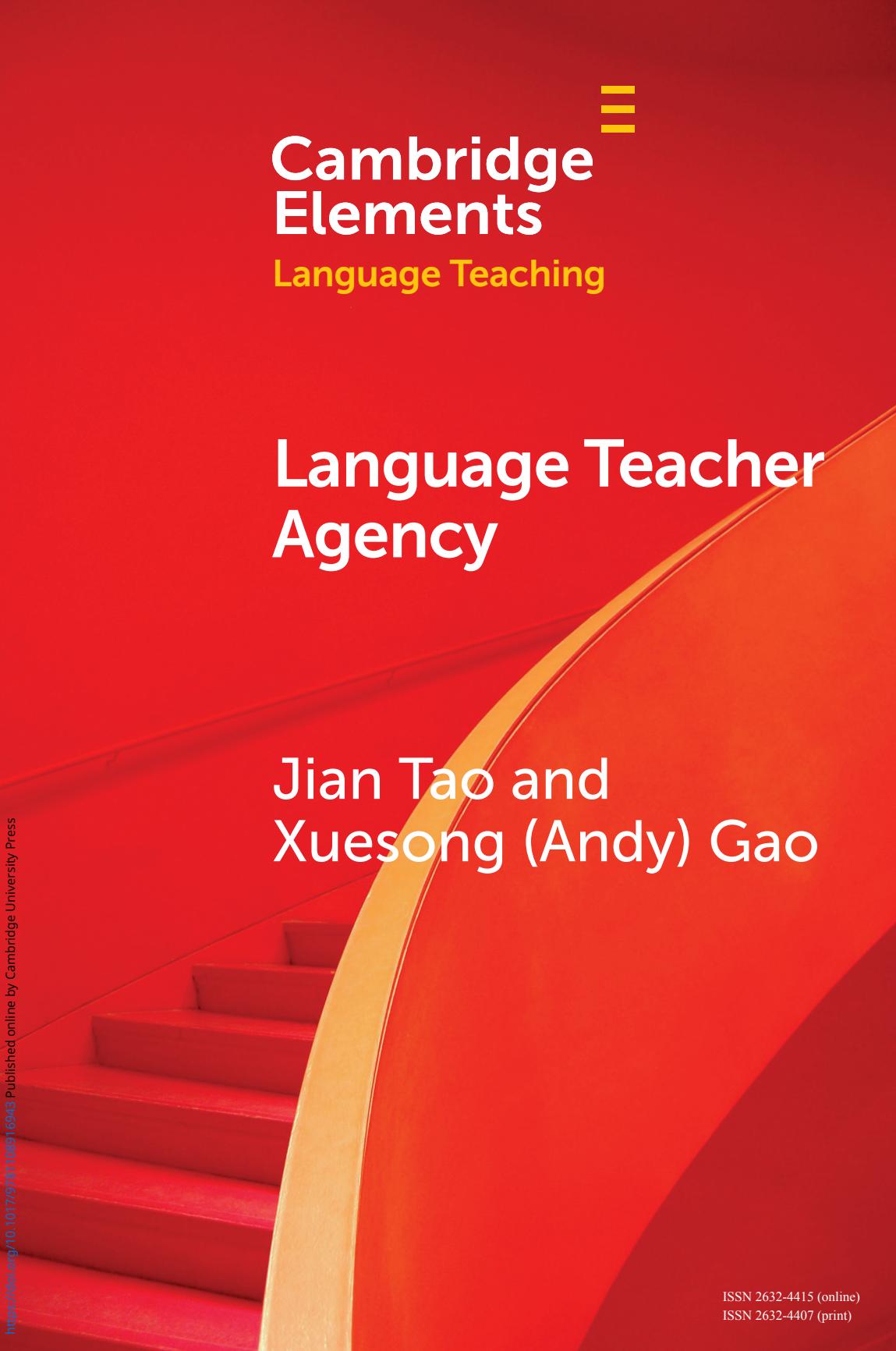


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LANGUAGE TEACHER AGENCY

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Language Teacher Agency

Elements in Language Teaching

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Abstract: This Element aims to elucidate the concept of language teacher agency by exploring the 'what' question, offering major conceptualisations of agency and explaining how they shape the way we approach teacher agency. The authors then continue with the 'why' question, and elaborate on the reasons language teacher agency matters, based on a discussion of the varied purposes of teacher agency at multiple levels. They also acknowledge that teacher agency does not operate alone, and examine how it intersects with such concepts as teacher identity, emotion, belief, and knowledge. Based on this, they identify ways to promote teacher agency through making changes to contexts and/or actors. They then introduce the concept of collective agency and propose a multilayered model based on an illustrative study. The Element ends with a call for a *trans*-perspective on understanding language teacher agency so as to facilitate the professional development of language teachers.

Keywords: language teacher agency, multilayered model, professional development, collective agency, trans-perspective

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1 Introduction

Like all teachers, language teachers need to cope with dramatic sociocultural changes. Changing educational landscapes often pose significant challenges to language teachers' professional practices. They also have to endure ongoing shifts in educational policies and curricula, adding complexity to their professional practice. Consequently, potential risks always exist that teachers may be too disillusioned to remain in the profession (e.g. Heikonen et al., 2016). In light of this increasingly intricate professional context, attempts have been made to recognise the resources residing within language teachers and to appreciate how they respond to the variety of challenges induced by sociocultural changes and educational reforms. One example is the attempt to 'recognize language teachers as reflexive and reflective agents' (Gao, 2019, p. 164) and to value the role of agency in language teachers' professional development in response to educational changes. However, it is problematic to assume that language teachers always have a strong sense of agency – that agency is 'a natural property' of individual teachers acting as change agents in implementing the desired pedagogical changes that sustain relevant curricular reforms (Miller, 2016, p. 352). For this reason, it is necessary for us to develop a proper understanding of why teacher agency matters and how it works in the professional lives of language teachers. The past two decades have seen a surge of studies aiming to achieve a better understanding of teacher agency, including in the language teaching profession. For instance, a special issue was published in *Teaching and Teachers* on 'teachers' professional agency in contradictory times' (Toom et al., 2015). In the field of language education, a collection of studies in *System* advanced an interdisciplinary perspective on language teacher agency (Miller et al., 2018). The discussion of language teacher agency extends to edited volumes (e.g. Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019; Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2017; for a review of the two edited volumes see Tao, in press) and a rising number of studies in the field (see Ekşi et al., 2019; Nguyen & Dang, 2021). Despite this rising interest in the topic, the concept of language teacher agency remains to be clarified in terms of what agency is, why it matters, what it does, and how it can be approached in research and practice. With frontline practitioners, teacher educators, and educational policymakers in mind, in this Element we intend to elucidate the concept and demonstrate how engagement with it will enhance language teachers' professional development.

We have noted that a concept of agency still needs to be articulated in an accessible way for readers, even though language teacher agency has emerged as a 'trendy' topic in the field of language teaching and teacher education. In our experience as reviewers (Tao, Gao) and an editor (Gao), we have found it

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common to see agency suddenly appearing in the findings or discussion section of a manuscript to explain something that may not have been explained by the concepts that were established at the outset. The authors of such manuscripts use teacher agency as a convenient concept without taking the effort to define it clearly, thereby running the risk of misusing the concept, confusing readers, and creating an impression that agency is highly challenging to operationalise in research. Motivated by these observations and our experiences in conducting research on language teacher agency (e.g. Tao & Gao, 2017), we approached this Element with the primary goal of articulating a clear concept of language teacher agency so that potential readers, including teacher educators, practitioners, and policymakers, may develop a critical, essential understanding of the construct. To accomplish that goal, we have organised this Element into six sections.

1. We offer an array of conceptualisations of agency from major theories or theoretical perspectives, including social cognitive, sociocultural, post-structuralist, and ecological perspectives. This section also discusses the way ontological and epistemological concepts of agency shape how we approach language teacher agency. Empirical studies are selected to illustrate how language teacher agency has been examined under different approaches which represent unique contributions.
2. We continue with the 'why' question – that is, why (language) teacher agency matters – and elaborate on the various purposes of agency at multiple levels that most frequently appear in the literature.
3. We link agency with other relevant constructs by tracing their origins in the aforementioned theories and then contextualising their connections to agency in empirical studies and in data from our own research project. Unlike previous studies which have focused primarily on language teachers' teaching, our projects are primarily concerned with language teachers' research engagement in Chinese universities – an important but under-examined aspect of language teachers' multifaceted professional practices.
4. Based on these discussions, we identify what can be done to enhance teachers' sense of agency. In particular, we highlight ways to foster teacher agency through changes in contextual conditions and/or actors' growth. Again, we draw on our own research data to illustrate how language teachers' sense of agency can be enhanced in a supportive community.
5. We then introduce the concept of collective agency, a concept which has roots in all theorisations of agency. We draw on data from a recent research project on a multilingual research team to create a multilayered model of collective agency.
6. The Element concludes by proposing a '*trans*-' perspective of agency.

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Before commencing with the 'what' question, it is necessary to clarify that the majority of existing studies on language teachers' professional practices focus on their activities in primary and secondary schools, with limited attention paid to language teachers at the tertiary level. To offer a wider array of perspectives, we use data from our recent research on language teachers working in Chinese universities (Tao & Gao, 2017; Tao et al., 2019; 2020) as illustrative studies when necessary.

2 What Is Agency?

Before articulating a theorisation of agency, it is necessary to make the distinction at the outset between agency and other constructs that researchers have easily conflated with it. One such construct is autonomy, as the boundary between the multifaceted concepts of agency and autonomy is blurry when they are defined broadly, and they are sometimes used interchangeably by researchers. For example, autonomy is defined as individuals' 'capacity to exercise control over their lives' (Benson, 2016, p.18), while agency is 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). The two concepts do overlap since 'capacity' is a key concept for both. However, they differ in many aspects. Autonomy emphasises one's capacity to make decisions on one's own (da Silva & Mølstad, 2020). In the context of learning, learner autonomy is exemplified by language learners taking initiative in managing and controlling their learning (Huang & Benson, 2013. It is also regarded as an essential feature that defines meaningful learning for language learners across different learning conditions (Benson, 2016). Most language learner autonomy researchers acknowledge that autonomous learning does not mean learning in isolation. Instead, researchers have argued that autonomous language learning is also characterised by a strong emphasis on the interdependence of various social participants in the learning process (e.g. peers, teachers) (Benson, 2016). The notion of agency has quite different theoretical considerations as it is often conceptualised in relation to structure, and even seen as inseparable from structure, such as in Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. As part of the ever-debated agency-structure dualism, agency is often perceived as action upon given contexts such as school culture and policy mandates. Teachers may be obliged to learn and practise according to certain mandates, but they may also autonomously display resistance towards a particular policy; both can be manifestations of agency (see details in Section 4). In other words, autonomy can be seen as one form of agency or a phenomenon associated with agency, and it relies on the exercise of agency; without agency, it is impossible for language learners to learn autonomously or for teachers to act autonomously in teaching

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(Hoang & Truong, 2017). Autonomy may alternatively be seen as a key component of agency as some researchers define agency as 'the capacity to initiate purposeful action that implies will, autonomy, freedom, and choice' (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011, p. 813). Reflecting on this variety of conceptualisations, which is discussed in more detail later, we conclude that agency is usually defined as a broader term encompassing autonomy.

Although the two concepts overlap, agency has some features that autonomy does not share. For example, agency often occurs through interactive positionings and social interactions depending upon others, and thus is relational in nature and sometimes shared (Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Melasalmi & Husu, 2019). It can be also argued that agency is more closely related to identity than autonomy (Benson, 2016). The element of identity is particularly highlighted in life-course views of agency that focus on identity negotiation at work and agency in practising identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Thus, agency provides a more powerful and encompassing lens than autonomy in examining language teachers' varying perceptions, decisions, and actions in the shifting educational landscape. Nevertheless, we fully appreciate the challenge of defining agency as we are aware of several significant risks in using the construct uncritically: (1) There is not a universally agreed-upon definition of agency, not because the concept is vague or hard to define but because it has been theorised from multiple perspectives (see Section 2); (2) consequently, offering a definition of agency inevitably presupposes taking a particular theoretical disposition, which may limit the scope of the discussion; and (3) using a single definition of agency also goes against the call for a *trans*-perspective proposed at the end of the Element.

