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Constructing student agency: The nexus between classroom activities and engagement

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ABSTRACT

Student agency refers to the quality of students' self-reflective and intentional actions and interactions concerning their activities and engagements both inside and outside the classroom. The engagements and activities help to increase the level of personal agency. This study mainly aims to determine the nexus between constructing student agency and engagements and activities in higher education English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed method design. To collect quantitative data, a survey was conducted with a set of five-point Likert scale questionnaires among 107 students studying at bachelor's level in Dhading district, Nepal. The students represent different years of the bachelor's level. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among three teachers teaching at the same level to collect qualitative data. The findings of the study hold important insights for higher education teachers, emphasizing the significance of incorporating agency into classroom activities and fostering engagement. Additionally, this study contributes to the development of agency when students have opportunities to be selective in actions, engagements and interactions in classrooms. To effectively address this issue, the researcher strongly advocates highlighting the importance of classroom engagement and activities as essential components in enhancing student agency in EFL classrooms and beyond.

Contribution/Originality: The article's focus contributes to the field of higher education by providing a succinct insight into fostering student agency through involving students in intentional actions and interactions with engagements within and beyond the classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recognizing student agency is vital as it enables students to have command over their learning, promoting autonomy, meaningful engagement, and improved educational achievements (Heilala, Jääskelä, Saarela, & Kärkkäinen, 2024). In the present context, the ongoing progress in educational methods has prompted shifts in the responsibilities of teachers to foster agency in the classroom. Multiple factors contribute to shaping agency within the learning environment. The practical implementation of agency involves collaboration between students and teachers, comprising activities both within the classroom and in broader social contexts. Thus, agency is not separated from action, rather it is co-constructed with the teachers and the peers (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in classroom and societal contexts. Additionally, teachers need to engage students in different agency-boosting activities and engagements.

Agency and activities are co-related; one boosts the other. Activity is the core aspect of classroom dynamics. The development of agency is contingent upon the support provided by teachers through classroom activities. Teachers can practice the best pedagogies based on different activities that capture students' interest (Stolp, Moate, Saarikallio, Pakarinen, & Lerkkanen, 2022) to promote agency. However, it is challenging to engage every student in the classroom as per their willingness. The other obstacle is the necessity for the activities to be academically relevant and tangible in an educational aspect (Finn, 1989). The involvement of teachers in activities serves to inspire students to actively participate in assigned tasks and situations. However, some students may show unwillingness or apathy to participate, and it proves challenging to have all students equally interested in the same activities. Similarly, Ninin and Magalhães (2017) pointed out that there may be contradictions to create chances for engaging students in similar activities. In that situation, the teacher has a significant role in adjusting the environment to co-create agency (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stolp et al., 2022). Therefore, teachers must recognize that the students' actions in the classroom generally mirror their identity, life goals, and their overall existence.

Conversely, students' active participation or engagement in the classroom contributes to the development of agency. Thus, agency is a process of self-reflective actions and interactions through engagement. The actions and interactions in the classroom help shape students' learning and critiquing skills (Klemencic, 2015). The classroom provides multiple platforms for students to grow their abilities, interests, and skills. Active participation in the classroom drives students' psychological investment toward learning, which promotes understanding, knowledge, and skills (Newmann, 1992). Therefore, engagements provide opportunities to exert individual as well as collaborative actions and interactions. Within this perspective, the study aims to determine the interconnectedness between the collaborative development of student agency, classroom engagement, and activities in English as a Foreign Language classrooms, as perceived by both teachers and students in university education. The outcomes of the study hold important insights for teachers in higher education, emphasizing the significance of incorporating agency into classroom activities and fostering engagement.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the literature, Section 3 presents the methodology, Section 4 discusses the insights from the results, and Section 5 presents the conclusions, implications, and further research recommendations.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Agency Theory

