Early Career Primary School Teachers' Agency in Relation to Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

Marie-Theres Gruber
(marie.gruber@pph-augustinum.at)
PPH Augustinum, Austria

Silvia Lasnik
(silvia.lasnik@phst.at)
University College of Teacher Education Styria, Austria

Anna Schöfberger
(silvia.lasnik@phst.at)
PPH Augustinum, Austria

Kyle R. Talbot
(kylereadtalbot@gmail.com)
Independent Researcher

Abstract

Even though there has been vast research focusing on teacher agency, primary school foreign language (FL) teachers remain relatively under-researched. In order to understand which aspects contribute to early career primary school teachers' sense of agency in their FL learning as well as teaching, semi-structured online interviews were conducted with nine Austrian primary school teachers in their first year of teaching. The findings are presented as individual case studies and a cross-case analysis. It was found that an interplay of psychological and ecological aspects impacted early career primary school teachers as FL educators and in their transition from learner to teacher. As part of professional development, early-career primary school teachers need to reflect on past, present, and future disjunctures in order to develop and sustain professional agency and effectively deliver foreign language lessons.

1 Introduction

In Austria, primary school teachers are trained generalists in eight subjects – one being foreign language (FL) education –often without an in-depth education in this domain (Buchholz, 2007; Gruber et al., 2020). At present, to become a primary school teacher, students must undergo a five-

year-training: a four- year bachelor's programme and a one-year master's programme. Within the 180-ECTS bachelor's-programme (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, where one credit point represents approximately 25 to 30 hours of work), six to eight ECTS (depending on the university college) are allotted to FL education. In the 60-ECTS master's programme, students can choose from a range of specifications.

After having finished the bachelor's programme, students can decide whether they will start working as primary school teachers while simultaneously finishing the master's degree over the next few years or enrol in the masters' programme full-time. However, within these choices, a spectrum of job placement options presents itself. Additionally, due to a shortage of primary school teachers (BMBWF, 2023b), even students still studying for their bachelor's degree are often hired before completing their training. As will become evident, novice primary school teachers enter schools from a variety of training-specific backgrounds, which is why the term *early career primary school teachers*, referring to less than five years of teaching experience (e.g., Day, 2012, 2017; Day & Gu, 2010), shall be used in this paper.

Austria's pedagogical landscape is facing a major shift, driven by new school reforms that include new school curricula and new teacher training programmes. The new school reform, including new curricula for primary and secondary schools, was launched in the academic year 2023/24. At the primary level, FL education received an upgrade in years 3 and 4 – from a compulsory exercise to a main, thus graded, subject (BMBWF, 2023a). Despite this upgrade at the primary school level, no adjustments have been considered at levels directly linked to this initiative. Whether at the primary school level, in primary school teacher training, or in pre- and postgraduate education, no additional weekly hours are allotted to FL education to sufficiently prepare and support teachers in line with aforementioned changes. Furthermore, Austria has no history of grading primary school learners in FL. This is concerning as it might cause additional difficulties for teachers besides the well-known contextual struggles of primary school teachers as FL educators, which have been elaborated on over the years, such as a lack of FL knowledge, FL insecurity, or even FL anxiety (Gierlinger, 2021; Gruber, 2017; Gruber & Mercer, 2021; Gruber et al., 2025).

Due to these current contextual conditions, primary school teachers as FL educators, and particularly early career primary school teachers, may struggle more than ever in their ability to enact their agency as FL learners and teachers (Gruber & Mercer, 2021; Gruber et al., 2020; Gruber et al., 2025; Schöfberger, 2023). This can occur for several reasons; for example, when teachers have not received sufficient content knowledge at university, or enough information about the reform guideline, or the new national primary school curriculum by the Ministry of Education, or about the educational system or their particular school (Chubbuck et al., 2001; McCann & Johannessen, 2004; Sulis et al., 2022). However, these challenges can be viewed as opportunities for teachers to explore and reexamine their agency and development in unfolding disjunctures (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2020), or when "what was and what now is no longer align" (p. 93). We use the term *disjuncture* in this paper to describe those moments where a challenge or disconnection seemingly acts as a springboard for reevaluating teachers' agency and development.

Thus, by looking at early career teachers' individual FL learning and teaching agency, reflections on their own learning of the language as well as their envisioned teaching processes, we aimed to explore components that may possibly impact the success of early career teachers or may diminish their chances of success in their professional roles.

