, and reflexive nature of qualitative analysis. RTA was appropriate for this study because it enabled theoretically informed, data-driven exploration of how teachers experienced, interpreted, and responded to the emergence of GenAI in their professional practice. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, this study adopted a contextualist epistemological stance, recognising that teachers' experiences of GenAI are shaped by their professional identities, school contexts, and broader sociocultural conditions, while also acknowledging that these experiences are interpreted and communicated through participants'

own meaning-making. Accordingly, the analysis sought to understand teachers' accounts as situated interpretations of professional practice rather than objective representations of reality.

The first phase involved familiarisation with the data. I repeatedly listened to the interview recordings to attend to tone, emphasis, and story before and during transcription. Each transcript was then read multiple times to develop an in-depth understanding of teachers' accounts. During this phase, I made analytic notes focusing on how teachers described their professional roles, articulated concerns or expectations about GenAI, and positioned themselves and their students in relation to GenAI use. Particular attention was paid to moments where teachers reflected on responsibility, decision-making, and boundaries around technology use, as these were indicative of agentic and identity-related meaning-making.

In the second phase, I conducted inductive coding, generating codes that captured teachers' expressions of agency, professional identity, and positioning in response to GenAI. Codes were grounded in participants' language and meanings rather than imposed from pre-existing theoretical categories, in line with the principles of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Related codes were then collated and clustered to identify broader patterns of meaning, leading to the development of preliminary themes that reflected how teachers negotiated the pedagogical value of GenAI, preserved professional identity, and adapted practices within contextual constraints. Subsequent phases involved reviewing, defining, and naming themes through continuous comparison between coded extracts, the entire dataset, and the evolving analytic narrative. This iterative process enabled refinement of thematic boundaries and interpretive depth, recognising that themes were actively constructed rather than discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2023).

Throughout the analytic process, I engaged in reflexive journaling to document analytic decisions, emerging interpretations, and reflective responses to the data. As an Indonesian researcher and former EFL teacher with professional experience in secondary education, I brought prior understandings of curriculum reform, rural schooling, and teacher professional learning to the analysis. This background supported contextual sensitivity in interpreting participants' accounts but also required ongoing reflexive engagement to critically examine how my experiences, assumptions, and professional commitments might shape the analytic process. Reflexive journaling, therefore, served not only as a record of analytic decisions but also as a means of interrogating my own interpretations and assumptions throughout the development of themes. Once the final themes were defined and aligned with the study's research aims, the analytic writing phase involved weaving participants' accounts with interpretive commentary to produce a coherent thematic account of teacher agency, identity construction, and positioning in the emergence of GenAI.

Findings

Analysis of the interview data identified three interrelated themes that illuminate how teachers make sense of and respond to the emergence of GenAI in rural secondary school contexts. The first theme, *Negotiating the Pedagogical Value of GenAI*, examines how teachers evaluate the educational legitimacy of GenAI by weighing its potential to support teaching and learning against concerns about critical thinking, cognitive development, and assessment integrity. The second theme, *Preserving Professional Teacher Identity Amidst GenAI Disruption*, explores how teachers enact and defend their professional roles as guides, mentors, and innovators in response to the growing presence of AI in education. The third theme, *Navigating Rural Realities of GenAI Integration*, highlights how infrastructural constraints, school policies, and community norms shape context-sensitive adaptations to GenAI use. Together, these themes portray teacher agency as a situated process through which teachers exercise professional judgement, negotiate their educational responsibilities, and adapt pedagogical practices within the opportunities and constraints of a rural context.

Negotiating the Pedagogical Value of GenAI

This theme illustrates how the three teachers negotiate the pedagogical value of GenAI by continuously balancing its instructional affordances with perceived risks to student learning. Across the findings, GenAI is not framed in binary terms as either beneficial or harmful; rather, it is understood as a double-edged pedagogical resource whose value depends on how, when, and by whom it is used. While the participants differed in the extent to which they embraced GenAI, all three evaluated its educational value in relation to learning quality, critical thinking, and students' developmental needs. Astrid explicitly captured this duality:

> For AI specifically, I see two sides. On the one hand, it is very helpful to me as a teacher, for example, when searching for references or methods for teaching certain topics. On the other hand, for students, it can become an instant shortcut to completing tasks without thinking critically.