Bandura (2001) positions social cognitive theory into three modes of agency: personal agency, proxy agency, and collective agency. Personal agency is direct; it is gained through personal involvement and efforts. Proxy agency depends on others to act to achieve personal outcomes. Collective agency is maintained by the help of groups or interdependent efforts. Similarly, Klemencic (2015) conceptualizes student agency as a process of students' self-reflective and desired actions drawing from social cognition theory, which is related to sociological theories of human agency. Bandura (1999) and Bandura (2001) claim that social cognitive theory classifies three types of environments: imposed environment, selected environment, and constructed environment. These environments play crucial roles in increasing personal agency. For Ninin and Magalhães (2017) agency involves noticing the differences to offer chances to expand one another's possibilities to transform realities. Therefore, agency is understood from a critical, collaborative, relational and transformative perspective. Agency assumes that individuals develop the means to face contradictions and engage in transformation processes (Liberali, 2020). It also depends on the activities and engagements made by individuals. Agency provides chances to transform individual capacity into collaborative action through engagements, and collaborative activities help transform the lives of learners. Thus, as mentioned by Battilana and D'Aunno (2009) agency can also be relative toward the future.

The practice of agency plays a crucial role in developing students' self-reflective actions and behaviors (Biesta, Field, Goodson, Hodkinson, & Macleod, 2008). When students can reflect and behave appropriately in different

situations, they enhance their ability to cope with whatever they face. Their involvement in interactions, debates, and discussions in the classroom helps shape their behavior and attitude. They can influence the course of events through the practice of agency (Bandura, 1986, 2001). The teacher's role in the classroom plays a huge part in shaping students' behavior. Teachers can mold their students into active agents by involving them in different activities (Jääskelä, Heilala, Kärkkäinen, & Häkkinen, 2021). Placing students at the center of activities helps shape their thoughts and actions.

Literature has pointed out that there is a relationship between academic achievement and engagement or activities (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Further, Finn and Zimmer state three types of engagement: Academic, social, and cognitive. Academic engagement is related to the learning process. Students' assignments, homework, project work, etc. are the core of this engagement. Following the rules and regulations of the class and school comes under social engagement. This reflects how students follow the rules of the class and how they communicate with teachers and peers. Cognitive engagement refers to the thought process of a student. This shows how the student comprehends difficult problems to find a solution. All three types of engagement play significant roles in constructing agency.

Overall, recent literature has presented a wide discussion on the issues of student agency. However, the study of activities and engagement relating to agency building is sparse. Very little research has been carried out on the issues of student agency in higher education (Jääskelä, Poikkeus, Vasalampi, Valleala, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2017). This study aims to identify the interconnectedness between the collaborative development of student agency, classroom engagement, and activities in EFL classrooms, as perceived by both teachers and students in university education. In this context, EFL refers to the teaching and learning of English in countries where English is not the native language.

2.2. Hypothesis

There is a relation between the construction of student agency and engagement and activities in EFL classrooms.

2.3. Research Questions

How is student agency constructed in relation to classroom engagement and activities intertwined with the support of teachers and peers?

How do teachers perceive the relational aspect of student agency with engagement and activities?

How do students perceive the relational aspect of student agency with engagement and activities?

3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The design of the study is an explanatory sequential mixed method, which is highly popular among researchers (Subedi, 2016). This design first requires the collection of quantitative data and then the collection of qualitative data to explain the quantitative results (Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, & Smith, 2011). A survey was adopted to collect quantitative data, which is widely used in quantitative research in education and social science (Leavy, 2022; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006). The survey uses a five-point Likert scale and was designed to cover a wide sample population among the practitioners of student agencies (teachers and learners) in higher education institutions. The survey obtains data from respondents (Glasow, 2005) across twelve higher education institutions in Dhading district. Questionnaires were distributed to 150 students from six out of the twelve campuses, and 107 were considered valid and were used for analysis. To collect qualitative data, the narratives of teachers were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Three teachers who have been teaching for more than nine years in higher education institutions were randomly selected.

Follow-up discussions were carried out to ensure saturation. The explanatory sequential mixed method was used, as per Subedi (2016). Figure 1 exhibits the procedure of the explanatory sequential design.
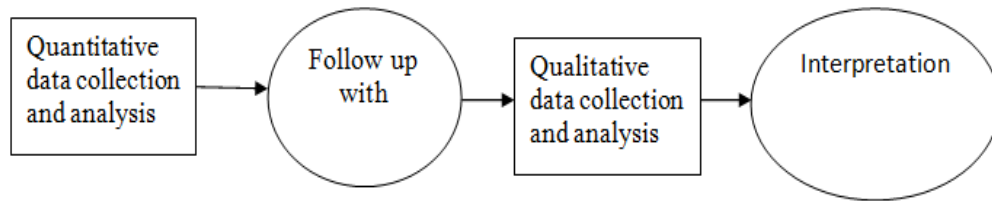
Figure 1. Explanatory sequential design.