Despite these risks, we can conclude from the variety of attempts to conceptualise teacher agency that the current literature generally agrees that teacher agency is not something static that an individual possesses. Rather, it is dynamic and involves the interaction between individual and context (Miller et al., 2018). With this broad viewpoint in mind, we will proceed to introduce how teacher agency is conceptualised in four major theoretical perspectives: social cognitive theory, sociocultural theory, the post-structuralist view, and an ecological perspective. These represent four conceptualisations of teacher agency: respectively, *agency as an intentional act, agency as a socioculturally mediated capacity, agency as a phenomenon/doing*, and *agency as a discursive practice*.

2.1 Agency As Individuals' Intentional Acts in Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory defines agency as individuals' intentional acts to make things happen and to participate in 'their self-development, adaptation and

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self-renewal with changing times' (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). It also highlights that agents are 'producers as well as products of the social system' (p. 1). This relates to the model of interactive triadic causation, which states that internal personal factors, behavioural patterns, and the environment influence one another to affect human agency (Bandura, 1999; 2001). Environmental factors such as professional relationships in schools influence agency 'through [the] psychological mechanism of the self system to produce behavioral effects' (Bandura, 2001, p. 15). Social cognitive theory identifies intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness as the core features of agency. Human agency also exists in different forms – that is, individuals exercise agency to produce effects through direct, proxy, and collective agency (Bandura, 1999). When individuals cannot exert direct influence, they will either resort to relying on people who have the power to act on their behalf, a form of proxy agency, or rely on collective power to achieve their desired outcomes. In any of these three forms, agency relies on self-efficacy to make things happen. Thus social cognitive theory perceives self-efficacy as the foundation of human agency, and studies taking this perspective are inclined to measure the correlation between agency and self-efficacy as well as other variables through the use of survey instruments and statistical analysis. Research applying the social cognitive theorisation of agency to teacher agency remains limited; one example which stands out among those who have taken this perspective is Min (in press).

Min (in press) applied social cognitive theory to understand teacher agency in enacting national curriculum reform in South Korea. Min's (in press) study focused on school culture as the major environmental factor and self-efficacy and outcome expectation as personal factors. In the study, 605 elementary school teachers were surveyed. To operationalise social cognitive theory, Min measured the correlation among environmental factors, internal personal factors, and teacher agency (Bandura, 2001). The analysis of the survey data identified that environmental factors, such as good teacher–principal and teacher–teacher relationships, had a positive influence on teacher agency towards greater autonomy conferred by the curriculum or by motivating them to exercise autonomy in enacting the new curricula. These findings confirm that participants' self-efficacy and outcome expectation have a positive effect on teacher agency in relation to the reform agenda. They also reveal that while the teacher–student relationship, as an environmental factor, does not directly influence the exercise of teacher autonomy, it does affect self-efficacy and outcome expectation, which in turn influence agency. Min (in press) shows how the social cognitive theorisation of agency can be aligned with the quantitative measurement of self-reported personal and environmental factors to explore their correlations with agency.

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2.2 Agency As a Socioculturally Mediated Capacity in Sociocultural Theory

Those taking a sociocultural perspective often draw on Lev Vygotsky's work and conceptualise agency as 'a socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). The Vygotskian view of teacher agency highlights the mediational process that connects individual development with structure. It gives primacy to the sociocultural contexts that shape one's beliefs, values, and agency. Thus the development of teacher agency occurs on the social plane, or at the interpersonal level, before the psychological plane, or the intrapersonal level (Wertsch et al. 1993). Individuals' agentic actions are always mediated by the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are situated. Contextual conditions are reflected in mediational tools, which include language, technology, or any signs that have evolved, but they can also be educational policy mandates, new curricula, or changes in assessment practice. Thus, as Wertsch et al. (1993) contend, the unit of analysis should not be the individual but rather 'individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-tools' (p. 342). Teacher agency can be mediated not only by tools, but also by interactions with different stakeholders present in the process, which results in the shared or relational nature of agency (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019). Research taking a sociocultural approach, such as ethnography or case studies, usually adopts a qualitative methodology.

As an example, Lasky (2005) takes a sociocultural approach and uses the notion of mediated agency to examine secondary school teachers' experiences of school reform. Based on the premise that agency is mediated, she first identified the mediational systems and then examined how these systems mediate the exercise of teacher agency. One mediational system relates to the impact of early experiences on teachers' identities as individuals working in a human-centred profession, including their views on the purpose of education, beliefs about teaching subjects, and opinions on the right way to teach or to assess learning. The other mediational system is related to contextual conditions, and more specifically to a school reform that introduced a more rigorous curriculum in shortened academic years with more stringent assessment. While these educational changes at the system level generated significant constraints on teachers' agency, their long-held beliefs and identities enabled them to exercise agency to resist the structural change and to continue building trustful relationships with their students that may not have been valued by the school but were by the teachers themselves. Thus the external mediational system may have less effect on teacher agency if teachers have developed a strong sense of who they are as teachers.

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Edwards and D'Arcy (2004) also use a sociocultural approach and draw upon the notion of relational agency to examine student teachers' agency in learning to teach. They define relational agency as 'a capacity to engage with dispositions of others in order to interpret and act on the object of our actions in enhanced ways' (p. 147). Their study compares two cohorts of student teachers experiencing differing levels of relational agency. Based on the assumption that agency occurs at the interpersonal level before the intrapersonal level, the researchers identified the social relations between the student teachers and other stakeholders and then examined how these relations mediate the exercise of relational agency. The results suggest that one cohort of student teachers perceived themselves as powerless curriculum deliverers as they neither engaged with mentors nor saw pupils as potential resources in helping them search for pedagogical possibilities. In other words, they could not experience relational agency and were thus unable to access supported learning. In contrast, the other cohort of student teachers shifted power relationships as they actively sought and received advice from mentors on teaching and engaged with pupils in learning together, which helped them gain a more holistic knowledge of the pupils and improved pupils' learning. In this case, the student teachers experienced either mutual support or learning between them and the pupils, indicating the significant role of relational agency in mediating the student teachers' professional learning. Therefore, Edwards and D'Arcy (2004) highlight that individual teachers do not exercise agency in isolation. The sociocultural approach emphasises that teacher agency is relational in that teachers engage with the dispositions of others in creating learning spaces and accessing learning resources so as to enable the exercise of agency in facilitating their own learning for professional development.

Language teachers are particularly well equipped to draw on the linguistic and cultural tools they possess to enable the exercise of agency. These linguistic and cultural tools may help language teachers assert agency in seeking social acceptance and building rapport with students as well as in informing their classroom pedagogy regarding social justice. For example, Ishihara et al. (2018) focused on translingual practice as a mediational tool in language teacher agency by reporting on two American teachers teaching English in Japan. By treating language as a potential mediational tool in their data analysis, the researchers identified the 'verbal and non-verbal means (e.g. knowledge of culture and semiotic and discursive resources)' (p. 84) that participants gained from multiple languages and then examined how these means mediated their enactment of agency. The study revealed that the two teachers drew on their knowledge of the local culture to follow local ways of doing things when communicating with colleagues in the personal or professional sphere, which

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enabled them to assert their agency through recognition as part of the local teacher community. Moreover, the teachers' agency in classroom teaching was mediated by their advanced knowledge of Japanese language and culture, which helped them communicate with local students with lower English proficiency. With a better knowledge of the students, they were able to exercise their teacher agency by designing locally acceptable pedagogy to scaffold language learning and disrupt various cultural stereotypes. In this regard, language teachers are armed with additional mediational tools, especially when their agency is constrained by structure.

2.3 Agency As a Temporal and Situated Achievement in an Ecological Perspective

Another line of scholarship defines teacher agency as a phenomenon or 'doing' – as something 'achieved and not as merely . . . a capacity or possession of the individual' (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 197). Eteläpelto et al. (2013) distinguish this perspective from the sociocultural approach by criticising the latter's overemphasis on moment-to-moment interaction and the primacy given to objects rather than subjects in the object-oriented activity system. Drawing on life-course theory, they propose a subject-oriented developmental approach to replace the sociocultural approach so that an understanding of professional agency can be achieved by situating one's actions not only in context but also in one's life history. That is, an individual's actions are based on his or her social environment but also on his or her prior experiences, which requires more attention to be paid to individual agents, including their intentionality, belief, and identity (Billett, 2006). The approach advanced by Eteläpelto et al. (2013) later evolved into an ecological perspective on teacher agency that features a spatial-temporal dimension and posits teacher agency as a temporal and situated achievement (Priestley et al., 2015). The ecological perspective acknowledges that teacher agency may be contextually afforded or constrained, but adds a temporal dimension and describes agency as the 'outcome of the interplay of iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions' (p. 34). More specifically, an individual's past experience, present conditions, and future goals form an iterative relationship in performing agentic choices and actions. When agency is individual and contextually resourced, it becomes something emergent in a particular context rather than an individual capacity. This line of research tends to use case studies due to the theoretical focus on individuals in an evolving ecosystem.

Priestley et al. (2012) operationalise the iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions of teacher agency enactment to demonstrate that

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teacher agency is a temporally situated phenomenon. They focus on three case studies of teachers' agency in curriculum-making in a school where the prescribed national curriculum was used and attainment in examinations was prioritised. Two of the case study teachers, who had gained rich working experiences before entering the teaching profession, projected the goal of the curriculum as being educational, but the other teacher saw the curriculum as exam-oriented, primarily based on prior schooling experience; this indicates that iterative experiences in the past can be drawn upon to develop aspired outcomes. The practical-evaluative dimension was present in the decision-making process as the two teachers needed to consider the impact of the current school conditions on their potential to realise their aspiration in curriculum-making. Despite the restrictive nature of their teaching context, the teachers adopted different approaches to bring changes to the prescribed curriculum, which demonstrates that 'there is always room for manoeuvre' (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 210).

Since agency is both individual and socially resourced, Tao and Gao (2017) examined language teacher agency as the outcome of the interplay between individual and contextual resources and constraints. To align with the life-course view, life-history interviews were conducted to investigate the professional trajectories of language teachers in which agency was situated. As the ecological perspective assumes a central role of identity in agency enactment, the data analysis focused on the articulation of identity commitment by language teachers and its link to their agentic choices. By viewing individuals within an evolving ecosystem, the study further examined how participants' agentic actions became possible '*by means of their environment* rather than simply in their environment' (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137, italics added). The study documented how a group of English for General Purposes (EGP) teachers transitioned to careers in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching and revealed how teacher agency was achieved in highly individualised ways to facilitate professional development. Of particular relevance was teachers' agency in improving their teaching practices. A few business English teachers made the 'agentic choice' to engage in a university–company partnership, which was a university-wide initiative, to access first-hand business documents from the relevant professional communities, which were later used to inform lesson planning and design authentic teaching materials. This kind of agentic action was enabled by the business English teachers' prior industrial experiences and by the contextual opportunities they had to continue their engagement in the related industries. The study concludes that language teachers 'match' their individual expertise, capabilities, and experiences with an array of contextual resources to take agentic actions.

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2.4 Agency As a Discursive Practice in the Post-structuralist View

Post-structuralists view agency as a form of discursive practice (Davies, 1990) and see individuals as able to make agentic moves only when they are assigned the position to do so. In other words, individuals are not agents by nature and do not make agentic moves freely to their own ends. Individuals are part of multiple collectives that have particular kinds of discursive practice, and can only 'speak from the positions made available within those collectives' (p. 343). The way they 'speak' about their desires must be formulated in the discursive practices that are available to them and recognisable by others in the collectives. Moreover, any kind of position entails responsibilities and duties. Thus an individual who 'has the obligation to take themselves up as a knowable, recognisable identity', who 'speaks for themselves', and who accepts responsibility for their actions' (p. 343) can be said to have agency. Positioning theory offers an analytical lens through which to understand the distribution of rights and duties in conversations or narratives (Davies & Harré, 1999). It is through positioning – that is, the process of individuals assigning positions to themselves and others – that rights and duties are distributed. Thus, Kayi-Aydar (2019) claims, 'one's agentic moves can be understood through positioning' (p. 60). This line of research is usually based on narratives of all kinds and adopts a critical discourse analysis methodology.