This reflection highlights an early tension in the teachers' sense-making. While Astrid positioned GenAI as a resource to enhance instructional preparation and professional efficiency, she also expressed concern that students might use it to bypass the thinking processes necessary for learning. Rather than rejecting GenAI, she evaluated its value based on whether it supported or displaced students' active engagement in learning tasks.

This concern becomes more pronounced when teachers reflect on the implications of GenAI for students' thinking development. Among the three participants, Rudy expressed the strongest reservations about introducing GenAI to lower secondary students. While acknowledging that GenAI may have educational potential, he argued that students first require strong foundations in critical and rational thinking before they can engage with such tools responsibly. As he explained:

> If their rational thinking is functioning well, I believe they would be capable of using AI wisely. But at a basic level, it seems that students' rational and critical thinking skills remain underdeveloped… If we justify the use of AI in learning without such foundations, students may be able to 'master' the tools, but I fear it will manipulate their ability to think.

This concern was closely connected to his view that GenAI may encourage students to prioritise convenience over intellectual effort. Reflecting on the junior secondary context, he further explained:

> So, my view remains that, at the junior high school level, introducing AI is not yet necessary—especially not in a way that students constantly rely on it throughout the learning process. The concern is that their ability to critically assess sources is still lacking. If their critical thinking doesn't develop early on, it will be overridden by the practicality AI offers. They'll start asking, 'Why do something the hard way when AI can do it easily?' And that's what really worries me.

Rather than positioning GenAI as inherently problematic, Rudy's concern centred on students' cognitive readiness. Discursively, he constructed a developmental storyline through repeated expressions such as "not yet necessary," "first require," and "before they can," positioning critical thinking as a prerequisite for meaningful use of GenAI. This storyline assigns students the responsibility to develop independent reasoning before engaging with GenAI, while simultaneously positioning teachers as responsible for protecting and cultivating these foundational capacities. From his perspective, Rudy saw that the pedagogical value of GenAI depends not on the technology itself but on whether students possess the critical capacities necessary to evaluate and interpret information independently.

GenAI is, therefore, positioned not simply as a technological tool but as an educational resource whose legitimacy must be judged in relation to students' developmental readiness and long-term learning outcomes.

In contrast to Rudy's more cautious stance, Iman emphasised the practical and pedagogical benefits that GenAI can offer teachers. Rather than viewing GenAI primarily as a threat, he described it as a resource that can support lesson preparation, expand access to teaching materials, and assist teachers when they encounter difficulties in planning instruction. As he explained:

> I'm very grateful for this technology. When teachers reach a standstill—when it's already at an acute stage—we don't have to be confused anymore because this [GenAI] really helps. For example, we can use text searches to find relevant texts that match current needs. If a "descriptive" text is outdated, we can update it to suit today's context.

For Iman, GenAI was particularly valuable because it enabled teachers to adapt materials and access knowledge that might otherwise be difficult to obtain. However, his endorsement was not unconditional. While recognising GenAI's efficiency, he argued that technological support should remain balanced with independent thinking:

> Technology should not be used 100% all the time, because it is vulnerable to misuse, especially for assessment purposes. Instead, it can be introduced as a way to make learning more efficient and time-saving, but it must always be balanced with independent thinking.

Similarly, he stressed the importance of transparency and accountability when integrating GenAI into educational practice:

> If teachers are not wise and careful in managing it, it could lead to reduced transparency and accountability… we need strategies to handle this—deciding whether AI should be used only by teachers or also by students, but with clear boundaries.

Iman's account illustrates a pragmatic orientation toward GenAI in which pedagogical value is recognised, but only when technological efficiency remains subordinate to learning goals. Rather than advocating unrestricted adoption, he positioned GenAI as a supplementary resource whose educational legitimacy depends on how it is integrated into the learning process.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that the pedagogical value of GenAI is not understood as fixed or self-evident. Rather, teachers continuously evaluate GenAI in relation to its perceived effects on learning quality, critical thinking, and assessment integrity. While Rudy foregrounded concerns about cognitive readiness, Astrid adopted a more balanced position that recognised both opportunities and risks, and Iman highlighted GenAI's potential to support instructional practice when used purposefully. Across these different perspectives, agency was enacted through pedagogical judgement: selectively adopting, adapting, or restricting GenAI according to whether it was perceived to enhance meaningful learning. This theme, therefore, highlights how teachers negotiate the educational legitimacy of GenAI rather than simply accepting or rejecting technological innovation.