Generally, an overarching question invites a mixed method design. To verify the students' responses, selected teachers were interviewed to explore their perceptions of the relationship between the construction of student agency, activities, and engagement in an EFL classroom. In this method, the first approach entails the overarching question then expanding it into separate quantitative and qualitative sub-questions (Creswell, 2014; Subedi, 2016) to align the questions with the research purpose. This mixed method study deals with two research questions (one qualitative and one quantitative). The explanatory sequential design utilizes a five-point Likert scale survey followed by semi-structured interviews. The goal of the first phase is to identify the potential predictive power of the selected variables (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006). The quantitative phase identifies students' involvement and perceptions, and the qualitative phase explores and interprets the results of the quantitative stage. The qualitative phase provides a more comprehensive understanding of the relation between the construction of student agency with activities and engagement.

3.1. Population and Research Sites

The higher education population involves all the students and teachers learning and teaching in the universities of Nepal. Dhading district has twelve higher education institutions, and six campuses were randomly chosen. First and second year bachelor's students of different programs were selected; 150 students were randomly approached, and three teachers were purposively selected from different campuses of the district. The ratio of the selection of the students depended on the total number of students in the respective campuses. Probability sampling for the survey and judgmental sampling for the interviews were respectively applied to select the respondents. To ensure ethical compliance, consent was duly obtained from the campus administrations and the individual participants. The privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity of the participants were ensured through the use of pseudonyms (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1. Respondents profile.

S.N.	Campus name	Number of respondents	Male	Female	Bachelor of education (B. Ed.)	Bachelor of business studies (BBS)
1	Nilkantha multiple campus	31	15	16	16	15
2	Adarsha multiple campus	17	6	11	9	8
3	Salyantar multiple campus	16	5	11	9	7
4	Namuna Bageshwori campus	14	7	7	8	6
5	Chandrodaya multiple campus	16	6	10	8	8
6	CP college	13	6	7		13
Total		107	45	62	50	57

3.2. Data Collection Tool

Survey data is usually collected using a questionnaire as the main tool (Leavy, 2014, 2022; Lodico et al., 2006). A set of questions in a Likert scale format was prepared comprising different questions concerning the topic and objective (Lodico et al., 2006). The questionnaire was validated by three experts. The researcher approached 150 students from ten different campuses for the purpose of obtaining information. Only 107 questionnaires were duly

filled in and returned. The questions were designed to answer the research inquiries (Leavy, 2022). For qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were carried out with follow-up interactions to understand participants' perceptions and experiences of constructing student agency (Chaaban, Qadhi, & Du, 2021).

3.3. Data Analysis Process

Descriptive surveys focus on asking standardized questions which are statistically analyzable (Johnson & Morgan, 2016). Tables, charts, and discussions are created to analyze the data using statistical tools (Leavy, 2022), such as descriptive statistics. These statistics help to describe and summarize the data (Babbie, 2013; Fallon, 2016). The qualitative data were transcribed, categorized, coded, and thematized. The two sets of data (quantitative and qualitative) were simultaneously discussed. The goal of the quantitative phase is to identify the potential predictive power of selected variables, and the goal of the qualitative phase is to explore and interpret the statistical results obtained in the quantitative phase (Ivankova et al., 2006). Table 2 presents the study hypotheses, the assumed variables and their parametric and nonparametric test assumptions.

Table 2. Hypothesis test and statistical test.

Hypothesis	Independent variable (x)	Dependent variable (y)	Parametric	Nonparametric
There is a correlation between teachers' support activities (TSA) and boosting agency (BA)	Boosting agency	Student agency	Pearson's correlation	Spearman's correlation
There is a correlation between supportive peer activities (PSA) and boosting agency (BA)	Student engagement	Student agency	Pearson's correlation	Spearman's correlation

4. RESULTS

4.1. Quantitative Results

The quantitative results are based on the research question: What is the relation between constructing student agency and classroom engagement and activities with the support of teachers and peers? Responses were gathered from university students pursuing undergraduate degrees under the faculties of education and management.