Rogers and Wetzel (2013) were among the first to apply the post-structuralist view of agency to educational settings. They focused on the 'discursive composition' of agency signalled in spoken interactions and investigated the discursive resources afforded by relevant positioning that demonstrate agency. They used positive discourse analysis (PDA) to examine a pre-service teacher's agency in culturally relevant teaching presented at a workshop and to focus on 'moments of liberation and agency' (p. 62). They introduced the concept of 'discursive contours of teacher agency', such as how individuals construct storylines for themselves, for the students, and for the relevant subject field which function as the contextual conditions for enabling teacher agency. The semiotic resources used to construct these storylines can be harnessed to construct agentic moves in the discursive process. Consequently, the case study teacher engaged in thinking aloud and posing rhetorical questions to extend teaching and learning, used non-verbal discourses to create opportunities for co-construction with her students, and adopted narratives and counter-narratives to create new realities for advocacy within the school. This case study presents an example of how teachers can use multiple representational systems or modes to construct multiple storylines and figured worlds, which constitute discursive processes in which they assert agency.

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Based on positioning theory, Kayi-Aydar (2015) explores the interaction between positioning and agency by focusing on three pre-service teachers of English language learners (ELLs) who were doing internships to finish earning their English as a second language (ESL) endorsements. The teachers were found to differ in terms of how they positioned ELLs and simultaneously self-positioned as particular kinds of teachers. These self-positionings encompassed related duties and responsibilities, which shaped the teachers' agency in working with ELLs. Two of the case study teachers perceived their students as language learners whose primary need was language assistance, and thus they positioned themselves as providers of language guidance and support. They exercised agency in helping the students improve their language development by trying out a variety of language learning tasks. On the other hand, the other teacher perceived the students as new members of society and interactively positioned herself not only as a language supporter, but also as a bridge between the students and the local culture. Thus she did more than provide linguistic assistance, agentively integrating culture into her teaching practice. Despite the differences in their approaches, all three experienced conflicting positionings that constrained their agency. They positioned themselves as caring and effective teachers but also, as they were assigned powerless positions, as individuals doubting their capacity to interact with and teach ELLs, which reduced their willingness to teach in schools with high ELL percentages. Kayi-Aydar's results indicate how agency may be constrained or afforded by different positionings.

The native-speakerism discourse is probably one of the most enduring discourses that privilege or marginalise teachers of all languages and that may enable or constrain language teacher agency. Wernicke's (2018) study of the interaction between teacher agency and linguistic teacher identity focuses on a teacher teaching French as a second language (FSL) in Canada. Aware of the broader discourse of the native speaker as the standard, the FSL teacher agentively drew on discourses of plurilingualism as a resource to construct a plurilingual speaker identity. This identity helped her establish her legitimacy as a non-native second language (L2) teacher – a legitimacy based not on her linguistic repertoire, but on her access to an alternative discourse on language learning and teaching from her prior professional learning. Thus, through accessing and mobilising this alternative discourse this FSL teacher was able to navigate the constraints of the native-speaker ideology to discursively legitimise her linguistic identity as well as her L2 teacher identity. These findings show that language teachers can exercise agency to combat the threat of unfavourable prevailing discourses in negotiating and constructing their professional identities.

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To offer an interim conclusion, this section introduces the major approaches to defining and conceptualising agency that have dominated the teacher agency literature. Illustrative studies are presented to show how the theoretical frameworks are operationalised or guide data analysis. With these understandings established, we next examine the question of 'why teacher agency matters' by discussing the role of teacher agency in teachers' responses to various challenges at multiple levels in a given context.

3 Why Teacher Agency Matters

The foregoing discussion of teacher agency in a variety of theoretical perspectives shows that it plays a critical role in facilitating teachers' professional development and sustaining desired educational changes that ultimately result in better student learning. Research has documented that teachers exercise agency for different purposes, including pedagogical, moral, and change (Molla & Nolan, 2020; Toom et al., 2015). In this section, we present a variety of conditions wherein teachers' exercise of agency matters. We classify the range of conditions that teachers' exercise of agency is likely to impact according to the levels of analysis (e.g. the Douglas Fir Group, 2016). This discussion is organised in line with our response to the call to use the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) framework as a guide for language teacher education (Gao, 2019). While this framework situated agency at the meso level, agency is affected by the interacting effects of macro, meso, and micro factors (de Costa & Norton, 2017). Researchers have also recognised the need to add a chronological dimension to the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) framework (e.g. Larsen-Freeman, 2019). For this reason, we add language teachers' professional development trajectory as the fourth dimension (see Figure 1), focusing in particular on teachers' professional development through research engagement. We then discuss the uniqueness and complexity of language teachers' professional lives, as they are expected to enact agency to make a difference while confronting a variety of challenges within their teaching contexts.

3.1 The Individual Level: Teacher Agency in (Continuously) Learning to Teach

Individual student teachers or early-career teachers may experience a series of challenges during the process of learning to teach. For instance, student teachers may need to negotiate power relations in pursuit of developing the knowledge and skills for teaching within teacher education programmes which tend to posit them as receivers of knowledge (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Research has revealed that student teachers perceive the quality of peer relations as the key to their sense of professional agency in the early phase of teacher education,

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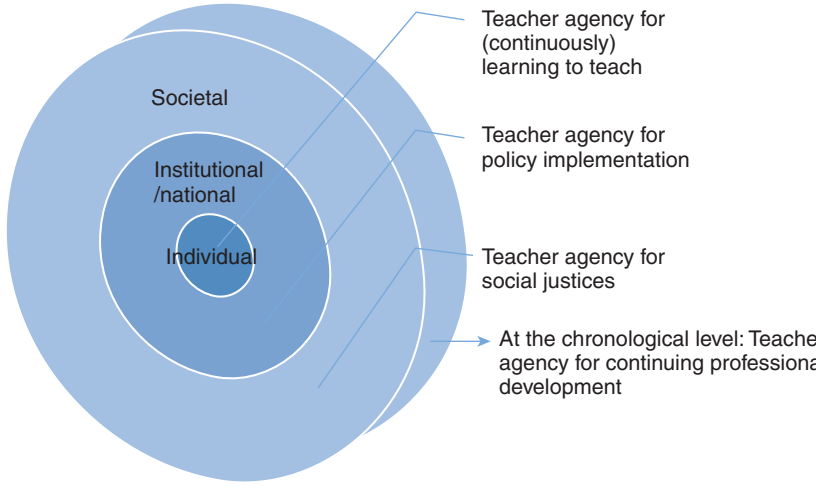


Figure 1 Teacher agency for varied purposes based on the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) framework

as peers can provide the type of social support in the learning process that teacher educators cannot (Soini et al., 2015). When they enter schools to conduct teaching practicums, student teachers may encounter gaps between what they learn in teacher education programmes and what they are expected to do in schools. They may also need to reconcile the differences between the way they aspire to teach and the way they are supposed to teach as demanded by mentors in schools. It is unusual for individual student teachers to finish their teaching tasks in isolation from peers, and it is nearly impossible for them to complete their teaching practicums without advice and support from their mentors. Previous research has highlighted the critical role that the relational agency between student teachers and mentors has in facilitating individual student teachers' efforts in learning to teach (Edwards & D'arcy, 2004). Furthermore, research has also noted that individual student teachers who did not experience relational agency as learners may not value relational agency and work to foster it in pupils. Although they may attend more to curriculum delivery in practice, they may thus neglect the creation of socially supportive conditions for the enhancement of student learning (Edwards & D'arcy, 2004). This might explain why some student teachers demonstrate strong agency in developing their instructional practices but weak agency in classroom management, especially in providing support for children's mental well-being (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). Unfortunately, student teachers' inability to manage classrooms socially and pedagogically can make them vulnerable to being

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challenged by students, resulting in strained teacher–student relationships. The perceived inadequacy of teacher–student relationships was found to contribute significantly to a reduced sense of professional identity among teachers and, eventually, increased likelihood of teachers leaving the profession (Heikonen et al., 2016).

Experienced in-service teachers may also face similar individual challenges in continuously learning to teach as educational reforms and curriculum changes can often make in-service teachers feel deskilled (e.g. Codd, 2005; Elliott, 2004; Troman, 2000). As these educational changes usually promote new approaches to teaching and learning, individual teachers may feel that their current teaching practices and competences are no longer appreciated. For this reason, they often feel obliged to take on new pedagogical practices, change their pedagogical beliefs, and follow new pedagogical principles, a process similar to that of learning to teach as experienced by students and beginning teachers. In addition, educational changes also tend to make teachers feel threatened by the emerging pedagogical conditions, wherein they are 'questioned by others (principal, parents)' about their 'professional identity and moral integrity' and fear losing 'control of the processes and tasks they [feel] responsible for as teachers' (Kelchtermans, 2005, p. 997). In many cases, they find themselves subjected to a tightening regime of accountability, in which their professional practice is increasingly evaluated according to externally developed performance standards (e.g. Codd, 2005). This means that all teachers, in all stages of professional development, need agency to develop a sense of authority during the process of learning to teach and ongoing professional development. Consequently, it has become imperative for researchers and teacher educators to explore how a socially supportive space can be created for teachers to experience relational agency, undertake professional learning, and pursue professional development (e.g. Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Soini et al., 2015).

3.2 The Institutional/National Level: Teacher Agency in Policy Implementation

At the institutional/national level, teachers are believed to hold the key to implementing curriculum reforms or educational policies. They are often described as 'change agents' regardless of whether they are being supported in the implementation of changes. Previous research has identified a range of characteristics attributed to teachers as change agents, including lifelong learning, mastery, entrepreneurship, and collaboration (van der Heijden et al., 2015), suggesting that teachers play multiple roles as agents in the reform process.

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Executing these roles requires time and effort in addition to those needed by the teachers to discharge their regular duties (i.e. teaching), introducing increased demands on their professional practice.

As previously discussed, educational changes often involve conflicts that make professional practices even more challenging and complex for teachers. For example, teachers may experience conflicts between their value systems and the values promoted by educational changes (e.g. the importance of high-stakes standard assessment). Agency is needed for teachers to develop trust in students and achieve their own purpose as teachers (Lasky, 2005). It is also needed when they must contest the tight control of their practices imposed by schools so that they might have a voice in responding to changing conditions for professional teaching (Oolbekkink-Marchand, et al., 2017). If meso-level actors (e.g. educational institutions) do not recognise individual teachers' agentic actions in their implementation of national policies, teachers may perceive less space for agency in policy enactment; this encourages teachers to agentively resist the imposition of top-down policies (Liu et al., 2020). Tao and Gao (2017) describe how English language teachers in a Chinese university agentively responded to requirements to take on new teaching tasks and career changes (such as from EGP to ESP teaching) as induced by the curriculum. Some teachers demonstrated a strong sense of agency in learning to develop subject-related knowledge by themselves and exploring the use of innovative pedagogical practices to accommodate student needs when teaching ESP courses. In contrast, teachers with a weak sense of agency chose to quit ESP teaching.

It is important for researchers and policymakers to recognise that teachers should not shoulder the responsibility of implementing curriculum changes alone and ensure that the role of change agents is distributed fairly (Leander & Osborne, 2008). It is equally important for researchers and teacher educators to recognise language teachers as agents in charge of their own professional development in response to educational changes and to find ways in which their agency can be fostered, supported and enhanced in their professional development. These efforts are particularly important as teachers in general feel deskilled and their professionalism may be eroded in a professional culture which prioritises external measures of performance (Codd, 2005; Elliott, 2004; Sloan, 2006; Troman, 2000). In particular, when teacher performance is evaluated by an authority at the top, who may actually know less about teaching, teachers are less likely to set goals for themselves or engage with transformative learning (Charteris & Smardon, 2015). In other words, when their control of their teaching and career is reduced, their agency is diminished. It has become critical for researchers and teacher educators to find

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ways to enhance teachers' agency in this tightening regime of accountability, in which teacher performance is increasingly quantified and linked to students' exit test results.

3.3 The Societal Level: Teacher Agency in Advocating Social Justice

Teachers do not just pass on established knowledge to students uncritically; they also prepare students to function and make positive impacts in their roles in society. To achieve this, language teachers need to enhance their awareness of 'the social, cultural and economic conditions of those who are frequently marginalised and socially excluded' (Gray & Morton, 2017, p. 103) and they need to agentively put such awareness into practice. When language teachers exercise agency in promoting social justice through teaching, they 'act strategically to transform the risks of exclusion and underachievement for all students in a context of cultural and social diversity' (Pantić, 2015, p. 759). Pantić (2015) further offers a model of teacher agency for social justice which includes purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity.

Social justice emerges as an important issue for language teachers in modern society, which is characterised by multicultural and multilingual realities. However, awareness of this issue presents no easy task for language teachers as they are likely to feel contradictions between their professional obligation to focus on academic excellence in practice and the need to educate students about social issues such as global citizenship. In many institutional contexts, language teachers are not necessarily expected to educate students about social justice, and they are rarely supported in doing so. Hence, it becomes critical for language teachers to agentively find ways to promote social justice in their teaching. For example, a network of like-minded individual teachers in a Canadian school worked together to exercise agency in creating opportunities for developing global citizenship, both within the curriculum and through extracurricular activities (Schweisfurth, 2006).