Preserving Professional Teacher Identity Amidst GenAI Disruption

Beyond practical considerations, the emergence of GenAI is experienced by the teachers as a challenge to their professional identity and the relational core of teaching. GenAI is perceived not only as a tool that reshapes instructional practices but also as a force that risks displacing the teacher's role in

guiding students' learning. Across the data, this concern is expressed through anxieties that students may become more engaged with technology than with their teachers, potentially weakening teacher–student interaction. Teaching, for these participants, is understood not merely as the transmission of knowledge but as a moral and developmental responsibility—one that involves shaping students' ways of thinking, evaluating information, and forming learning dispositions. This perception situates GenAI as a disruptive presence that must be carefully negotiated to preserve the teacher's professional legitimacy and relational authority.

Rudy's account illustrates how concerns about GenAI become intertwined with his understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Drawing on everyday classroom experiences, he noted that even with basic tools such as Google Search, students often copy information without adequately evaluating its credibility or meaning. While he worried that GenAI might amplify this tendency, his response was not simply to restrict technology. Rather, he positioned himself as responsible for helping students develop habits of verification and critical evaluation. As he explained:

> As a teacher, my role is to bridge that gap. When students submit an answer, I often ask them about their sources—where did they get the information, and have they cross-checked it? This is to prevent them from blindly accepting and reproducing AI-generated content. I encourage them to validate the information by checking multiple sources and comparing the results.

This statement reveals how Rudy understood his professional role as extending beyond content delivery to the cultivation of students' critical judgment. Instead of allowing AI-generated responses to stand unquestioned, he intentionally prompted students to explain and validate their sources. His agency is therefore enacted through practices of questioning, verification, and scaffolding. From a positioning perspective, Rudy positioned himself as a bridge between information and understanding, responsible for guiding students through increasingly complex information environments. GenAI is not rejected outright, but its use is mediated through the teacher's role as a critical guide and facilitator of reflective thinking.

In contrast, Astrid adopted a more tempered stance that nonetheless reinforces the centrality of teacher identity. While acknowledging that GenAI is an inevitable part of contemporary education and can support pedagogical innovation, she rejected the idea that GenAI should occupy a central role in learning. As she explained, "the important thing is not to let students think that AI is the core of learning, but rather that it is a tool to help them". She elaborated further:

> Sometimes, when I ask students to write a text, I can see that some have used AI tools—such as ChatGPT or similar ones. Still, I believe students need to learn how to do it themselves, because that's important for their future. So, I tell them: AI can help you, but it should not be the main source. You can use it to learn, find information, and develop your potential, but whenever possible, you should return to books. Books have always been the most straightforward and most affordable resource, from ancient times to the present. So, there is still potential for students to use AI productively. The key point to teach them is this: the core is not AI itself, but how we, as individuals, can use it appropriately for our needs. In that way, AI can help improve productivity and student understanding.

Through this framing, Astrid positioned herself as a mediator who helps students make informed decisions about knowledge sources rather than simply consuming AI-generated information. Discursively, this positioning is accomplished through repeated contrasts, such as "AI can help you" but "it should not be the main source," and "return to books" whenever possible. These contrasts construct a clear

pedagogical hierarchy in which GenAI is assigned a supportive role, while teachers and established learning resources retain epistemic authority. Her reminders to consult books, verify information, and develop independent learning habits demonstrate agency enacted through guidance and mentorship. Openness to GenAI, therefore, coexists with a strong commitment to preserving the teacher's role in shaping students' learning dispositions, judgment, and long-term intellectual development. Rather than positioning GenAI as a replacement for teaching, Astrid positioned it as a tool whose educational value depends on the teacher's ongoing mediation.