A Likert scale was used to obtain quantitative data in the first phase of the study. In the case of Likert scale data, Spearman's rank correlation is used to show the correlation between different variables (teachers' support in classroom activities, peer support in classroom activities, student engagement, and boosting agency). Theoretically, the value of the correlation should lie between -1 and 1. Table 3 represents the Spearman's correlations between the assumed variables of teachers' support in classroom activities, peer support in classroom activities, boosting agency, and student engagement. The table shows that there is a significant positive correlation between teachers' support in classroom activities and peer support in classroom activities (correlation coefficient = 0.402, p < 0.01). This infers that as teachers' support increases, peer support also increases. There is also a significant positive correlation between teachers' support in classroom activities and boosting agency (correlation coefficient = 0.436, p < 0.01). This means that as teachers' support increases, the agency also tends to increase. However, there is no significant correlation between teachers' support and student engagement (correlation coefficient = 0.436, p > 0.05). This signifies that there is no clear relationship between teachers' support and student engagement.

Table 3. Spearman's correlations.

Variable	Correlation coefficient	p-value
Teachers' support in classroom activities and peer support in classroom activities	0.402	< 0.01
Teachers' support in classroom activities and boosting agency	0.436	< 0.01
Teachers' support in classroom activities and student engagement	0.436	> 0.05

Overall, the table shows that there is a significant positive relationship between teachers' support in classroom activities, peer support in classroom activities and boosting agency. However, there is no distinct relationship between teachers' support in classroom activities and student engagement. According to the table, the factors of teachers' support and peer support exhibit a flawless positive correlation. This proves that they co-vary perfectly along the same trajectory and that they move together in the same line. Teachers' support activities and boosting agency, as well as teachers' support activities and student engagement, exhibit moderate positive correlations. Moreover, peer support activities exhibit moderate positive correlations with agency and student engagement. At length, boosting agency and student engagement have a relatively stronger positive correlation.

4.2. Qualitative Result

4.2.1. A Brief Profile of the Participants

One of the teachers, Rima, has a wide experience of teaching English as a foreign language in schools. She has also been teaching at a higher level for nine years. She has completed a master's degree in education. Similarly, Amrit has been teaching in schools for two decades. He has 10 years' experiences teaching English as a foreign language at college level. He has a master's degree in arts. Rijan holds a master's degree in philosophy. He has been teaching master's and bachelor's students for more than a decade. Through interactions and interviews, it was evident that he possessed a good understanding and knowledge regarding student and teacher agency in comparison with Rima and Amrit.

Based on the quantitative results, qualitative information was gathered from the three English language teachers teaching at higher education institutions through semi-structured interviews, which asked the following questions:

What is the relation between constructing student agency, classroom engagement and activities with the support of teachers and peers?

How do teachers perceive the relational aspect of student agency, engagement, and activities?

How do students perceive the relational aspect of student agency, engagement, and activities?

The themes that emerged from the responses collected through the follow-up interviews with the participants are discussed below.

4.3. Themes

4.3.1. Agency Through Activities with the Support of Teachers

Classroom activities and student engagement are crucial aspects of building student agency. If teachers can keep their students engaged in activities, the students get opportunities to enhance their capacity to achieve learning goals. While students are active in classroom activities, they are focused on learning. All three participants believe that *"Classroom activities support students to improve learning achievement. Students are conscious in learning while doing work…students also concentrate on learning…"*.

It is important that students' interest and teacher's support play a positive role in learning. When the students feel that they are being cared for by the teachers, they put more effort in. They want support from teachers. If teachers provide them with support consistently, they do not give up working in the classroom. Rima made a similar remark: *"When I continuously support and care, my students like to work more. They do not drop the activities"*.