Language teachers in specific cultural contexts may also find significant challenges in engaging with controversial yet crucial issues such as gender and race in teaching. Similarly, teachers who take a social-justice pedagogy and include queer perspectives in their language teaching may confront substantial obstacles in places where homophobia dominates and there is little room for accepting queer culture. Leal and Crookes (2018) describe the experiences of an American teacher who adopted pedagogical practices based on Pantić's model to engage students with gender issues when teaching English in South Korea. Their study records how the case study teacher exercised agency in adapting teaching materials and using identity as pedagogy to deal with issues such as

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homophobia and queer culture and to encourage students to think critically and co-construct understandings of gender-related issues. This teacher's agentic pedagogic efforts were enabled by favourable classroom and institutional conditions, but social justice is rarely included in the official curriculum in educational contexts. As language teachers are increasingly urged to address these issues in their classrooms, their agency plays a critical role in initiating and sustaining their efforts to promote social justice.

It must be noted that agency matters at multiple levels of analysis in an interactive manner (de Costa & Norton, 2017). The aforementioned studies offer valuable insights into teacher agency enactment for social justice, but we also believe that it is important for language teachers to enact agency in pursuit of social justice by exercising reflexivity and challenging their own views before advocating for others. After all, reflexivity is a central element of agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). In many educational contexts, language teachers may be privileged or marginalised primarily due to their ethnolinguistic characteristics. For example, white male native-English-speaking teachers are often viewed as the ideal type of English teacher and thus enjoy privileges in the workplace. Language teachers are now encouraged to reflect on sources of privilege so that they may develop an enhanced awareness of the sources of oppression and advocate for oppressed groups (Appleby, 2016). Moreover, awareness of one's privilege can be a precondition for agency enactment to transform the ideological rules which empower or disempower individuals through pedagogical practices (Morgan, 2004). However, female and non-native-English-speaking teachers, particularly those who are not white, may be unfavourably positioned and marginalised in the language teaching profession. They must therefore learn to empower themselves by exercising agency to challenge the dominant discourse that disempowers them (Ilieva & Ravindran, 2018). This kind of agentic act may be a precondition to advocating social justice for all students who may be disempowered in similar ways (Zheng, 2017). Therefore, language teachers should reflect on their privileged or marginalised position in order to exercise agency in advocating for others.

3.4 The Chronological Level: Teacher Agency in Ongoing Professional Development

The previous sections illustrate the role of teacher agency in learning to teach, implementing policies, and advocating social justice; this agency occurs on multiple levels, according to the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) framework. It is important to note that teacher agency enactment is not a one-time event. In fact, teacher agency operates throughout an educator's professional trajectory, as it is

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temporally constructed (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Thus we should situate teacher agency not only in various contextual conditions, but also within a teacher's professional career. For this reason, we add a chronological dimension to acknowledge teacher agency in ongoing professional development, which will be illustrated by a focal case teacher, Qian, from an ethnographic study conducted by the first author in a Chinese university (Tao, 2017). Qian was among the first teachers tasked to teach ESP courses due to faculty-level curricular reform. With an educational background in applied linguistics, Qian had taught mainly skills-based English courses. Teaching ESP thus represented a career transformation for Qian which required teacher learning as a starting point.

To fulfil the new task of teaching forensic English, Qian made an agentic choice to receive professional training in the target area of law. To do so, he participated in a two-year master's programme on law studies and took courses every weekend. These agentic actions allowed Qian to acquire a 'systematic' knowledge of the content area which he believed was essential to teaching the new curriculum.

> I taught legal English . . . I entered a law program. I can show you my notes in business law, economic law, intellectual property law and so on. A master-level curriculum is more systematic. (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 350)

Qian worked hard in the master's programme, taking 'notes in business law, economic law, intellectual property law and so on'. Moreover, he kept several booklets of course notes in the drawers of his office desk and told the interviewer that he would reread these notes every summer to consolidate his repertoire of knowledge.

While Qian continued to agentively build his knowledge, he also demonstrated professional agency in teaching the new curriculum. Apart from offering the course every semester, Qian exercised agency in writing textbooks for target students and exploring innovative pedagogies by doing course projects. For example, Qian accomplished a university-level course project and later received a provincial-level grant which involved building a website for his course. When he was asked why he completed these projects, he explained as follows:

> My motivation was to teach the course in a better way . . . In the course website, there was quite a lot of interaction between students, and between teacher and students. I just wanted to teach the course better through doing this kind of project.

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This extract indicates that Qian took agentic action to enhance his course design. In particular, he focused on how to facilitate student learning through a series of interactional tasks. By doing so, Qian achieved better teaching outcomes and also made his teaching resources accessible to the public through the course website.

Qian's agency in teaching is manifested in his ability to not only hone his pedagogy, but also update his course with the changing practices in real workplaces in the digital era. The first author's classroom observation reveals that Qian introduced new software to enable students to write law documents in a simulated context and thus moved his class to a computer lab. Such actions can be interpreted as agentic responses to the increased digitalisation of the target industry, as Qian reported to have maintained contact with professionals working in international law firms or customs houses. By experimenting with computer-assisted language teaching, Qian attempted to better prepare students for the future workplace.

These examples illustrate agency enactment in teacher learning, pedagogical practices, and responses to the digital era, which occurred throughout the case study teacher's professional career. They indicate that language teachers need to exercise agency continuously in addressing challenges at different points in time to sustain their professional development.

Having discussed the significant challenges to which teachers, including language teachers, need to respond in professional practice at these various levels, we now present the results of two studies (Buchanan, 2015; Stillman & Anderson, 2015) to illustrate how teacher agency operates in specific contexts. Following this, we will discuss what we have learnt from these studies and other literature on enhancing teacher agency.

3.5 Manifestations of Teacher Agency: Two Illustrative Studies

Research has captured the multifaceted nature of teacher agency which manifests in the highly challenging and complex professional circumstances in which teachers find themselves. Teachers have been found to demonstrate more than resistance or accommodation in response to changes imposed from above. The variety of manifestations of teacher agency reflects the dynamic interplay between context and individual teachers, who may act independently or collectively. We have selected the following two studies to illustrate how teachers' agentic responses to educational changes are facilitated or constrained by contextual conditions.

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Study 1

Buchanan (2015) notes the (mis)match between teachers' and schools' understanding of *what it means to be a professional* and discusses the impact of this (mis)match on the exercise of teacher agency. Her study defines teachers' understanding as derived primarily from prior experiences, particularly early-career experiences. The school culture is more connected to the larger macro-level discourses, such as operationalising policies related to accountability and standardisation (at the societal level). Teachers are found to exhibit two kinds of agency, *stepping up* and *pushing back*, depending on how their understanding fits with the school culture. *Stepping up* is a way for teachers to exhibit agency when their understanding of the way they want to teach fits well with the policy discourses of the school (at the institutional level). This kind of agency involves taking action to 'go above and beyond the perceived expectations of their roles' (p. 710). For example, a case study teacher not only fulfilled her teaching responsibilities effectively, but also took on additional responsibilities as a school administrator, 'coaching other teachers, leading professional development sessions, and serving on the school's hiring committee' (p. 710). *Pushing back*, in contrast, is a form of resistance seen when teachers feel that their teaching philosophy is not in harmony with what the school culture promotes, and in response, exercise agency to 'reject, negotiate or reconfigure' the perceived expectation of the roles imposed on them (on the institutional level). For example, exercise of this kind of teacher agency is reflected in collaborative efforts to unite all teachers and talk to the superintendent, and in an individual teacher's efforts to challenge policy decisions through actions like threatening to quit teaching. Stepping up is more than just meeting the school's demands, and pushing back is more than just leaving the school; both are agentic actions intended to change the course of relevant policy decisions.

Study 2

Stillman and Anderson (2015) discuss how a case study teacher of language arts exercised agency to engage with policy (on the societal level), moving from accommodation to appropriation. When a policy mandate conflicted with the focal teacher's commitment and expertise, she exercised agency to respond to policy-related demands while continuing to teach in a way that aligned with what she believed in, which was taking ownership of something to make it one's own (on the micro level). This started with 'taking ownership' of policy by

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reading it with an open mind, which helped the case study teacher realise that part of the accountability policy was compatible with her stance on teaching. For example, even though the case teacher was critical of exam-oriented education, she found that the goal of the accountability policy aligned with her stance towards enhancing student learning. The teacher then started 'taking up the tools' of policy, since policy tools such as the standardised test offered clearer directions for her lesson plans to fulfil her goal of enhancing student achievement. In the end, the case study teacher exercised agency in appropriating the policy to make it her own – that is, she strategically reframed the policies to help students make sense of a required lesson or test. She also drew on her knowledge, beliefs, and professional experiences and, more importantly, other trusted voices such as critical pedagogues to adapt policy tools agentively, such as adapting the mandated teacher-centred approach to allow students to participate as contributors rather than just as receivers of knowledge while teaching the mandated lessons. Thus her agentic choices and actions positioned the teacher as a policy author rather a policy implementer. While much is to be celebrated about her agency, it is important to note that all the agentic actions she undertook to internalise and adapt the externally imposed policies were facilitated by the relative autonomy of the school (on the institutional level), given the fact that the school retained the right to design its own programmes.

3.6 Why Language Teacher Agency in Particular?

While agency is significant for all teachers in shaping their ability to respond to the variety of challenges they need to address in professional practice, we would like to highlight a series of significant professional issues that language teachers in particular need to deal with through their exercise of agency. These professional issues are associated with the multilingual and multicultural realities for which language teachers need to prepare language learners in contexts where monolingualism, particularly English monolingualism, is the dominant ideology. These professional issues include:

- Language teachers need to exercise agency in working with students of diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds while having limited knowledge of these students. As ESL teachers, they need to work with subject teachers and respond to the learning needs of learners whose first language is not English but need to learn subject content in the medium of English (e.g. in the United States; Kayi-Aydar, 2015) and with students of lower literacy (e.g. in

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Australia; Ollerhead, 2010). However, problems may arise when those ESL teachers are not taught or well prepared to accommodate students' specific needs beyond language skills, such as their intercultural competence, requiring language teachers to exercise agency in particular.

- Language teachers, especially non-native English-speaker (NNES) teachers, need to exercise agency in navigating the native-speakerism ideology which dominates in their profession. NNES teachers have long been discriminated against in terms of their legitimacy to teach English since monolingual native speakers of particular English varieties (e.g. American English, British English) are portrayed as the ideal teachers (Hsieh, Gao, & Bell, in press; Ilieva & Ravindran, 2018; Wernicke, 2018). NNES teachers must therefore make agentic efforts to gain recognition as competent English teachers and address these unfavourable discursive positionings in both the recruitment process and the language classroom by drawing on linguistic concepts such as multi-competence, multilingualism, and translingual competence.
- Language teachers, including native English-speakers (NES) teachers, also need to exercise agency in dealing with potential marginality: NES teachers may enjoy privileges in job hunting, but their participation in the local context remains peripheral (Trent, 2012). They may be recognised in terms of linguistic superiority and familiarity with the target culture, but they are generally considered to have inadequate knowledge of the contextual conditions and are thus not allowed to participate in making key curricular decisions. Their professional status is also often called into question (e.g. Ishihara et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2016). It has been argued that NES teachers should learn additional languages, in particular those of the language learners, and familiarise themselves with the language learners' cultures (e.g. Ellis, 2016), which require them to exercise teacher agency.
- Language teachers often face new demands in the context of shifting curricula and pedagogy, such as an expectation to adopt new pedagogies imported from other contexts (e.g. task-based language teaching) or take on new teaching tasks (e.g. designing and delivering new ESP courses) (e.g. Guo, Tao, & Gao, 2019; Tao & Gao, 2017). This means that they need to constantly update their professional knowledge and skills in highly challenging working conditions (e.g. lacking adequate support and resources, busy schedules), which makes agency central to teachers' learning throughout their careers.
- Language teachers may exercise agency in making career transitions due to language policy changes in some contexts or in becoming policymakers in

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their own language classrooms to resist language-related ideologies. For instance, language teachers who teach languages other than English (LOTE), such as Chinese, French, and Russian, may need to make a career transition from teaching LOTEs to English (e.g. Guo, Zhou, & Gao, 2021; Tran, 2019), which requires them to exercise agency in learning and teaching English simultaneously. Language teachers also need to exercise agency so that they can create classroom language policies to preserve indigenous cultural heritage and resist macro-level language ideologies that illegitimise the use of indigenous languages (Stranger-Johannessen & Norton, 2017).