The protective dimension of teacher identity is expressed differently in Iman's account. While he shared concerns about students' overreliance on GenAI, his response centred on the need for continual professional adaptation. He explained:

> When it comes to assessment, the risk is that students may misuse AI by simply searching for answers. Because AI provides instant results, they might rely on it instead of thinking critically. Of course, AI can be helpful—it can support the learning process—but it should not be used as the primary tool for evaluation. If students are given complete freedom to use it, then there is also the danger of misuse.

However, rather than viewing this challenge as evidence that teachers are becoming less relevant, he interpreted it as a call for ongoing professional growth:

> From my perspective, this is where teachers need to innovate continually. Teachers must always look for beneficial breakthroughs. Innovation should not be limited to just one or two applications in a monotonous way. Rather, teachers must continually adapt, innovate, and find new tools and methods to integrate into the learning process.

Importantly, Iman framed the emergence of GenAI not as a threat that diminishes teachers' relevance but as a challenge that requires continual professional renewal. His agency is expressed through adaptation, experimentation, and pedagogical innovation. By emphasising the need to develop new methods and learning experiences, he positioned teachers as active designers of learning environments rather than passive users of technology. In this sense, professional identity is preserved not by resisting change but by continually redefining teaching practices in response to emerging educational conditions.

From a positioning theory perspective, these findings show how teachers discursively construct and defend their professional roles in response to the disruption of GenAI (Davies & Harre, 1990; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). While all three participants positioned students as learners who require guidance in navigating GenAI, they enacted teacher identity in different ways. Rudy positioned himself as a bridge-builder who helps students validate and critically evaluate information. Astrid positioned herself as a mentor who guides students toward responsible and balanced use of knowledge sources. In contrast, Iman positioned himself as an innovator who responds to technological change through continual adaptation and pedagogical renewal. Across these different enactments, GenAI was positioned not as an autonomous authority but as a tool whose educational value remains dependent on teacher judgment and mediation.

The identity–agency relationship is evident in how teachers' understandings of their professional responsibilities directly shape their actions. Rather than exercising agency through technological mastery alone, they enacted agency through validating information, mentoring responsible learning habits, and redesigning pedagogical practices. This theme, therefore, demonstrates that preserving teacher identity in the GenAI era involves ongoing negotiation of professional roles, in which agency is exercised through guidance, mentorship, and innovation to sustain the human dimensions of teaching and learning.

Navigating Rural Realities of GenAI Integration

This theme highlights how the rural context fundamentally shapes how GenAI can—and cannot—be integrated into classroom practice. While the teachers acknowledge that students are already immersed in digital environments outside school, they emphasise that such engagement is often superficial and poorly regulated. At the same time, infrastructural constraints, school-wide policies, and community norms significantly limit formal classroom use of GenAI. Interestingly, the teachers did not view these constraints solely as barriers; they framed them as conditions requiring adaptive, context-sensitive responses. In doing so, they positioned themselves as mediators who bridge students' informal digital experiences with formal learning expectations, negotiating what counts as legitimate GenAI use within the realities of a rural school setting.

A recurring tension in the data lies between students' informal exposure to GenAI and the controlled nature of classroom learning. Astrid described how students freely encounter AI-related tools outside school, yet their use tends to prioritise speed and convenience over understanding. She recounted how students previously relied on tools such as Google Lens to instantly translate texts, completing tasks quickly but without processing meaning.

> Previously, when I displayed text on the screen—say, a long report—they would immediately use Google Lens. They would scan the text, read the translation, and then just summarise it without really processing the meaning. That's why I try to limit their reliance on such tools in the classroom.

In response, she deliberately limited phone use during lessons, explaining that when students were required to translate manually, "they remember more easily, focus better, and are less distracted." This contrast highlights how informal digital practices and formal pedagogical goals often operate according to different logics. Teacher agency emerges here not through expanding GenAI access, but through restructuring learning conditions to slow down processes and re-centre cognitive engagement.