2   Literature review

Teacher agency in second language acquisition (SLA) has become an important domain (e.g., Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2019; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Skinnari, 2020). At the same time, it has been identified as a key factor in understanding teacher development (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2020), or how teachers behave and act in their classrooms (Day et al., 2006; Jin et

al., 2021), how they position themselves within a teaching community, and how they make sense of their professional roles (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2021; Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016; Talbot et al., 2021). From our perspective, agency refers to the feeling of being able to take action in a specific context, as a sense of empowerment and motivation (Gruber & Mercer, 2021): "It is through agency that teachers feel empowered to enact their professional roles, make decisions, and set direction and pathways of action." (p. 92).

The expectations that primary school teachers, who are trained generalists in Austria, should possess a profound knowledge of an FL (learner level) and its subject didactics (teacher level) can put significant pressure on individuals (Bovellan, 2014; Skinnari & Bovellan, 2016) as they themselves often feel poorly trained (Buchholz, 2007; Gruber, 2017; Gruber et al., 2025) or insecure in the FL (e.g., Gierlinger, 2021; Gruber & Mercer, 2021). As a robust sense of teacher agency has been demonstrated to benefit teachers' feelings of efficacy in their practices (Duff, 2012), it could be assumed that research into primary school teachers' FL agency would be a major priority for policymakers and teacher educators at all levels.

However, to date, limited research has been conducted on primary school teachers' agency related to FL education (e.g., Gruber & Mercer, 2021; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2020; Pappa, 2021; Pappa et al., 2017a/b). Despite a relative scarcity of research in this specific field, there are some studies to consider. For example, Pappa et al. (2017a) looked at 13 Finnish primary Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) teachers' professional identities and sense of agency; the authors highlighted a connection between these two concepts, which are shaped in an individual, but also a collaborative process. In another study from the same data set, the authors identified aspects that limited and supported primary school teachers' senses of agency, such as language and material development, as well as autonomy and collegial community (Pappa et al., 2017b). In a similar study, also in the Finnish context, Moate and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2020) explored the interplay of agency and identity in 12 pre-service teachers and how this was influenced by new affordances and opportunities for action. They also found that teaching CLIL was reported to be challenging for the pre-service primary teacher participants; this was especially visible at the beginning of their education, as they seemed to need to question and completely reconstruct their own language identities and agency within this new concept and learning environment. Even though the participants reported that their learning environments were supportive, they still reported having particular struggles. Accepting this change within their learner identities and transitioning into a more positive and enjoyable atmosphere, which eventually happened after they had become accustomed to speaking only English while learning, were reported to be important steps for the participants. At the end of their teacher education programme, most teacher participants found CLIL to be very helpful and positive in many ways, implying that it helped them to form a new perspective and understanding of language, as well as a new understanding of their own "relationship to language as learners and future teachers" (p. 100). In another study, Gruber and Mercer (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with six primary school CLIL teachers in Austria to understand how their sense of agency helped them navigate their professional roles in an ecological system. The study showed that even though the primary school teachers reported being passionate about CLIL, they felt their agency constrained as CLIL educators. Paradoxically, they all exercised their agency by giving up CLIL in their own classrooms.

To summarise, these studies show that disjunctures offer opportunities for new actions and allow old experiences to fade, enabling teachers to reevaluate future steps. This allows a new understanding of teachers' own FL learning and teaching to develop. Besides the specific circumstances that generalist primary school teachers experience, early career teachers may face additional challenges in their first years, even leading to their exit from the profession (Gilad & Alkalay, 2014; Sulis et al., 2022) due to a high level of stress, excessive workloads, mismatched expectations (Amitai & van Houtte, 2021; Anderson & Olsen, 2006; Johnson et al., 2005), limited resources (Buchanan, 2010; Flores, 2006), a lack of support (Buchanan, 2010; Flores & Day, 2006; Thomas et al., 2018),

or constant development issues (e.g., new national curriculum, new national regulations, and school changes) (Andersen & Olsen, 2006; Spooner-Lane, 2017).

In the early career teacher phase, also known as the survival period, in which novice teachers familiarise themselves with the school and the system (Chubbuck et al., 2001; Sulis et al., 2022), as well as content knowledge (McCann & Johannessen, 2004), agency plays an especially important role. In a period of many new influences, agency might allow early career teachers to perceive control during stressful situations. Being agentic may support teachers' decision-making and problem-solving as well as empower them to follow through with their individual goals and guide their own professional pathways.

Considering the complexity of circumstances and dynamism in this initial job placement phase, it is important to understand how early career primary school teachers understand their professional roles, how agentic they feel, how they are able to enact their agency, or whether they feel their agency as FL learners and teachers is limited.