- Language teachers who teach in universities are pressured to publish in English in many contexts, regardless of the language they teach, because English is the dominant medium in international academic publishing (Tao, et al. 2019; 2020; Tran et al. 2017). This means that many LOTE teachers need to exercise agency in developing academic English writing skills for international publication alongside conducting research and discharging their regular teaching duties.

Although this is not an exhaustive list of professional issues that language teachers have to deal with, these issues are indicative of the profound influence of contextual conditions on language teachers' professional practice, and the need for language teachers to undertake agentic action in improving their professional practice and pursuing professional development. Having explained the significant role of agency in teachers' professional practice and development, we now move on to a discussion of language teacher agency in relation to other key constructs in language teacher education such as teacher identity, emotion, belief, and knowledge.

4 Teacher Agency Intersecting with Other Key Constructs

Teacher agency is not examined in isolation in research. It is usually explored in relation to other key constructs in teacher education, including teacher identity, teacher emotion, teacher belief, and teacher knowledge. In this section, we discuss the links between language teacher agency and other key constructs in language teacher education with data taken from our study (e.g. Tao & Gao, 2017). In contrast to the typical focus on language teachers' teaching, our study examined language teachers' research engagement in Chinese universities. As mentioned earlier, teachers at different career stages must undertake ongoing activities for professional development while either learning to teach or learning to adapt to educational changes. Alongside

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a variety of professional development activities such as attending workshops and taking courses, engaging with research has been a popular strategy for language teachers, especially in universities, to gain new knowledge, develop new practices, and advance their careers. Research engagement refers to a host of activities such as reading research, conducting action or academic research, and disseminating research findings through publication (Borg, 2010).

Research engagement has been shown to have significant potential to contribute to teachers' professional growth and career advancement (e.g. Gao et al., 2011a, 2011b; Le et al., 2021; Yuan & Burns, 2017). However, past studies have also problematised language teachers' research engagement, noting that it may not be used to promote curriculum changes and may not always serve the interests of language teachers (Gao et al., 2011b). For this reason, it has become increasingly important for language teachers to exercise agency in managing their research engagement as an ongoing activity for their own professional development. In the context of universities, language teachers are often also academics confronted with the demands imposed by university management, which is increasingly adopting new managerialist practices (Gao & Zheng, 2020). These practices advocate research excellence as defined by measurable research productivity; for this reason, language teachers' work is increasingly monitored and evaluated in ways that undermine academic professionalism and freedom (Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). In many contexts, these practices also place university language teachers in an ongoing vulnerable position (e.g. Hökkä et al., 2017), compelling them to conduct research and publish in prestigious journals to maintain job security even though their primary duty is to teach languages (Peng & Gao, 2019; Tao et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2017). Thus, language teachers must exercise agency in renegotiating their professional identities and managing research engagement in their pursuit of career opportunities.

4.1 Teacher Agency and Identity

Language teacher agency is often examined alongside language teachers' professional identity, particularly in studies underpinned by the ecological perspective (see Table 1). These studies reveal that language teachers need to negotiate social identity markers (e.g. race and gender), the native-speaker ideology, and shifting educational policies and ongoing curriculum reform (Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019; Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2017). Many language teachers

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find these professional issues and contextual conditions highly challenging as they present significant obstacles that threaten language teachers' assertion of their professional identities and require them to exercise agency in developing appropriate responses. Research has identified that language teachers manifest their agency in using their professional knowledge to undertake strategic manoeuvring amid gendered and racial discourses that affect their recognition as professionals (Vitanova, 2018). Language teacher agency also emerges when non-native English-speaking teachers capitalise on the concept of multi-competence and third space (Ilieva & Ravindran, 2018), and when native English-speaking teachers draw on their translingual/cultural knowledge and practices in the EFL context during the process of identity negotiation (Ishihara et al., 2018). With enhanced agency, teachers are able to build connections with others and enhance their pedagogical practices. When implementing educational policies, language teachers have been found to exercise agency in using their professional expertise to recreate local language policy in a way that fits their unique contexts while creating the space to negotiate for the kind of teacher they want to be. The different manifestations of language teacher agency identified in these studies reflect language teachers' investment in asserting legitimate teacher identity in a process mediated by their prior knowledge and experience within contextual conditions.

One line of research on teacher agency and identity frames teachers as active agents in the making of professional identity (e.g. Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). The term *identity agency* refers to 'a sense of professional agency related to one's professional identity' (Eteläpelto et al., 2015, p. 665). More specifically, teacher agency is related to professional identity through teachers' agentic negotiation of the ideals, interests, and goals that make up identity. Although the social environment may shape a teacher's professional identity – for example, the ideal teacher they want to be – it is the teacher's agentic actions that either maintain or transform that professional identity. Going a step further, Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2016) delineate two forms of teacher agency related to identity. The first form describes agency in participating in a community so as to seek membership and form one's professional identity. The other is the 'capability to use experiences and participation in the development of professional identity' (p. 319). This second form of teacher agency is used to conceptualise 'identity-agency' (differentiated by the hyphen from the concept mentioned earlier), the process

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Table 1 Major conceptualisations of agency

	Social cognitive theory	**Sociocultural theory**	**Post-structuralist view**	**Ecological perspective**
Definition	Agency as individuals' intentional acts	Agency as a socioculturally mediated capacity to act	Agency as a form of discursive practice	Agency as a temporal and situated achievement
Key quotes	• '[H]uman agency is embedded in a self theory encompassing self-organising, proactive, self-reflective and self-regulative mechanisms.' • 'This belief system is the foundation of human agency.'	• 'There is no way to reduce the analysis of socially distributed cognition to a set of individuals' processes, and as a result a type of agency is attributed to the group rather than to the individual.' • '[A]n agent is viewed as being an irreducible aggregate of individual (or individuals in	• '[A]gency may be discursively constructed as a positioning made available to some but not to others.' • 'Embedded within those discursive practices is an understanding that each person is one who has an obligation to take themselves up as a knowable, recognisable identity, who "speaks for themselves",	• '[U]nderstanding agency in different contexts and times requires a focus on the dynamic interplay between (i) past influences and experiences, (ii) engagement with the present, and (iii) orientations towards the future.' • 'Professional agency is always exercised for certain purposes and within certain (historically

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		intermental functioning) *together with mediational means*.'	who accepts responsibility for their actions, that is as one who is recognisably separate from any particular collective, and thus as one who can be said to have agency.'	formed) socio-cultural and material circumstances, and it is constrained and resourced by these circumstances.'
Guiding questions	How does a teacher's self-efficacy influence his/her exercise agency?	How is a teacher's agency mediated by the contextual conditions (e.g. the new policy mandates)?	How does teacher agency interact with positionings in the social context?	How is agency achieved?
Key related concepts	Self-efficacy belief, knowledge	Intermental functioning, mediational tools	Positioning, knowledge	Identity, emotion, belief
Major sources	Bandura (1999, 2001)	Wertsch et al. (1993)	Davies (1990); Davies & Harré (1999)	Eteläpelto et al. (2013); Priestley et al. (2015)

of agentively making sense of and mobilising experiences to construct and develop professional identity. Based on the narratives of eight pre-service teachers studying foreign language pedagogy, they further identified three forms of identity-agency: expansive, reductive, and attentive (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). These indicate different levels of identity development depending upon the extent to which teachers draw upon new experiences in the teacher education programme to inform their identity-making.

Another line of research focuses on the mediating effect of identity on agency; this approach can be further divided into two categories of studies. One group assumes that identity markers shape the emergence or development of teacher agency. Based on multimodal narratives of ESL teachers, Vitanova (2018) describes narrative construction of agency as mediated by racial, gendered, and professional identity, showing that social identity markers such as race and gender shape how student teachers are perceived by others. In some cases, professional identity is diminished or barely recognised as a result – for example, someone may be perceived primarily as an Asian woman rather than as a professional ESL teacher. These identity markers and the resultant interactive positioning undermine the development of teachers' sense of agency. Other studies assume that identity offers directions for agency enactment. Teachers exercise agency to stay true to their identities (Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). When teachers find themselves in situations where they have to respond to educational reforms in practice, they use their knowledge and value systems to make sense of these reforms and to make agentic choices true to their beliefs about their professional identities (Kelelaar et al., 2012). When the reforms conflict with their identities, or the kinds of teachers they want to be, they may exercise agency to resist these reforms and thus stay true to themselves. To illustrate the relationship between identity and agency, we will draw on data extracts from our study of eight ESP teachers in a Chinese university (Tao & Gao, 2017).

We conducted retrospective life-history interviews with these teachers to collect information about their learning, teaching, and research experiences in response to curriculum innovation intended to reform the current EGP teaching and bring ESP courses to the curriculum to prepare students for employment. The teacher participants, seen as change agents, were asked to change to teaching English for specific purposes such as business, law, and finance – a significant challenge to the participants, who were used to teaching EGP. Some teachers opted out of the curriculum change while others adapted

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themselves to it. Among those who changed to teach ESP, some developed ESP into a research interest while others treated it only as a teaching task. We used the concept of identity commitment, defined as a constellation of a teacher's interests and aspirations (Vähäsantanen, 2015), to guide our interpretation and understanding of these teachers' professional development trajectories. We used it to understand these teachers' agentic choices and actions in managing their professional development in relation to their identity commitments, which were multifaceted in nature, incorporating identities as learners, teachers, and researchers. The participants' identity commitments were found to be rather diverse (see Figure 2).

Next, we discuss their articulation of identity commitments coupled with their agentic choices and actions one by one. What follows shows what Zhao, one of the most experienced ESP teachers, articulates about his identity commitment.

> I have different roles at different places . . . I am an ESP teacher in class, an ESP researcher when writing articles, and an ESP practitioner when doing business. (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 349)

Zhao decided to establish himself as an ESP teacher and ESP researcher in business English. The agentic choices and actions that he reported having undertaken to that end include reading extensively on business studies, participating in university–company partnerships to acquire industry knowledge, and publishing extensively on business English to gain recognition as a key researcher in the field. Likewise, Qian considered himself 'an ESP teacher in a deeper sense' (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 349) after he made relevant agentic choices such as participating in a part-time master's programme in law for two years, publishing extensively on business English, writing monographs and textbooks, and developing a clear research plan to further develop his ESP expertise.

In contrast, Sun appears to have been less assertive about her ESP teacher identity, as she admitted: 'I position myself as a college English teacher, which may sound a little negative, but I wish I could become an ESP teacher in terms of my research or professional development because I could make more contribution to society' (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 349). Nevertheless, she also reported a series of agentic choices and actions that she took in managing her professional development trajectory, including participating in university–company partnerships, continuing to teach legal English despite her institutional affiliation with a different department, and conducting and publishing research on legal English.

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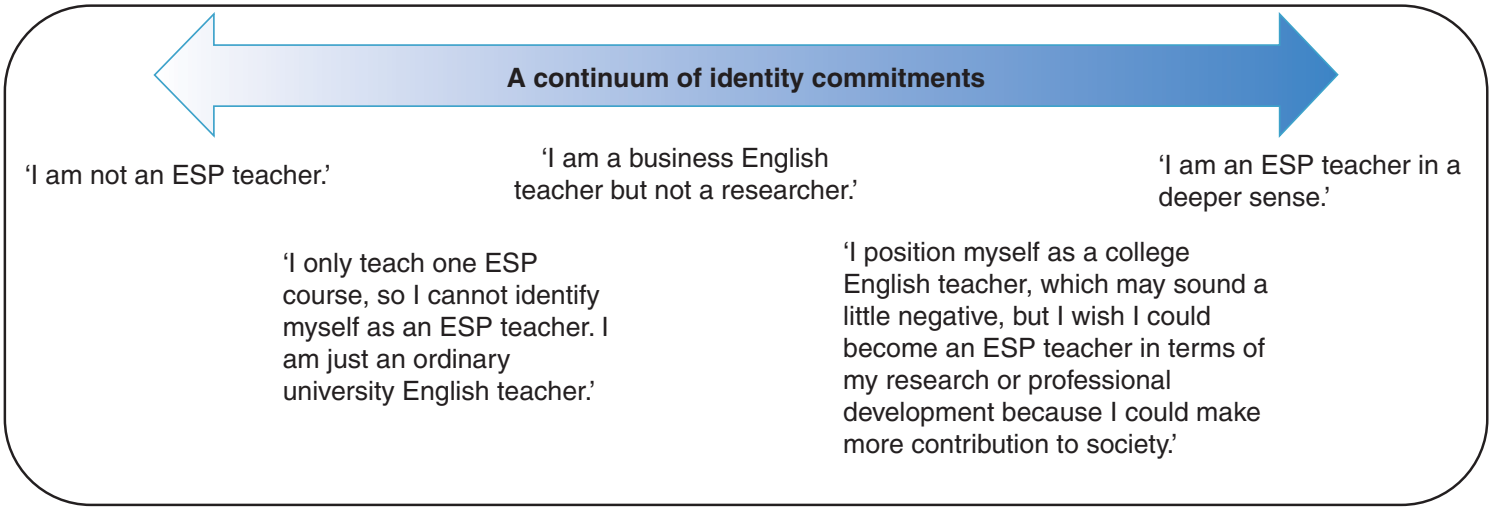


Figure 2 A continuum of ESP teachers' identity commitments (Quotes from Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 349)

As some of the participants in the study became less sure of who they were as professionals, differences in their agentic choices and actions could be noticed. For instance, Zhou felt that 'I only teach one ESP course, so I cannot identify myself as an ESP teacher. I am just an ordinary university English teacher' (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 349). For this reason, the agentic choices and actions that he reported having made include participating in university–company partnerships to gain first-hand knowledge of industry and using first-hand materials to teach. He chose not to engage in research.