Activities give students chances to gain the attention of teachers. The teachers also can acquaint themselves with the students' abilities through their performance. There is a reciprocal relationship between activities and teacher support. The teachers also get opportunities to improve their students' performance. It helps the students to promote their ability to learn. Amrit adds: *"I wonder how students increase their performance when they are continuously involved in activities. I found even very weak students raise their capacity and standards."*

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According to Usman (2016) good teachers foster a positive relationship with students by showing individual concern and care, and demonstrating profound empathy. They inspire the students by giving intelligible instructions, and they become enthusiastic, assertive, and humble toward the students. They also amuse their students through activities. Thus, students actively respond to them. Responding through activities creates an environment of learning for improving their efficacy. In similar context, Rijan stated: *"We are good to students when we are humble, inspiring, and enthusiastic. They respond to us and follow us in activities when we show care and concern toward them."*

As mentioned by Culajara, Culajara, Portos, and Villapando (2022) teachers need to adapt to an ever-changing classroom environment and develop their skills and competencies to cultivate their students' abilities through activities. These activities are the basis for engaging every student in learning. Teachers also need to create a conducive atmosphere for everyone in the classroom. Every student should feel confident in their actions in the given activities. Amrit and Rima expressed a similar view: *"When we can change and adopt different situations in classrooms, our students get positive vibes from us…and they feel the necessity to act by themselves to change positively."*

Moreover, Awuah (2015) believes that teachers who improve their pedagogical approach by designing learner-centered activities and tasks could enhance students' overall capacity to boost their agentic aspects. If teachers adapt the classroom situation and help students in many ways, they can boost students' potential for learning. It also helps to grow individual magnitude for their future activities and achievements. Such achievements build up the students' agentic practices.

4.3.2. Agency Through Engagement with the Support of Teachers and Peers

Previous research has found that engagement plays an important role in learning achievement. Adaptive and flexible teachers can interact with the course information and provide control over students' engagement and achievement (Agu, 2015). Engaging students means keeping them active in tasks. Engagement provides individuals with chances for collaborative action and interactions, which helps to develop their skills and their ability to improve learning. Rijan perceives: *"For me, engagement is the way to keep students active and interactive in learning courses. When they are engaged, they are learning something that is helpful for their achievement…at the time of engagement, we must be flexible and helpful."*

Teachers can offer different lesson-related tasks to engage students. While engaging in the tasks they put in more effort, and their attempts result in achievement. Teachers ask them to present their work, and they can enhance their presentation skills. Rima and Rijan have had similar experiences: *"I was surprised to see their progress in presentations. When students do given tasks themselves, we usually ask them to present individually and sometimes in groups. In the beginning they hesitated, but slowly they have improved their presentation skills."*

Teachers can use different supportive strategies to improve students' performance through engagement (Culajara & Luces, 2023). Some students require teachers' support directly, needing encouragement and motivation from the teachers. They may require teachers' assistance to complete the given tasks. When the teacher neglects the students, they may leave the tasks incomplete and are discouraged from completing them in the following days. All three participants agree: *"It is our responsibility to engage students using different supportive strategies…otherwise we could not engage them effectively."*

Moreover, Amrit mentioned: *"I totally believe that many students need our help directly. They may not ask us, but we need to know. We must support them. Our positive support encourages them to complete the tasks. When they complete the allotted tasks, they enhance their potential."*

In the case of large classes, teachers face difficulty in helping students individually. They may not have sufficient time to support student engagement directly. They need support from peers and groups to get involved in activities. In this aspect, Rima's practice is similar to Rijan's. They often divide students into pairs. They encourage students to help and collaborate with each other. Their experiences show that peer support is more effective in

improving the students' performance and presentation skills. Rima mentioned: *"I have seen that peer support is highly effective in improving weak students' performance…when they support each other, they are highly encouraged to engage in activities. They do the given tasks easily. It is easy for us to observe them."*

Practice in pairs is more effective than practicing in groups because it allows for better participation from each individual fostering collaboration. Additionally, teachers can easily observe the activities of pairs. It is easy to provide support and input for each member of the pair. Rijan and Rima mentioned: *"It is very easy to handle activities done in pairs. We can ensure their participation in the tasks."*

Students' active and voluntary participation in work as a pair means they are gaining something and achieving. They are promoting their capacity to learn and do things in collaboration with peers and teachers. As stated by Damiani (2016) engaging students in partnership leads to greater learning and a better role in society. To develop this kind of system in the classroom, we must recognize the importance of teachers' involvement (Chopra, 2016). Hence, it can be inferred that when teachers and students actively engage and participate in activities, each student has the opportunity to enhance their agency.