3   Research design and methodology

This study was part of a research project that investigated pre-service primary school teachers' FL identity in Austria. The aim of this study was to explore agency in early career primary school teachers' FL learning and teaching and to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that might possibly impact the success of early career teachers or diminish their chances of success in their professional roles. This study sought to answer the following research question:

What contributes to early career primary school teachers' agency in their FL teaching and learning?

3.1 Participants

For this study, nine early career primary school teachers were selected from a larger sample. They were between 23 and 34 years old. As mentioned above, the job placements and teachers' backgrounds were rather diverse. Out of the nine teachers, six were studying towards their master's degree part-time, and three participants were studying full-time while simultaneously teaching. One person was employed as a class teacher, six were non-class teachers, and two participants were working in afternoon care, all with a diversity of hours employed – ranging from full-time (22 hours per week) to 12 hours per week (see Table 1).

Table 1. Basic information about interviewees and interviews

Pseudo-nyms	Age in years	Teaching experience in months	Professional information	Length of interview	Language of interview
Theresia	24	0*	Afternoon care Master's programme full-time	37:22	German
Agnes	34	1	Primary school teacher Full-time Non-class teacher Master's programme part-time	34:34	English
Dietburg	24	1	Primary school teacher Full-time Non-class teacher Master's programme full-time	32:22	German
Helga	24	0*	Afternoon care	43:48	German

			Master's programme Full-time		
Rafael	33	1	Primary school teacher 15h per week Non-class teacher Master's programme part-time	28:34	German
Edith	23	1	Primary school teacher Full-time Class teacher Master's programme part-time	30:32	English
Josefa	27	½	Primary school teacher 12h per week Non-class teacher Master's programme part-time	26:29	German
Cornelia	24	1 ½	Primary school teacher 15h per week Non-class teacher Master's programme part-time	26:48	German
Wilhel-mina	24	½	Primary school teacher 12h per week Non-class teacher Master's programme part-time	28:47	German

* Note: 0 refers to "in their first year"

3.2 Data collection

Over a period of two months, June to July 2022, a total of nine in-depth, semi-structured, individual online interviews were conducted by two researchers. The researchers received introductory training and were provided with written guidelines to ensure the consistency and comparability of the data collected. For recruitment, emails were sent out across university college networks to early career primary school teachers; however, it was only possible to elicit participation through personal connections. Therefore, all participants were from the same university college. After being contacted via recruitment email, interested parties digitally received the informed consent sheet and a background questionnaire (e.g., age, years of experience, current professional status). The participants were offered the option to select either German or English as the medium for the interview. This choice was provided to promote a conducive and relaxed setting, thereby allowing participants to communicate freely without language barriers. The interview guide was drafted by the head of the project and then sent out to the whole team for feedback. Following initial oral consent declaration, the interview was structured as follows: (1) introduction, (2) warm-up, (3) foreign language identity in the (a) past, (b) present and (c) future, and finally, (4) concluding remarks. For each section, obligatory main questions were formulated, leading to a total of 17 main questions, which often included optional follow-up questions (see Appendix). The interviews lasted between 26 and 43 minutes and created a corpus of 42,517 words and 363 minutes of data (see Table 1). Although the data were originally collected mainly to examine teachers' identity and well-being, we saw a close connection to agency during the data analysis process. Therefore, the decision was made to analyse the data focusing solely on primary school teachers' sense of agency regarding FL learning and teaching while preserving in-depth insights in case studies.

3.3 Ethics

Prior to their interviews, all participants digitally signed a consent form including information about the purpose of the study. With their agreement, participants gave explicit permission for their data to be recorded, transcribed, and utilised for the purposes of this study. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. Data were treated confidentially by keeping records only on password-protected computers, using pseudonyms at all stages, as well as the removing any additional identifiable information.

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, including hesitation markers, grammatical errors, relevant pauses, and silences. Data from the interviews conducted in German were translated into English for the final report. After the transcription and anonymisation of the interviews, data were subjected to a multi-layered analysis in four steps (Rashid et al., 2019). A qualitative content analysis, (Mayring, 2022) was conducted both inductively and deductively with the help of the free software QCAmap (Mayring, 2020). First, one researcher went through the data line-by-line to become familiar with the data (Bortz & Döring, 2016; Brosius et al., 2012), allowing themes to emerge while creating memos. Thereafter, two researchers went over the data with a constant recoding and revision process in line with a deductive framework based on literature, memos, and initial themes. To counteract misinterpretations, these two researchers discussed and compared their individually taken codes until consensus was reached (Diekmann, 2013; Flick, 2012) before they each separately went over the data again. Next, the researchers exchanged and aligned on six main codes: FL experiences [learning, teaching, positive, negative], FL confidence, ecology, disjunctures, self-efficacy, and empowerment. Then they created cases of each participant, showing a holistic yet individual formation of agency in relation to FL learning and teaching (Yin, 2014). After that, connections between individuals' FL learning and teaching agency, as well as embedded disjunctures, were drawn. Finally, cases were compared to reveal cross-case patterns to facilitate insights and relationships without losing the richness and uniqueness of the individual cases.