Wu was apparently much less certain about his identification with ESP teachers, as he confessed in an interview:

> I may not belong to them [ESP teachers]. I felt a bit embarrassed because I am neither a teacher in the business faculty nor similar to teachers in the foreign languages faculty, whose research is very different from mine . . . I am not saying I am not an ESP teacher, but I am a bit different from other ESP teachers . . . I am a not-very-academic teacher, just interested in teaching. (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 349)

Even though Wu chose to study English in the UK for a year to improve his language and pedagogical competence and his agentic actions included designing tailor-made classroom activities for his ESP course students, he chose not to engage in relevant research either. Although Zheng categorically denied her identification with ESP researchers, saying 'I am a business English teacher but not a researcher' (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 349), her agentic actions included efforts to make her ESP teaching highly authentic by engaging in university–company partnerships and using first-hand materials to teach. Nevertheless, she also agentively redirected her research endeavours from ESP to cognitive linguistics, which was more widely recognised as a topic of linguistic research. Finally, as Wang categorically asserted that 'I am not an ESP teacher' and confirmed his identification as 'an ordinary university English teacher' (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 349), it came as no surprise that she eventually chose to quit ESP teaching.

These examples show how language teachers make agentic choices to fulfil their identity commitments. Even though one teacher quit ESP teaching, this was also an agentic choice she made to align with her self-identification that 'I am not an ESP teacher.' Among those who continued teaching ESP, their agentic choices and actions were also highly individualised. They studied related subjects or improved their language skills in different ways depending on their educational backgrounds, work experience, and learning styles in order to inform or update their lesson planning. Their agency in research engagement was even more closely associated with their identity commitments. One teacher,

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who refused to identify herself as a researcher, shifted her research focus from ESP to another area which is considered more 'mainstream' and thus offered a more promising outlook in the local institution. Those who had strong identifications with ESP teaching or research were active in exploring ESP texts and ESP pedagogy, including writing ESP textbooks, monographs, and research papers. Thus this study indicates that teachers' identity commitment shapes their choices about what to participate in and what not to participate in or how they make particular agentic choices. The data extracts reveal a diversity of agentic actions undertaken by the teachers which were closely associated with their prior learning, teaching, and working experiences.

4.2 Teacher Agency and Emotion

Compared to the growing interest in exploring agency in connection with identity, there has been less attention given to examining teacher agency in relation to emotion. However, a teaching-as-caring discourse has long permeated the teaching profession as teaching by nature involves emotional labour. Compared with the teaching profession in general, language teaching has been characterised as more imbued with emotion due to 'additional specific stressors such as high intercultural and linguistic demands as well as the frequent use of energy-intense methodologies' (Mercer, in press, p. 1). The impact of emotion on agency is more clearly articulated in the life-course perspective on agency, which defines adult professionals as individuals 'act[ing] as *feeling* and willing subjects who actively prioritize, choose, and consider what is important and worth aspiring to in their life and future, and thus practice agency in their life' (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 62, italics added). This definition sees teachers as individuals who have 'feelings' which impact their agentic choices and actions. In this section, we use Miller and Gkonou's (2018) and Benesch's (2018) studies to illustrate two major themes characterising the relationship between emotion and agency in the teaching profession: teacher agency as a motivational force underpinning teachers' emotional labour, and teacher emotions as signals of teacher agency. Further elaboration on teacher agency and emotion will be undertaken in a later section (Section 5), when we draw on our own work to advance the notion of collective agency.

Conceptualising teacher agency as a motivational force underpinning teachers' emotional labor, we highlight the role of teacher agency in teachers undertaking emotional labor to become the kind of teachers they

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aspire to be (Miller & Gkonou, 2018). By situating language teachers in the teaching-as-caring discourse, Miller and Gkonou (2018) examine the co-constitutive effects of emotion and agency. On one hand, language teachers exercise agency to show that they are caring professionals as part of their everyday emotional labour and professional responsibility. They are expected to display 'optimism, empathy, patience and enthusiasm' (p. 55) to develop good relationships with students. In most cases, the findings indicate that language teachers follow the teaching-as-caring rules in professional practice. On the other hand, they need to exercise agency in managing emotionally challenging situations, such as student discipline, by maintaining emotional detachment from teaching practices. They agentively choose not to display 'anger or frustration' to avoid emotional entanglement, meaning that they still align with expectations of 'good teaching' regarding appropriate emotions. Here, teacher agency is mainly exercised through performing emotional labour.

Benesch (2017) argues that emotions serve as signals of teacher agency by helping teachers 'initiate reflection on how particular discourses of teaching intersect with their emotional experiences and choices to exercise agency through emotion labor' (Miller & Gkonou, 2018, p. 57). Benesch (2018) studied ESL writing teachers' experiences of agency and emotional labour against feeling rules (e.g. hypervigilance and indignation) implied by their university's plagiarism policy. The teachers disobeyed the feeling rules agentively when they were uncertain about following the policy, and especially when the policy conflicted with their professional expertise. Thus emotional labour serves as a signal that calls language teachers to exercise their agency and to muster their courage to challenge the existing contextual conditions, including university policy. Emotional labour thus becomes 'a source of teacher agency and participation in policy making' (Benesch, 2018, p. 68).

4.3 Teacher Agency, Beliefs, and Knowledge

4.3.1 Teacher Agency and Beliefs

The connection between agency and beliefs has roots in multiple theorisations of agency (see Table 1). Beliefs – specifically about one's capacity to act and exercise control on a personal or social level – are considered the most central contributor to agency from a social cognitive perspective (Bandura, 2001). The life-course theorisation of agency attaches importance to 'the self-reflective

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belief in one's capacity to achieve life course goals' as a component of life-course agency. In short, teachers' beliefs are inseparable from teacher agency, although empirical studies remain limited.

Biesta et al. (2015) conducted one of the major studies foregrounding the role of belief in teacher agency. They focus on teachers' beliefs in three key areas: beliefs about children and young people, beliefs about teaching, and beliefs about the purpose of education. Their study, based on the experiences of six primary and secondary school teachers working in schools in the midst of a large-scale educational reform, reveals that teacher agency is highly dependent upon the beliefs and values teachers bring to their work. This study further reveals that when a teacher does not have long-term beliefs, especially about the wider purpose of schooling, they may have a limited sense of teacher agency and can be subjugated to the contexts in which the regime of accountability prevails and constrains teachers' professional practice. Even if they possess a highly advanced level of professional knowledge and skill, the absence of robust beliefs about education may eventually constrain their capacity to exercise control over their own teaching practice and professional development.

The significance of beliefs in language teachers' exercise of agency is also confirmed by our inquiry into language teachers in a Chinese university – a study designed to examine their collective agency (for findings on collective agency, see Tao et al., 2020). We present extracts from interviews with three participants, referred to as T2, T6, and T8, to illustrate the interaction between teacher agency, belief, and expertise when teachers take on the role of researchers. T2 teaches French, T6 teaches Japanese, and T8 specialises in business English. These three participants engaged in greater collaboration with one another than the other participants in the project, exercising a relatively high level of teacher agency in supporting others or being supported in the collaborative process of doing and publishing research. The following extracts reveal their beliefs about research collaboration for professional development:

> T2: Yes, I am positive [to collaboration]. I think collaboration can push me forward, and [I can] learn new stuff from other teachers . . . I think that doing research alone is not very effective or efficient. I think that working with others can achieve double results with half effort.
> T6: After I attended conferences, I learned clearly that research is conducted in teams. When those professors did presentation, they often co-presented. So you can tell from them that collaboration is very important . . . I am not suitable for single authoring according to my research capacity so far. I need someone guiding me through.

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> T8: I will stick to collaboration, which is very necessary. We can make progress only if we collaborate . . . We may take different roles [in collaboration]. I may be the leader of a team doing projects together that create space of learning for my co-authors; when I enter a new field, I can work with experienced collaborators creating space for my own learning.

These extracts show how each of these teachers emphasised the importance or necessity of collaboration in research, which was shaped by their practical needs and sustained by productive exchanges of professional expertise. Their positive beliefs about research collaboration and development underpinned their strong sense of agency, and their enhanced sense of agency in turn contributed to the strengthening of positive beliefs. A virtuous cycle of growth can thus be observed in the teachers' experiences. When teachers have positive beliefs about collaboration, they are more likely to exercise agency in collaborating with others. For example, T2 engaged in multiple collaborative projects with T1, T5, T7, and T8. Similarly, T8 was involved in more collaborative projects with T1, T2, T3, T6, and T7. This confirms the important role of teacher beliefs in the exercise of professional agency (e.g. Biesta et al., 2015). The participants also had positive beliefs about professional development. For example, T8 had a clearer picture of how professional learning and development occur in different patterns of collaboration than before, which 'created space of learning' for 'other co-authors' and also 'my own'. More specifically, T8 had expertise in intercultural education and he led a project with T6, an intercultural education practitioner. Meanwhile, T8 was new to the field of multilingual education, and thus learned about how to conduct research on issues related to multilingual education by working collaboratively with T2. Different teachers learnt different things from multiple research projects; for example, T2 was engaged in a project with T7 and T8 and also in another project with T1 and T5, from which she gained different but highly valuable insights, as captured by the following extract.

> T2: [In collaborating with T2 and T8], I learned how to write research paper[s] in English, since English [writing] is a bit different from French especially in [the] education field that I knew little before. Now I can write a paper [in English], which is a very big harvest.
> T2: I can learn from his [T1's] questionnaire design about what is narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry has a framework as well, rather than just asking you to narrate aimlessly.

When reflecting upon her collaborative experience, T2, a teacher of French, explained that she had learned about academic writing in English, which she considered 'a very big harvest'. Her collaboration with T1 involved collecting

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narrative data using a questionnaire, a methodology T2 had little knowledge of. By observing what T1 did, T2 learned how to conduct a narrative inquiry. In light of these experiences, we contend that how language teachers exercise teacher agency in the process of collaborative professional development depends on their beliefs regarding collaborative professional development, rather than their expertise and knowledge.

These teachers' exercise of agency in the process of research collaboration and professional development was positively supported by the favourable conditions in their community of language teachers. Members of this community apparently shared a common goal of improving their research capability and productivity through fostering a strong culture of collaborative professional development. The individual teachers had an enhanced sense of teacher agency because their beliefs aligned with the shared beliefs of the community. In contrast, teachers' sense of agency may be weakened when their individual beliefs do not align well with those promoted by their professional communities or institutions (Biesta et al., 2015). These teachers accessed the opportunities for intellectual exchanges and collaboration exploration created by the community, which facilitated their exercise of agency. Similarly, as these language teachers engaged in a community of supportive colleagues in terms of teaching and research collaboration, they had a safe space in which to ask questions and share concerns, which increased their self-efficacy and enhanced their sense of agency (Christiansen et al., 2018).