Rudy's account further illustrates how rural school policies shape pedagogical possibilities. He explained that a school-wide no-phone policy had been strictly enforced, resulting in classrooms that rely primarily on "interaction, dialogue, text, videos from the teacher, images, or other media specifically designed for that purpose." While this policy limits direct access to GenAI, Rudy did not frame it as regressive. Instead, he reflected critically on what technology displaces, contrasting contemporary digital immediacy with earlier learning practices that cultivated patience and memory. His observation that "processes that are fast tend to be forgotten quickly" positions technology as reshaping not only access to information but also students' relationships with effort and retention. Through this lens, rural constraints become pedagogical resources that allow teachers to preserve slower, more deliberate learning practices.

Teacher agency is enacted as a contextual and regulatory practice, particularly in how teachers deliberately structure and monitor students' engagement with GenAI across learning contexts. Astrid, for example, described regulating technology use during group work by allowing only one phone per group under close supervision, while discouraging reliance on AI-generated responses.

> The way I handle this is by controlling what I can—mainly during classroom learning… For example, when I assign group work, I allow just one phone per group as a resource. I stay nearby to supervise their browsing and try to discourage the use of AI tools during those activities.

Her agency is further evident in how she responded to suspected GenAI use in homework. Rather than penalising students, she invited them to explain their reasoning, structure, and language choices:

> When they turn in homework that looks suspicious… I'll display it and ask: 'Do you understand what you wrote? Can you explain these steps? Why is this sentence structured this way?" If it's a narrative, I might ask: "Which part is the orientation? Which part is the complication? If the student can't explain, then I know they didn't make it themselves.

Importantly, Astrid's enactment of agency is mediated by her professional identity as a supportive educator. Instead of positioning students as offenders, she reframed potential misuse of GenAI as a learning opportunity, maintaining students' motivation while encouraging deeper understanding. These practices illustrate how agency operates as contextual regulation: although Astrid could not control students' digital practices beyond the classroom, she actively designed pedagogical interactions that surface students' thinking and reassert the value of understanding over mere task completion.

The current study findings show that teacher agency in rural contexts is inherently relational and situated (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004). Through positioning theory, students are constructed as digital natives whose technological familiarity does not necessarily equate to critical competence. At the same time, GenAI is positioned as both an unavoidable external influence and a disruptive shortcut. Teachers, in turn, position themselves as community-embedded educators who negotiate between institutional policies and students' informal practices. Their identity as local educators—accountable not only to curricular demands but also to community norms—shapes how agency is enacted. Rather than pursuing full GenAI integration, they adapt pedagogical practices to local realities, scaffold critical literacies indirectly, and prioritise learning conditions that sustain attention, memory, and interaction.

Discussion

This study extends current understandings of GenAI in language education by foregrounding how teacher agency, professional identity, and positioning intersect in a rural, under-resourced context. Importantly, the three themes should not be understood as representing separate types of teacher agency. Rather, they illustrate different domains in which agency was enacted as teachers responded to the emergence of GenAI. In negotiating the pedagogical value of GenAI, teachers exercised agency through pedagogical judgement about when and how GenAI could meaningfully support learning. In preserving professional identity, agency was enacted through protecting valued teacher–student relationships and students' cognitive development. In navigating rural realities, agency was expressed through contextual adaptation as teachers responded to material conditions, school policies, and community expectations. Together, these domains demonstrate that teacher agency in the context of GenAI is not a singular response, but a multifaceted process of professional judgement enacted across pedagogical, professional, and contextual dimensions.

Much of the existing literature on GenAI in education frames teachers primarily in terms of adoption, acceptance, or readiness, often focusing on technological affordances such as efficiency, automation, and personalised feedback (Al-Kadi, 2025; Taheri et al., 2025; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Zhai, 2024). For example, Saydazimova and Saydazimova (2025) found that teachers in Uzbekistan generally demonstrated positive perceptions of GenAI and had progressed toward adopter and collaborator roles in GenAI implementation. While such studies provide valuable insights into teachers' engagement with GenAI, they primarily conceptualise teachers in relation to levels of adoption and use. In contrast, the findings of this study demonstrate that teacher agency is enacted less through technological uptake and more through selective restraint, moral judgement, and contextual negotiation.