4 Findings

The findings are organised through case studies. Each case includes insights about how the early career primary school teachers perceived agency in relation to learning and teaching an FL, as well as how disjunctures appeared.

4.1 Theresia

Theresia's FL learning experience was primarily very positive. She reported being good at her FL lessons in secondary school and attributed that mostly to watching many YouTube videos. These experiences seemed not only to have had an impact on her well-being in the past, but also her understanding of a new teacher's best practices. For example, it seemed that her learning success from a young age reinforced her reported belief that languages should be learned as early as possible. Furthermore, because she appeared to attribute her own success as a learner to a relatively implicit approach (e.g., watching YouTube), she also appeared to be favourable towards CLIL as a means of language learning. The disjunctures mentioned in Theresia's reflective understanding of language contact (e.g., L1, L2, L3), particularly in the transition from school FL learning to university education, that "were eye-opening" and something she "had never experienced" (Line 164), helped her to develop a clear picture of how her FL lessons should look like:

"[...] I already have a certain... image of what foreign language teaching can look like for me... [...]." (Line 420-421)

Reflecting on her positive school experiences, she described how her ease with language learning may hinder her in the classroom by not letting her relate to or empathise with students who were struggling. Even though Theresia had very little experience with the FL during her internships, her teacher training at her university seemed to help her to reflect further on FL learning and assisted her in developing confidence through further use of and contact with the FL. This, along with cooperative exchange with colleagues, appeared to positively affect her well-being while teaching. Although she mentioned occasionally feeling nervous during FL lessons, her positivity and confidence seemed to outweigh any negative feelings, letting her act agentically in her FL role:

"[...] it feels easy, so it... just comes easily to me, it's funny, it's fun, it's... enriching also for me, because I realize that I'm also practicing again and yes making progress ... yes... of course in advance also nervousness... so that's clear, because you then go into foreign waters [...]" (Line 191-194)

4.2 Agnes

Agnes faced a spectrum of experiences as a learner: from positive experiences in primary, early secondary and out-of-school involvements to negative ones in upper secondary education. The decision to go abroad after completing her A-levels, thereby stepping out of her comfort zone, made Agnes more active in her FL learning process, become empowered and confident in the FL at present:

"And then after Hauptschule [middle school] I went to _____ [high school] and I hated English there [...] Yeah. And then after my Matura [final exams], I just didn't really know what to do... so I spontaneously went to England to be an au pair. And when I arrived at the airport, I couldn't even speak a sentence with my Gastfamilie [host family], because I always though… before I said something, I thought ah which, which tense am I going to use now, which sentence structure and I just didn't speak freely, and it took me at least… I don't know, I'd say two months before I really started to speak. But then from that moment on, it just got better and better. Yeah, I stayed there for three years, and I came back, started to study English. Stopped studying and yeah, still enjoy English. I really like it." (Line 63-82)

Through her reflections on these disjunctures – understanding why her former teacher did what she disliked – Agnes appeared to acknowledge the past and to have processed it into part of her own FL learning empowerment. She continued with disjunctures from secondary to tertiary education, where she mentioned the implementation of methods which she had experienced herself as a secondary school student, such as vocabulary drilling. Although the tertiary education environment offered alternatives in a supportive way, she still seemed to be in a grey area of acknowledgement – theoretically considering changes in FL learning and making meaning of it, but seemingly not being able to take action yet:

"Yeah, I think when I think about the last semester, the last year that we were like working intensively with CLIL… I sometimes thought that I do get the concept of CLIL now and am now ready to do it in class, but I I just end up walking into the class doing the vocabulary drilling again. So, I think I'm… it has changed. My view on it has changed, but I think my actions haven't yet." (Line 106-110)

However, the appreciative and welcoming environment in her current school – employing her as a "proper" teacher in the first year of teaching – seemed to make Agnes positive and facilitated her agency as a FL teacher. Being a full member of this new community – sharing materials, discussing methods, concerns and views – was described as having a major impact on her empowerment, well-being, self-efficacy, as well as on her agency and entire identity as a pedagogue:

> "They really appreciate what I do, and they take me… I don't know how to say it in English, but they ask me for my opinion, and they don't treat me like... the beginner, but they treat me like a proper teacher and... that really makes me feel good, and it makes me feel confident. And they also ask me for my advice to ask me, "How do you see that?", "I've looked at this kid, I think this and that, what do you think?", "Is there anything you experienced?" and that really gives me a good feeling and that really gives me confidence as well." (Line 140-146)

At the same time, Agnes' experiences in a new ecology seemed to enable her to flourish and grow quickly as a pedagogue with "things that did not make sense in the studies, suddenly do make sense now (laughs)" (Line 206-207). In addition, past experiences, especially stepping out of her comfort zone after secondary school by going abroad, appeared to have had a major impact on her current FL self-confidence, well-being, and present FL learning identity and agency development.

4.3 Dietburg

Dietburg displayed a rich treasure trove of FL learning experiences. After migrating from Albania at the age of eight and growing up speaking Albanian and German, as well as learning English and Spanish, Dietburg's love of English started in primary school in Austria when she felt very welcomed in class, particularly during the English lessons. These positive experiences, conveyed by her former primary school teacher, not only appeared to shape Dietburg's views about the profession, but also appeared to have a major influence on her well-being at that time in general, as well as on her personal well-being in the FL lessons – lasting to the present day:

> "Because during the first years at university college, I mean months, I really started to reflect how she [the primary school class teacher] did all this and gave me a base how I would like to be as a primary school teacher, because for me she really was a role model and…I loved her so much, this teacher and since then that was that I always said, I also want to be like that, and I also want that the pupils love me." (Line 69-74)

Even recently, during the FL learning courses at university college, Dietburg described feeling very positive, "like eight again" (Line 266), and suggested that the methods she experienced in the primary FL classroom still influenced her current FL learning preparation and how she envisioned future FL learning lessons. Particularly, her active participation during primary school teacher education made Dietburg more confident and secure. The positive past experiences as a primary school student appeared to foster her resilience to negative influences throughout school life such that her positive, motivated and self-efficacious attitude has remained to the present day, in turn positively influencing her professional well-being and thus her early-career pedagogical agency.

4.4 Helga

Helga's FL learning history and her feelings towards the FL seemed to depend largely on individual teachers she had in the past. During her upper secondary English language lessons, Helga described having negative experiences, which appeared to result in her choosing not to use English in her spare time. These feelings still seemed to be present at the time of the interview, as Helga

mentioned feeling inhibited and self-conscious as an FL teacher. Notably, the feelings even appeared to impact her physiology; she described how at times her entire body would shake with nervousness when she was using the FL. Helga, however, described envisioning a future self that would be more secure and that would build up a routine while teaching the FL, even though she still reported unpleasant feelings, unlike in other subjects. Helga's feelings about past experiences seemed to run deep and still influenced her present. Even in the few FL situations during her internships, and even though she mentioned a change in FL learning methods, Helga primarily used vocabulary drills, where the teacher talks, while the students have to listen. The university courses, however, helped her to generate a "much healthier and better feeling towards foreign language learning" (Line 225) and become empowered with a collection of tools and methods. Still, Helga remarked that she had similar feelings when she was a secondary school student herself, particularly in courses with practice character, where students needed to engage a lot. She also reported still being afraid to say something wrong and pointed out how she would not ask for help, because she believed someone her age should already know these things. Moreover, Helga did not identify as an FL teacher. In her opinion, a FL teacher is a secondary school teacher, who is a subject specialist and whose role is much more important than that of a primary school teacher. At the same time, however, she acknowledged that primary teachers lay the foundation and have a responsibility to use the FL in class. It appeared that Helga's sense of agency as a FL learner and teacher was diminished, and the resulting insecurities presented themselves particularly during unstable moments.

4.5 Rafael

Rafael expressed a motivation to work with children from a young age – influenced by his primary school teacher mother as well as former primary school teachers. Even though he was grappling with disjunctures in picturing the job – e.g., how it is displayed in the media – Rafael concluded that "there is nothing better than …yes, day by day give joy to the children and really to be in the classroom and yes … really" (Line 56-57). His positivity towards the job seemed to spread to FL learning and teaching as well. Even though Rafael expressed not feeling very confident in the FL, he mentioned his awareness of making mistakes and facing them by constantly focusing on improvement:

> "Partly I feel insecure because it just doesn't work yet the way I would like it to, but on the other hand.... yes, it's still a challenge for me, and I find... it's, it's always, it's always still cool to talk to the kids and teach the kids something, and I think it's often because you're not so good at it that you make mistakes, but I think mistakes happen, and that's what I keep teaching the kids. And... I'm not so afraid of making mistakes, but I just try to speak and really stay in the flow of speech, so that the children really get something, and yes. Of course, you're ambitious and you always try to do it as correctly as possible, but as I said, mistakes can't always be avoided and that's why... I actually feel quite good about teaching English despite everything." (Line 152-163).