4.3.2 Teacher Agency and Knowledge

Teacher knowledge has less presence in the literature, although it is mentioned in a few theorisations of agency. Social cognitive theory defines agency as the capacity to exercise effective control over something, which requires 'mastery of knowledge and skills' (Bandura, 2001, p. 13). From a post-structuralist perspective, personal resources are one of the requirements for agency enactment; these resources include one's 'knowledge resources, personal skills, and the ability to mobilise relevant discourse' (Davies, 1990, p. 360). Similarly, the ecological perspective proposes that teachers exercise agency when they, as professional subjects, have the professional knowledge and competencies to do so. There is little empirical research on how teacher agency interacts with teacher expertise or knowledge, although research has noted that teacher agency can be identified in the process of language teachers developing teacher expertise, as ESL writing teachers take agentic action to transform their routine

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expertise into adaptive expertise in response to language learners' emerging learning needs (Christiansen et al. 2018). Furthermore, research shows that language teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) can enhance their agency in the sense that teachers confident in PCK are more likely to be emboldened to engage with the teaching material available to them and make the best of it to facilitate student learning (Bao et al., 2020).

So far, we have shown how language teachers' agency interacts with their identity, emotion, beliefs, and knowledge, indicating that language teacher agency cannot be examined in isolation. In the following section, we discuss what can be done to promote agency.

5 What Can Be Done to Enhance Language Teachers' Sense of Agency?

The aforementioned studies on teacher agency offer a few pathways to promote teacher agency and extend its potential contribution to teachers' professional development. These pathways can be divided into those which involve changing contextual conditions and those which involve promoting the actors' growth, although the two may operate interactively in practice and should thus be discussed in combination. To illustrate these two approaches, we draw on narrative data from a business English teacher/researcher in a research project we recently conducted to explore the emotion-imbued nature of the research work that language teachers in universities need to engage with and to show how collaborative interaction enhances teachers' sense of agency.

5.1 Changing the Contextual Conditions

One pathway to enhance teachers' sense of agency is to build teacher communities of varying size. Doing so creates safe, socially supportive spaces for teachers to exercise agency and thus helps teachers neutralise the negative impact of contextual constraints on their professional practice. Teacher communities can range from small groups to school-level and inter-school communities, and can have different purposes. Teachers can enhance their sense of agency through participating in small professional learning groups of teachers who share similar goals. Groups may be created and organised through a bottom-up approach by teachers themselves, as documented by researchers such as Christiansen et al. (2018), whose study focuses on a group of three international graduate teaching assistants assigned to teach ESL writing

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courses. These teachers organised themselves into a supportive professional community to develop relevant expertise. Despite the fact that they had different teaching experiences and levels of educational expertise, they all found the community a safe place in which to give advice, seek input, ask questions, and share concerns or doubts. Through such socially supportive interactions, they enhanced their self-efficacy and confidence in writing instruction, which led to a stronger sense of agency.

Teachers can enhance their sense of agency by participating in the school-wide teacher community to minimise the negative impact of a top-down approach on their professional practice. Pyhältö et al. (2014) describe a teacher community designed to help teachers develop agency in terms of responding to the policy demands emanating from meso-level actors such as educational institutions when implementing relevant educational reforms. The school these teachers worked in designed a learning environment to facilitate practices of shared meaning-making and collaboration, allowing teachers to acquire a more holistic understanding of relevant reforms and perceive themselves as active subjects in the reform process. As a result, they were more likely to develop teacher agency in implementing and sustaining related educational changes.

Teacher communities across schools serve larger purposes that go beyond issues directly related to classroom instruction. Teacher activist organisations exemplify inter-school teacher communities (Quinn & Carl, 2015). These consist of formal programmes and campaigns aiming to assist the development of teacher agency in different ways, which has the potential to change the structural conditions for educational policymaking and implementation. They also provide avenues for teachers to challenge district-level decisions, foster 'a shared belief in the collective power' of teachers, and enhance the role of teachers in the education system (p. 754).

Although positive teacher communities vary in size and operate on different levels, they all share some characteristics that sustain teacher participation and promote the development of teacher agency, as summarised in Brodie's study (2021). First, they maintain a focus on activities relevant to teachers' work; second, the activities they engage in are collaborative in nature, requiring teachers to work for the benefit of all; third, they foster an environment which allows teachers to trust and remain open to each other. By developing such communities, we may help change the contextual conditions and make them more conducive to the enhancement of teacher agency. However, we cannot assume that such communities are a 'natural' or 'social

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given', as these communities are often constructed through an extended process of negotiation (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Previous research has also problematised the idealised notion of community that runs the risk of 'exaggerating the internal cohesion and cooperation of collectivities and ... understating the operation of discourse and power through the communication of group norms' (Morgan, 2007, p. 1046). For example, while the collaboration between native-English-speaking (NET) teachers and local English teachers was promoted in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong, NET teachers were not recognised as professional language teachers 'doing the real teaching' by their local colleagues. Such antagonistic relations undermined NET teachers' agency (Trent, 2012). Thus, any teacher community must be examined more critically in order to understand its impact on language teacher agency.

5.2 Promoting the Actors' Growth

Enhancing teachers' sense of agency requires changing teachers as well as changing their working contexts. Whether contextual conditions present affordances for or constraints on teachers' professional practice depends on how teachers perceive, deconstruct, and understand what these conditions mean for them. Individual teachers approach these contextual conditions with a host of presumptions, beliefs, knowledge, and aspirations. For this reason, it is equally important for teachers – the key actors in the process – to change before they can develop an enhanced sense of agency. One of the major challenges facing language teachers is the need to overcome deficit discourses related to both themselves and language learners (Gao, 2019). In particular, the dominance of native-speakerism places non-native-speaker language teachers in a disadvantaged position, which seriously undermines their positions as competent and qualified language teachers. Being trapped in these discourses, non-native-speaker teachers may feel less empowered and have a diminished sense of agency in language teaching. Similarly, language learners are often presented in terms of deficit discourses as individuals who need to be taught and helped in the learning process. Language teachers often fail to recognise the linguistic and cultural resources language learners bring to classrooms (e.g. Ortega, 2019). Such a failure not only reduces the space for language learners to exercise agency in learning, but also profoundly impacts language teachers' exercise of agency in identifying and implementing creative pedagogical responses to facilitate students' learning. Therefore, it is necessary for language teachers to create a reflective space in which they can engage critically with their own presumptions

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and adopt alternative discourses to reposition themselves and language learners. By helping them develop this reflectivity, we may help language teachers create the potential for agency enhancement.

One way to foster critical reflection for agency enhancement is to create a space for critical or active reflection. While writing papers for journals or undertaking professional interactions were traditionally seen as important ways to generate reflection, multimodal narratives may now present a new strategy to share views and prompt reflections in a community of teachers. For example, Vitanova (2018) shows how language teachers employ multimodal narratives, including written, digital (e.g. images), and sound narratives, to enhance their sense of agency. In particular, selecting images from the past gives language teachers a chance to actively engage with and reflect upon their prior experiences, which prompts them to tap into their existing beliefs, current value systems, and future goals. In other words, multimodal narratives enable language teachers to undertake critical engagement with their prior experiences and current thinking to identify changes and enhance their sense of agency.

Another way to enhance teacher agency is to offer alternative discourses in varied ways. For example, Ilieva and Ravindran (2018) discuss an identity-focused teacher education programme in which many readings and activities introduced authoritative sources on multilingualism and multi-competence. The study revealed that the NNES student teachers drew on those discourses to critique their assumptions related to native-speakerism and discursively reconstruct their identities as legitimate language teachers whose multilingual knowledge should be valued. Access to alternative discourses, if well guided, thus helps create a discursive space where language teachers can negotiate more favourable professional identities to enhance their sense of agency. Similar findings have also emerged in studies of teachers of other languages (e.g. Wernicke, 2018).

5.3 An Illustrative Case Study

While these studies focused on teaching – a major component of language teachers' professional practice – other studies have also begun to explore the emotion-imbued nature of language teachers' professional practice beyond teaching. In particular, language teachers in universities are often pressured to conduct and publish research in addition to long hours of teaching. A close examination of teachers' experiences in this context with a focus on their emotions and agency generates critical insights into the interdependent roles

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of emotions and agency in mediating their professional lives and development. To this end, we draw on a recent study on the collective agency of a multilingual research team at a Chinese university where a stringent performance evaluation system had been introduced to decide whether certain language teachers could be retained for long-term employment after a period of six years (Tao et al., 2020). This so-called promote-or-fire policy is similar to the tenure and promotion system in American universities. The policy requires the teacher to publish a certain number of articles in leading international journals, which, together with satisfactory teaching evaluations, will enable the teacher to receive a continuing contract of employment at the end of six years (also see Guo et al., 2020). Although the focus of Tao et al.'s (2020) study was not on emotion, participants occasionally described their emotional experiences when asked about their response to the performance review policy in the context of their research practices. Six emotional narratives from a business English teacher are particularly illustrative of how the research component of the teachers' professional practice is highly emotionally imbued for language teachers, or perhaps for any academics working in universities. In our view, these narratives also explain the interaction between emotion and agency. The business English teacher (T3) had a bachelor's degree in English and a PhD in business and had been teaching business English for more than five years in the focal university in our inquiry. She is highly committed to teaching and had received excellent evaluations from students. However, she found it increasingly stressful to cope with the university's promote-or-fire policy as her research outputs did not satisfy the requirements for continuing employment. The following statements describe her first publication experience and her first research collaboration. We divide her emotional experiences into three stages, emerging before, during, and after the research collaboration, since the collaboration was highly valued as the turning point of her research journey. These statements illustrate how this language teacher (T3) developed an enhanced sense of agency by undertaking emotional labour related to research work in a supportive community where she was facilitated to reflect on her prior experiences and seize opportunities to become a changed actor.

Stage 1: Before collaboration

(1) Research is more of one person's work, a belief which may be related to my prior educational experience . . . Research is more of a lonely job. Even if

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you have supervisors and classmates to help you out, I rarely experienced collaboration. When I was doing PhD, my work may be a little related to others' but we have different data, theories, directions, and conclusions. So we stay at the discussion stage.

(2) I felt that doing research was a lonely journey. I must rely on myself most of the time. If I don't tell others about my research, they will never know what I am doing.

Stage 2: During collaboration

(1) If I wrote the paper alone, I would be experiencing self-doubt throughout the process. Is it appropriate? Is it right or reasonable? I would not be sure who could help me. I would feel sorry to bother others. But if we co-author, I would say to T8 boldly 'quickly [help me]'.

(2) T8 was very experienced in publication. She was very good at polishing a manuscript. I felt more confident after she revised the manuscript.

Stage 3: After collaboration

(1) I felt enlightened after writing the paper.

(2) My publication may help lift up other teachers' confidence. So T5 approached me to talk about the possibility of collaboration.

These narratives reveal that T3 had long been feeling isolated in her research journey, possibly due to her PhD training experience. Moreover, while she had come to expect self-doubt when writing a paper alone, she had no way to resolve this doubt. The negative emotion attached to research practice may have constrained her agency in conducting research or seeking research collaboration. However, this kind of negative emotion may signal the need to seek collaboration within the university, and later the multilingual research team, where collaboration is highly encouraged. As both are teachers of business English, T3 had intense interactions with T8 over the years and found that they shared a common research interest in corporate language management. Since T3 and T8 were both involved in building a university–company partnership with a Spanish bank, T3 agentively took opportunities to visit the company for data collection and started a collaborative project in this area of shared interest.

Once they had established a collaborative relationship, T3 no longer felt isolated and became a changed actor since she could seek help from her

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collaborator 'boldly' without feeling 'sorry'. T3 also felt 'more confident' when co-authoring a paper, especially with an experienced researcher like T8. In the end, she felt 'enlightened', indicating that working with her colleagues and finishing the paper in a collaborative process was emotionally rewarding. Moreover, her publication experience may have encouraged other colleagues in the community to participate in collaborative research. Having been a lone, unproductive researcher in the past, T3 eventually became someone who others approached for collaboration. Thus, agency may interact with emotion in a loop in which a negative emotion serves as the signal for the teacher to reflect and exercise agency to make a change, while a positive emotion may guide her to continue collaborative work. This idea resonates with Benesch's (2018) critical approach to emotion and agency that suggests emotions, either positive or negative, can provide 'agentive guides to collective action' (p. 61) among language teachers, helping them respond to policies that disempower them. T3's exercise of agency enabled her to perform positive emotional labour and receive emotional rewards at the end of a successful collaborative process (e.g. Miller & Gkonou, 2018). It is noteworthy that T3 was supported by favourable contextual conditions, including a community of supportive colleagues, which empowered her to undertake appropriate agentic actions. The successful outcome T3 managed to achieve from her agentic choice and actions led to both emotional rewards and an enhanced sense of agency in managing research-related work. T3's narratives confirm the significance of changing the contextual conditions and actors as strategies to enhance teacher agency, as discussed earlier.