4.4. Discussion

In this study, the initial part addresses how the construction of student agency, intertwined with classroom engagement and activities, is influenced by the support of both teachers and peers. Consistent with Polatcan, Arslan, and Balci (2023) the results reveal a noteworthy positive correlation between teachers' supportive activities, student engagement and enhancement of agency. This implies that an increase in teachers' support is associated with a corresponding increase in boosting agency. This observation aligns with the perspective of Culajara and Luces (2023) who assert that teachers play a crucial role in elevating the quality of each lesson, thereby fostering a lasting transformation in educational practices for both teachers and students, as focused on by Kusters, van der Rijst, De Vetten, and Admiraal (2023). Overall, the quantitative findings confirm the alternative hypothesis, establishing a correlation between the development of student agency and involvement in activities within EFL classrooms. Additionally, engagements and activities play a crucial role in developing students' habits of being active in learning. This is a kind of student-centered teaching practice that focuses on students' needs, interests, and talents (Culajara & Luces, 2023). When students are focused on their needs and interests, they have more chances to enhance their learning potential. This helps to foster an individual caliber to set and achieve learning goals, which leads to new forms of personal and communal transformation (Guerrero & Camargo-Abello, 2023; Wang & Zhang, 2021) through the development of agency.

Furthermore, engagement and activities constitute integral components of classroom education, ensuring the sustained interaction and involvement of students. Active engagement maintains the students' attentiveness, while various activities encourage increased interaction. Students' actions and interactions with teachers or with peers assist them to increase their capacity, ability, and strength to navigate the diverse learning situations within the classroom and in social environments. This view is consistent with the ideas put forward by Moore (2022) and Hemi, Madjar, and Rich (2023) who believe that students are influenced by the learning achievements of their peers through engagement and activities. Similarly, the research findings of Moore (2022) indicate that students seek support and facilitation from both teachers and peers. When students receive help, they are encouraged to perform better, enhancing their agency. The agency in a such situation can be developed (McNeil, 2018; Rainio & Hilppö, 2017) with the help of peers and teachers.

The qualitative results in this study align with Klemencic (2015) who noted that current actions and interactions are indicative of agency. According to the participants involved in this study, there is a consensus that students who actively engaged in activities have cultivated their sense of agency. Students develop a habit of doing something themselves when they are engaged in activities. Their actions, reactions, and interactions provide them with the chance to boost their overall capacity for transformation of learning and becoming involved in society.

This overall transformation helps students to promote their individual capacity and change their educational setting in pursuit of learning objectives (Cook-Sather, 2020). This finding is similar to Guerrero and Camargo-Abello (2023) who view that the practice of agency allows for new forms of individual and social transformation. In addition, the various phenomena, such as engagement, activities, teacher support and peer support, collectively possess the capability to augment student agency. Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate a reciprocal relationship between peer support and teacher support in enhancing student agency.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the development and enhancement of student agency in English as foreign language classrooms can be achieved through active participation and various activities. On top of that, the influential roles of teacher and peer support are crucial in shaping student agency. This study adds value by underscoring the significance of classroom participation and activities in enhancing student agency. Consequently, the study yields valuable insights into fostering student agency through active engagement and diverse activities within classrooms.

5.2. Implications

This study is limited to the area of student agency within engagement, activities, and support of teachers and peers. In the course of agency development, students feel that their voice is important. This study did not explore the place of students' voices in the process of their capacity boosting. Based on the conclusion of this study, it is evident that exploring methodologies and incorporating student perspectives are essential for boosting agency. Additionally, integrating student-centered learning approaches is crucial to emphasize and enhance student agency by aligning with their interests, preferences, and cognitive abilities (Ghiasvand, Jahanbakhsh, & Sharifpour, 2023). Finally, as assumed by Kusters et al. (2023) and Nguyen and Ngo (2023) teacher agency is also a similar aspect that can be developed to concurrently enhance student agency, which becomes the core aspect of teachers' identity, professionalism, and success.

This study addresses the ways in which the collaboration of teachers, peers, and individual students construct agentic practices. There is a dire need for engagement and activities in the classroom to promote agentic behaviors among students. Similarly, teacher and peer support are other aspects to be considered. This study allowed the teachers to identify the necessary ideas to connect engagement and activities to enhance agency in the classroom and social contexts, and the teachers and students at the higher level can get insight into the promotion of agency-boosting practices.

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