Rafael's positive attitude towards teaching, his professional identity, and his reflection on the benefits of teaching an FL to young learners overall, allowed him to enact agency as an FL learner and teacher:

> "Let's say, first of all, it's very unusual because, as I already said, I've never been a learner... as the ideal learner in foreign language teaching, so, I have always had a hard time there, and that is then really, then implement that you teach it to the children then... is then really yes again a challenge, I would say, because as I said before, if you do not master something so

well yourself then... you also always want to be authentic and always yes always convey some-thing and I believe that, that there is just a little bit missing then the being authentic, because you cannot do it so well, but.... And I think that's why I feel a little bit... Yes, a little bit inhib-ited and a little bit more... how shall I say it, a little bit more nervous when I teach a foreign language now. But I think it will work out then [...]." (Line 328-344)

His positive experiences in different ecologies – school life, university, colleagues – seemed not only to make him self-efficacious and to aid him in overcoming challenges, but also to empower him in his career to set concrete goals for himself. Rafael's well-developed self-efficacy seemed to enable him to take an active role in his own FL learning processes so as to act professionally in his role as an FL teacher, with an awareness of making mistakes and improvement possibilities. This agency facet helped outweigh the fear stemming from the past of not being good enough. All in all, Rafael reported looking positively to the future, mentioning many times that his university college education helped him considerably in building up a repertoire and to become more secure as an FL practitioner.

4.6 Edith

Edith, who had wanted to become a primary school teacher since her own primary school days, was pursuing her master's degree part-time while also working full-time as a teacher. On the path to becoming a primary school teacher, Edith had already experienced some disjunctures. First, she mentioned that her vision of being a primary school teacher changed when she started her teacher training programme at a university college, because of learning "everything from the theoretical" (Line 50). Regarding FL learning, Edith mentioned several discrepancies regarding the individual levels of education, from primary to tertiary. From a self-described positivity towards language learning "Yes, I think I always liked languages as…English and German" (Line 71), she expressed a liking for English in primary and lower secondary, but "in higher secondary it became very strict and there the fun…was gone" (Line 97-80). However, getting introduced to ways of implementing FL learning with young learners at university college helped Edith regain this joy and delve deeper into this subject, and she even decided to opt for the master's programme containing an FL focus:

"But then when we were at [university college] and learned the strategies, how we can teach English for little children, the …the joy I think came back and this was also the reason why I took the professional deepening (in Master's) in English, because I really like this language and I also like to teach the children the language so…some years ago I did not really like it, but it came back." (Line 80-83)

Edith's individual process of acknowledging past negative experiences from secondary school and allowing her positivity to blossom and return seemed to strengthen her agency and positivity towards FL learning while also passing this on to young learners. Also, her active participation dur-ing her teacher education in a programme, which she described as supportive and evaluation-free, seemed to facilitate active learning and empowerment. The constant reflection on course content supported the formation of new ecologies and helped her to remain positive towards FL learning while boosting FL self-confidence. Edith's seemingly overall positive experiences with the FL and her reflective and positive nature appeared to strengthen her self-efficacy and empower her as an active agent of her own individual FL learning processes as both a learner and a teacher:

"And that's the thing, I think with all the courses, when I was there, I thought… Will this be such a huge help? But in the end, when I used it, I think it was such a huge help […]." (Line 150-152)

Edith's example shows how intrinsic motivation for the profession and primarily positive FL learning experiences throughout one's scholastic life can impact an individual's agency and aid them in overcoming insecurities and negative moments of FL learning and teaching.