At the same time, the findings resonate with previous studies that characterise GenAI as a double-edged pedagogical tool. Consistent with earlier research, the participating teachers recognised GenAI's potential to support instructional preparation while expressing concerns about over-reliance, superficial learning, and threats to academic integrity (Abubakar et al., 2025; Vieriu & Petrea, 2025). Viewing these findings through a sociocultural perspective provides further insight into how teachers evaluated GenAI's role in learning. While sociocultural theory conceptualises learning as a mediated and developmental process (Lantolf, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978), the participants did not assume that every form of technological mediation equally supported learning. Instead, they continuously evaluated whether GenAI fostered the effortful engagement, reasoning, and knowledge construction they regarded as central to students' development. From this perspective, teacher agency involves not only regulating technology use but also making pedagogical judgements about the educational legitimacy of different forms of mediation. The findings illustrate how teachers operationalise their underlying principles when responding to emerging technologies in classroom practice.

Across the three themes, the findings resonate with Kayi-Aydar (2019), revealing that professional identity consistently mediated how teachers exercised agency in responding to GenAI. However, the findings also highlight important differences in how this identity–agency relationship was enacted. Rudy adopted the most cautious stance, positioning GenAI as potentially premature for junior secondary students whose critical thinking was still developing. In contrast, Astrid viewed GenAI as an inevitable educational resource but emphasised that it should remain subordinate to teacher guidance and students' own cognitive engagement. Iman expressed the strongest support for GenAI as a professional resource for teachers while simultaneously advocating clear boundaries around its use in student assessment and calling for continued teacher innovation. These differences suggest that teacher agency cannot be understood as a uniform response to technological change but is shaped by teachers' distinct professional identities, pedagogical priorities, and interpretations of students' learning needs.

Positioning theory helps explain these variations by illuminating how teachers discursively constructed relationships between themselves, their students, and GenAI (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). While all three teachers positioned themselves as responsible educators committed to supporting students' learning and development, they differed in how they positioned GenAI—as a developmental risk that required restraint, a conditional pedagogical resource whose value depended on purposeful use, or a professional support tool that could enhance teaching while remaining subject to teachers' judgement. These different positionings shaped the distinct ways in which teacher agency was enacted across the pedagogical, professional, and contextual domains identified in this study. Consistent with Ahearn's (2001) view of agency as a situated accomplishment, the findings demonstrate that teacher agency emerged through the interaction of professional identity, contextual conditions, and teachers' interpretations of what constituted educationally valuable learning.

The rural context plays a critical role in shaping these agentic practices. In contrast to studies conducted in relatively well-resourced educational settings such as Hong Kong (Choi et al., 2025), Turkey (Filiz et al., 2025), China (Jia & Pun, 2025), and Australia (Barnes & Tour, 2024) where GenAI integration is often framed primarily as a matter of capability, access, and teacher training, this study demonstrates how infrastructural limitations, school-wide phone bans, and community expectations shape teachers' pedagogical decision-making. Viewed through an ecological perspective of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015), these contextual conditions are not simply external constraints that limit teachers' actions. Rather, they form part of the ecological environment within which teachers exercise professional judgement about what constitutes meaningful learning. The participants did not merely adapt to rural conditions; they actively interpreted school phone restrictions and limited technological access in relation to their educational goals, frequently viewing these conditions as supporting classroom interaction, sustained attention, and deeper cognitive engagement.

At the same time, these protective strategies also involve pedagogical trade-offs. Although restricting students' access to phones and GenAI may help minimise distraction and encourage independent thinking, it may also limit opportunities for some learners—particularly those with lower English proficiency—to benefit from translation, vocabulary support, and other forms of scaffolded assistance that GenAI can provide (e.g., Chapelle, 2025; Fathi et al., 2024). These trade-offs highlight that teachers' decisions about GenAI are not simply technological choices but professional judgements that require balancing cognitive development with equitable learning support. This interpretation also resonates with Selwyn's (2015) critique of technologically deterministic perspectives on educational innovation. Rather than assuming that greater access to GenAI necessarily leads to better learning, the participating teachers evaluated GenAI based on its pedagogical consequences for students' thinking, engagement, and learning processes. Their accounts, therefore, suggest that decisions about GenAI integration are fundamentally educational rather than technological, requiring teachers to exercise professional judgement about when, how, and under what conditions GenAI supports learning within their local context.