4.7 Josefa

Josefa discussed the process of learning favourably – "I for myself just figured that every day is new in learning" (Line 63-64) – and expressed very positive experiences with FL learning from primary school onwards. However, she also noted that she could only actively use and try out the FL when she went abroad after completing her A-levels. This experience appeared to shape Josefa's future vision, envisioning students talking as much as possible in class while also fostering a self-critical and improvement-oriented attitude. However, regarding Josefa's individual FL learning experiences, disjunctures seemed to appear between her past school and teacher training experiences. On the one hand, she mentioned that many courses at her university gave her the opportunity to reflect on her own past experiences with the FL. On the other hand, she thought that more opportunities to see what FL teaching with young learners could look like would be needed. The internships seemed to be a key aspect, where university colleges hope students will see FL lessons in practice, but it depends on the mentor with whom the individual students are placed – whether they can observe and take part in FL lessons or not. Basically, Josefa's openness to forming new ecologies and willingness to reflect on the past and shape a new present were shown by her final utterance in the interview. There, she outlined the gains during her teacher education as a kick-off, with further individual steps to come that would shape individual FL teachers, demonstrating her active role in current FL learning and teaching development:

> "So what I wanted to say in general is that I think the training simply shows you what is possible, that it gives you ideas about what a lesson can look like, and then how you work with your children and what you do with all these things, I think, that is really experience, that is also practice and... I think every class is different [...]." (Line 260-277)

4.8 Cornelia

Cornelia, who was working for 15 hours per week in a primary school while studying towards her master's degree part-time, experienced FL learning negatively in secondary school, She was only able to actively use the FL due to hobbies, something she described as "[…] the best REALLY that could have happened to me for real […]" (Line 134-135). Through these experiences, Cornelia became more confident in the FL, which seemed to influence her current beliefs on FL learning. Even though she admitted to not being the best FL user and still having to cope with moments of insecurity, Cornelia described how she wanted to bring the FL into the classroom to allow students to talk and be immersed, without excluding any students from this experience. When transitioning from secondary to tertiary education, Cornelia mentioned initial feelings of anxiety during the FL courses:

> "I think I generally... never feel quite bad. (laughs) So probably good. And... yeah. So it's now, for me it's not uninteresting. So when it says, no idea, 'pedagogy part 3' I always think oh my god, but when I see something like that [FL education] I think to myself, okay yeah it's going to be cool. That's why... Yes. So I feel more positive." (Line 288-291)

Cornelia's example of out-of-school experiences seemed to positively influence her in the present and help shift negative experiences towards acknowledgement, allowing her to proceed without dwelling on them and become agentic and empowered to move on and improve.

4.2 Wilhelmina

Wilhelmina was working in a primary school for 12 hours per week while studying towards her master's degree part-time. She described having a mixture of FL learning experiences throughout her school career: in primary school they were mainly positive, whereas in secondary school FL anxiety was present:

> "Yes, English was then always the main problem with me, I was always so afraid that I would say something wrong that I sometimes didn't dare to speak at all. Where I now know in retrospect that that was a bit of nonsense, [...]." (Line 78-81)

At the time of the interview, Wilhelmina felt confident and positive about teaching the FL:

> "(laughs) On the one hand, not really, but because we never focused on this topic of foreign language, but... what is positive is that I think I speak English not so badly, I would say so myself, and also... compared to my colleagues at school and I think then... you feel a bit more secure and you know you can do that and you can do that. I think that gives you a certain security when you know that you are not necessarily the worst. (laughs) So, yes, [...]." (Line 164-169)

Reflecting on her history and comprehending these experiences, Wilhelmina communicated a vision of an evaluation-free environment in her classrooms. Despite the acknowledged disjunctures from her own school time, during which foreign language speaking anxiety existed, Wilhelmina appeared to become an agent of her own FL learning process through travelling and doing an Erasmus semester. These FL learning experiences seemed to help Wilhelmina to develop a certain FL learning agency together with a positive attitude towards the FL.

5   Discussion

The present study demonstrates that becoming an agent of one's own FL learning process requires actively drawing on past experiences in shaping both present practices and future trajectories while sustaining an image of oneself as an ongoing FL learner. Consistent with prior work (Gruber & Mercer, 2021; Moate, 2013; Pappa et al., 2017a), teacher agency here emerges as complex, dynamic, and highly individual: what fosters agentic action in one setting may inhibit it in another.

For Theresia, Dietburg, Edith, and Josefa, positive secondary school experiences, combined with stable preferences, such as watching English videos, formed a foundation for sustained agency. In contrast, Helga's negative school experiences continued to exert a paralysing influence, constraining professional action. Agnes, Cornelia, and Wilhelmina described early inhibition after secondary school, being unable to speak in full sentences despite years of instruction. They later developed strong agency through out-of-school opportunities, including Erasmus semesters and living abroad. Such informal learning experiences proved decisive in reframing their identities as capable FL learners and teachers.

Across the dataset, past FL learning experiences, whether positive or negative, were strongly linked to participants' current teaching orientations. Those with predominantly positive school experiences (Theresia, Dietburg, Rafael, Edith, Josefa) retained positive attitudes toward FL learning,

even if they had encountered occasional negative moments. For others, reflection and acknowledge-ment of disjunctures between past and present (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2020) were central to reconfiguring their agency. Out-of-school successes helped Agnes, Cornelia, and Wilhelmina over-come negative schooling, enabling them to proceed as empowered professionals. University courses facilitated this process for many by providing structured opportunities to reflect on and reframe prior beliefs, thereby reducing anxieties around FL teaching. However, for Helga, and to a lesser extent Agnes, such reflection had not yet translated into enacted change, suggesting that the process of transforming one's agentic stance can be prolonged and non-linear.

The findings affirm the value of examining agency holistically, attending not only to individual cognition and emotion, but also to perceived capabilities and affordances in the surrounding ecology (Gruber & Mercer, 2021; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2006). Agency is shaped through the inter-play of personal history, social context, and professional environment, with different outcomes even among teachers sharing similar training. Negative school experiences can act as major perturbations, either disrupting or strengthening agency, depending on the individual's resources and context (Sulis et al., 2021). Notably, the influence of teachers extends across temporal dimensions: from shaping learners' pasts to affecting their present engagement to informing their imagined professional futures.

Even though this study provided insights into early career primary school teachers' agency in FL learning and teaching, there are also limitations in terms of methodology. First, the study relied on only one method rather than data triangulation, which could have helped to provide a more com-prehensive picture. Second, the study focused on one context, and data elicitation was only possible via personal connections. For future studies, a wider spectrum of early career primary school teach-ers from different university colleges, provinces and/or countries would be valuable.

6   Conclusion

This study focused on early career primary school teachers' sense of agency in FL learning and teaching. It showed the interplay of psychological and ecological aspects impacting their agency as FL learners and teachers. What became obvious was that agency was very complex and diverse in the ways individuals enacted it. Also, agentic individuals faced moments of insecurity regarding FL learning and teaching; however, their empowerment helped them to overcome unstable moments. This study highlights the complexity and individuality of teacher agency, demonstrating how per-sonal histories, educational experiences, and reflective practices shape professional identities and influence teaching practices. The findings revealed that both positive and negative past experiences in FL learning significantly influence teachers' current and future pedagogical approaches. Teachers who experienced positive reinforcement in early education tend to carry forward a more empowered and proactive approach towards FL teaching. Conversely, those with negative experiences often face challenges in enacting their agency, although external supportive environments and self-reflection can facilitate positive changes. The role of reflective practice emerges as crucial for teachers to acknowledge disjunctures between past and present experiences and to adapt accordingly. This re-flective process is critical in enabling teachers to transition from inhibited learners to confident ed-ucators. Furthermore, the research highlights the need for teacher education programmes to provide more comprehensive and practical opportunities for pre-service teachers to engage with FL educa-tion, thereby fostering a stronger sense of agency and preparedness in their professional roles. Over-all, this study contributes to the understanding of how early career primary school teachers navigate their professional journeys amidst evolving educational landscapes. Future research should aim to broaden the scope by incorporating diverse educational contexts and methodologies as well as look-ing at agency longitudinally and conducting comparative cross-context analyses to deepen the un-derstanding of teacher agency in FL education. Such insights are vital for informing policy and practice to better support early career teachers in their professional development and in delivering effective foreign language education.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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About the Authors

Marie-Theres Gruber (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7234-537X) works at the PPH Augustinum and focuses on foreign language didactics and primary education. She is co-editor of the books "The psychological experience of integrating language and content: Teacher and learner perspectives" (Multilingual Matters, 2021) and "Diversität im Kontext Hochschullehre: Best Practice" (Waxmann, 2021).

Silvia Lasnik (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2107-2113) is a professor of English language teaching at the University of Teacher Education Styria (PH Steiermark). She completed her doctoral thesis on foreign language teaching anxiety among Austrian primary school teachers. Her research interests also include English as a lingua franca and native-speakerism.

Anna Schöfberger (https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4050-0701) is a primary school teacher at the Private Primary School of the PPH Augustinum in Graz, Austria. The focus of her master's thesis was on the identity and language of pre-service primary school teachers. Her current research focuses on this topic as well as the transition of students from primary to secondary school.

Kyle R. Talbot (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7246-0706) is a language researcher and teacher. He holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Graz, Austria, and an MA in TESOL/Applied Linguistics from the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, USA. His research and teaching interests include the psychology of language teaching and learning, well-being in language

teaching and learning, higher education, bilingual education, complex dynamic systems, and content and language integrated learning.