Recommendation and Limitations

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that meaningful engagement with GenAI does not require immediate or extensive classroom adoption. Teachers can exercise agency by curating the use of GenAI in ways that align with developmental goals, relational pedagogy, and local realities. Strategies such as delaying GenAI exposure in the early stages of learning, prioritising explanation and validation, and maintaining teacher-led dialogue support the call for responsible and pedagogically grounded GenAI integration (Filiz et al., 2025; Ho & Lee, 2025; Markauskaite et al., 2022). Recognising protective and selective positioning as a legitimate professional response is particularly important in under-resourced contexts, where uncritical adoption may exacerbate learning inequities.

The findings also highlight the importance of developing locally responsive school policies on the use of GenAI. Participants' decisions were shaped not only by pedagogical beliefs but also by school-wide phone restrictions, uneven student access to digital devices, unstable internet connectivity, and community expectations surrounding technology use. Consequently, GenAI integration strategies developed for highly resourced educational settings may not always be appropriate for rural schools. Policymakers and school leaders should therefore avoid assuming equal technological access across contexts and instead support flexible approaches that allow teachers to adapt GenAI-related practices to local conditions and students' needs.

For researchers, this study underscores the value of moving beyond adoption-focused frameworks and examining GenAI integration through lenses that foreground identity, agency, and positioning. By adopting a reflexive thematic analysis approach and case study design (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Duff, 2008; Tisdell et al., 2025; Yin, 2018), the study highlights how teachers make sense of GenAI through discourse, identity, and moral reasoning. Future research could extend this work through longitudinal designs that trace how teachers' positioning and agentic strategies evolve as GenAI becomes more embedded in educational systems. Comparative studies across rural and urban contexts may also reveal how different ecological conditions shape teachers' responses to GenAI in divergent ways.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a small number of participants within a specific rural Indonesian context, which limits statistical generalisability. However, the study does not aim to generalise its findings statistically, but to offer theoretically grounded insights into teacher agency and GenAI integration that can inform understanding in similar contexts (Yin, 2018). The reliance on interview data may privilege teachers' articulated beliefs over their enacted classroom practices, suggesting the need for future research that incorporates extended student perspectives. Finally, given the rapid evolution of GenAI technologies, teachers' perceptions and practices are likely

to shift over time. The findings should therefore be understood as situated within a particular moment in the emergence of GenAI rather than as fixed or universal positions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that teacher agency in the GenAI era is best understood not as a binary of adoption or rejection, but as a multifaceted process enacted across interconnected pedagogical, professional, and contextual domains. Within these domains, teachers exercised agency by negotiating the pedagogical value of GenAI, protecting their professional identities and students' learning, and adapting practice to the realities of rural schooling. These forms of agency were mediated by professional identity and enacted through the ongoing positioning of the self, students, and GenAI. By foregrounding how EFL teachers in rural Indonesian secondary schools made sense of GenAI within sociocultural and institutional constraints, the study moves beyond technology-centred accounts of GenAI integration to portray teacher agency as an ethically, relationally, and contextually grounded practice.

The study contributes to theoretical discussions of teacher agency in three ways. First, it demonstrates that teachers' responses to GenAI are shaped less by technological acceptance than by ongoing judgments about its pedagogical legitimacy and educational value. Second, it shows how teachers' professional identities shape agency through the ways they position themselves, their students, and GenAI, with GenAI itself emerging as a supportive, conditional, or potentially disruptive educational actor. Third, it illustrates how teacher agency is enacted through teachers' interpretation of technological, institutional, and material conditions, as they evaluate whether these contextual realities support or hinder valued forms of learning. Together, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of teacher agency as a dynamic process enacted across pedagogical, professional, and contextual domains when responding to technological change in under-resourced educational settings.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Use of Generative AI

This manuscript made use of Grammarly and ChatGPT to assist in paraphrasing and improving the clarity of the text. No AI tools were used in generating research hypotheses or writing conclusions. The final manuscript was authored and reviewed by the listed author without additional AI input.

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