This case analysis also prompts us to consider the importance of collective agency, as most studies on teacher agency have highlighted the individualistic nature of agency, which we now believe is inadequate for language teachers who need to respond to increasingly challenging and complex working conditions. Thus, we felt it necessary to address collective agency explicitly and separately in the following section.

6 The Significance of Collective Agency

While teacher agency plays a critical role in initiating and sustaining individual teachers' agentic actions, it is important to note that teachers do not take agentic actions in isolation. As teachers often engage in a range of social relationships, including those with students, colleagues, parents, and school principals, their agentic actions unfold in a socially interactive, dynamic way (Pyhältö et al.

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2014). In other words, teacher agency is highly relational and social. In fact, it could be argued that one of the defining characteristics of teacher agency is its collective nature. The notion of collective agency is not new, but it has been seriously under-researched and is not fully appreciated in theorisations of language teachers' agentic choices and actions. For this reason, we would like to highlight the notion of collective agency and draw renewed attention to this construct and its associated phenomena.

The notion of collective agency is rooted in multiple theorisations of agency, as discussed in Section 2. Collective agency, one of the three modes of human agency in social cognitive theory, happens when people cannot produce the desired outcome individually (Bandura, 1999). Collective agency operates through 'shared beliefs of efficacy, pooled understandings, group aspiration and collective action' (Bandura, 1999, p. 34); people's shared belief in collective power is the central component. When people have stronger beliefs about their collective power, they are more likely to achieve their goals as groups. However, collective agency is more than people working together with shared beliefs, knowledge, and skills; it also involves interactions and coordination between different members within the group. Thus Bandura (2001) further clarified that people's perceived collective efficacy is not a sum of individuals' self-efficacy but rather 'an emergent group-level property' resulting from the 'transactional dynamics' of the group (p. 14).

The notion of collective agency is also highly relevant in the sociocultural theory of agency, as Wertsch et al. (1993) claim that 'agency may be attributable to groups rather than individuals' (p. 343). Building upon the Vygotskian view of human cognition, sociocultural theory contends that the agentic power of socially distributed cognition is greater than that of the sum of individuals' cognition. Moreover, individuals' mental functioning starts with the inter-mental plane, such as the social group in which it exists. Sociocultural theory redefines the boundary of agency and extends the unit of analysis to the group rather than the individual. The presence of collective agency is less salient in post-structuralist views, but post-structuralists also emphasise the relationship between self and collective (Davies, 1990), noting that even if people exercise agency in individualised ways, they are members of different collectives, each characterised by unique discursive practices. Individuals need to adopt discursive practices that are recognisable by the collective in order to 'speak' for themselves. For this reason, they need to collaboratively constitute themselves as members of a collective. In comparison with the other perspectives on

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agency, the ecological perspective may have the least theorisation of collective agency, probably because it centres the role of subjects or agents with individual identities (e.g. Eteläpelto et al., 2013). However, the collective element has been incorporated into the ecological perspective by researchers highlighting the concept of collective professional identity, such as group membership and shared identification (e.g. Hökkä et al., 2017). Collective professional identity may be particularly relevant in the teaching profession, where teachers inevitably share institutional affiliations and participate in various kinds of community, be it for teaching or for research purposes. Collective agency can involve collective actions of a group of teachers either to develop new teaching or research practices or to negotiate new understandings of themselves as a collective (Hökkä et al., 2017).

The majority of existing empirical studies on collective agency take a sociocultural approach and focus on mediational tools or interpersonal actions. These studies reveal that teachers make collective actions to transform institutionally derived tools into collectively derived tools for their teaching (Spicer, 2011). Their collective actions are mediated by discursive moves, such as tracking/probing in moments of interaction, and through the use of representational tools, such as the graphs in policy documents. Collective actions taken to increase ownership of teaching materials reflect the development of collective agency. Similarly, shared agency emerges when student teachers and teacher educators engage in collective inquiry (Lipponen & Kumuplainen, 2011). In collaborative discussion of collective inquiries, student teachers act as accountable authors who construct knowledge and make meaning. In the process of collective inquiry, authority is distributed, as is agency. More recent studies on this process take an ecological perspective, moving the focus from individual identity to collective identity. One study finds that teacher educators develop a group affinity and a sense of belonging through participation in shared activities, which creates collective agency that allows them to transform marginality into strength (Hökkä et al., 2017). In short, engagement in shared activities such as collective or dialogic inquiry, and social interaction constitute the key to developing collective agency.

However, teachers' exercise of collective agency in professional practice for professional development is not always a straightforward process. Previous studies have emphasised that the complexity of language teachers' workplaces may undermine collective agency. For instance, language teachers usually work in multilingual and multicultural workplaces, and thus need to interact with social agents from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These diverse

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others potentially function as resources, but may also present challenges for language teachers' exercise of agency in professional practice and development. For example, Lai et al.'s (2016) study reveals the influence of power relations on Chinese language teachers' professional learning in an international school in Hong Kong, where a one-way influence from West to East dominates – that is, the Chinese language teachers exercised much greater agency in learning from their Western colleagues than in influencing their Western colleagues with their own cultural heritage. This one-way transmission was probably shaped by the unequal discursive power that the Chinese and Western colleagues had in the international school context. This means that the emergence of collective agency in a given context depends on a few contextual factors. To further illustrate how collective agency emerges, we again draw data from a recent project on a multilingual research team. The focus of that project is to explore how collective agency emerges among a group of teachers specialising in different languages in this community of language teachers, targeting mutual support in professional practice and development. Part of the data and findings have been published (Tao et al., 2020). To better contextualise the data and interpretation, we continue by introducing the research background of the study.

6.1 Background to the Study

The team involved in our study was established under a scheme designed to foster research excellence in a Chinese university which adopts the Western tenure system and undertakes rigorous performance reviews for all teachers before offering them continuing employment. The study involved eight team members with expertise in English, Japanese, and French, and examined how they exercised collective agency in conducting cross-linguistic collaboration by offering each other complementary 'resources' and 'support'. The study takes a sociocultural approach and defines collective agency as 'intentionally interacting with others as a resource' and 'acting as a support for them' (Toom et al., 2015, p. 615), highlighting the mediating role of social interaction/relationships in the emergence of collective agency. In keeping with this approach, the study adopts the *social network* as a theoretical perspective and methodological approach. As a theoretical perspective, social network theory focuses on social relationships, rather than the attributes of individual actors, to explain people's actions and learning outcomes. As a methodological approach, the social network offers measurement tools to

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reflect the structure of the network, such as cohesion and centrality. The structure of language teachers' social networks can, in turn, reflect their access to resources and (emotional) support, while the content of the network unveils the resources and support they access, which are manifestations of collective agency. This study used a mixed-method approach, but we limit ourselves here to presenting interview data that reveal the content of the network – that is, what participants did collectively and agentively. Before going into detail, we give two narrative extracts from a French teacher (T2) and a Japanese teacher (T5) to show the challenges they had to address in response to the performance review policy.

> T2: In the third year, I felt a bit anxious because I felt I was doing nothing . . . When there were colleagues leaving in their fourth year, I felt I must get two B-level articles published. In the fifth year, I hadn't started my grant project and started to feel nervous. The incompletion of the grant project would not secure me a B. I was worried that I couldn't reach the assessment criteria, and got anxious again. (Tao et al., 2020, p. 21)

> T5: Yes, I feel a lot of pressure, although I am not affected by the promote-or-fire policy . . . I often use the policy standard to evaluate my research capability, and then I have found myself really bad. I would often hate myself, and give up, that way. (Tao et al., 2020, p. 21)

These two narratives illustrate the enormous pressure the research component of the performance review policy generated for language teachers in this university. These two teachers experienced a lot of negative emotions, as T2 felt 'anxious' and 'worried' and T5 expressed fairly low self-esteem. Their heightened sense of job insecurity was shared by language lecturers experiencing research policy changes in other contexts, with universities committing to improving their research productivity for better global rankings (e.g. Gao & Zheng, 2020; Tran et al., 2017). Thus, language teachers in universities are expected to take the role of 'active researchers', even though they may not readily embrace it (Tran et al., 2017, p. 65), which generates significant constraints on their professional practice and development. This situation requires language teachers to take individual or collective action to bring about change and exercise more control of their professional practice. When individuals have weak agency in accomplishing these challenging goals, as exemplified by T2 and T5 in the foregoing extracts, collective action may make a bigger difference for individual teachers in their pursuit of professional development and job security.

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6.2 The Multilingual Research Team As a Supportive Community

The following interview with T8, who initiated and coordinated the team, offers insight into the emergence of collective agency.

> The members joined [the team] voluntarily, and share a common goal. They want to enhance their research capability. They want to support each other in doing research. I think everyone has much recognition of the team's vision, or mutual support in this kind of community. Moreover, everyone invested a lot in the community. So the climate is very good. One reason is that everyone is relatively young and it's easy to communicate. Almost everyone received PhD training overseas, and developed very good professional spirit, professional literacy and ways of being, which is the second reason. Third, the team means a lot to me personally. There are many young members and they are very open-minded and hard-working. We have a few fresh PhD graduates who are very committed to and passionate about research, which invigorates everyone including me. These young teachers are highly competent of learning new theories and methods, which I'd like to learn from them. We can reach the most cutting-edge stuff together, in which I feel supported personally too. What is good about the team is that everyone is very uplifted forming a catching-up-each-other atmosphere. Whenever we learn about a member's publication, we very much appreciate and congratulate s/he from the bottom of our hearts. Meanwhile, we feel the pressure . . . I think once this kind of attitude or climate formed, it is very sustainable . . . We are very uplifted, have clear goals, and support each other in such a good community, which foster the development of the team but also my own career. (T8)

T8's statement highlights three important characteristics of the team. First, all team members joined 'voluntarily'. Second, the members had a common 'goal' and recognised the team's 'vision'. Third, there was a 'very good' 'climate' on the team. The narrative further presents a few reasons the shared background of the team members may play a role in creating a supportive community. The first is that the members are of similar age and have compatible personalities. Their educational experiences may be the second reason, as they received professional training during PhD programmes at overseas universities and may have developed similar outlooks related to professional practice. T8 describes the language teachers as 'open-minded', 'hard-working', and 'uplifted', which may contribute to the emergence of collective agency in sustaining their efforts to undertake cutting-edge research. These noteworthy commonalities resonate with the findings of previous literature that examined how shared personal characteristics impact the notion of collective agency (e.g. Bandura, 2006;

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Ibrahim, 2006). However, we argue that the commonalities of the participants are only effective in favourable conditions as they may mediate, but do not guarantee, the emergence of collective agency. It is in social interaction/relationships that collective agency emerges. Moreover, it is important to note that the interview also indicates the interactive positioning between the team leader and the members, as T8 repeatedly claimed to 'learn from them' and 'feel supported too personally'. This implies that T8 positioned herself as a learner and as someone who also needed support, creating an equitable relationship with the team members to ensure that authority is distributed within the team. It should also be noted that the language teachers had varying educational backgrounds, areas of interest, and expertise. T3 specialised in French, T5 had expertise in Japanese, and the remaining team members taught English, which made cross-linguistic research possible. Apart from their differences in language specialisation, the teachers' educational backgrounds indicated a wide range of expertise, including learning science, L2 acquisition, L2 learning motivation, language teacher education, and language policy, which contributed to cross-disciplinary work. The following findings will also illustrate how these 'differences' can be leveraged to offer complementary resources that facilitate the emergence of collective agency.

6.3 Collective Agency in Cross-linguistic Research Collaboration

This study (Tao et al., 2020) identified two types of social relationships – that is, instrumental and expressive relationships – reflecting the distinct contributions that intellectual 'resources' and emotional 'support' make to collective agency (Toom et al., 2015). Based on the findings, Tao et al. (2020) propose a multilayered framework which describes how collective agency emerges across multiple levels, including between individuals, within subgroups, and in a team as a whole (see Figure 3). These levels influence each other and create a synergy to allow the emergence of collective agency in a supportive community. Next, we elaborate on how collective agency operates at multiple levels, as manifested in intellectual support and emotional support.

6.3.1 Language Teacher Agency in Lending and Seeking Intellectual Support

The following three extracts from the interview data illustrate how teachers exercised collective agency in lending intellectual support to each other, both within subgroups and across the team as a whole.

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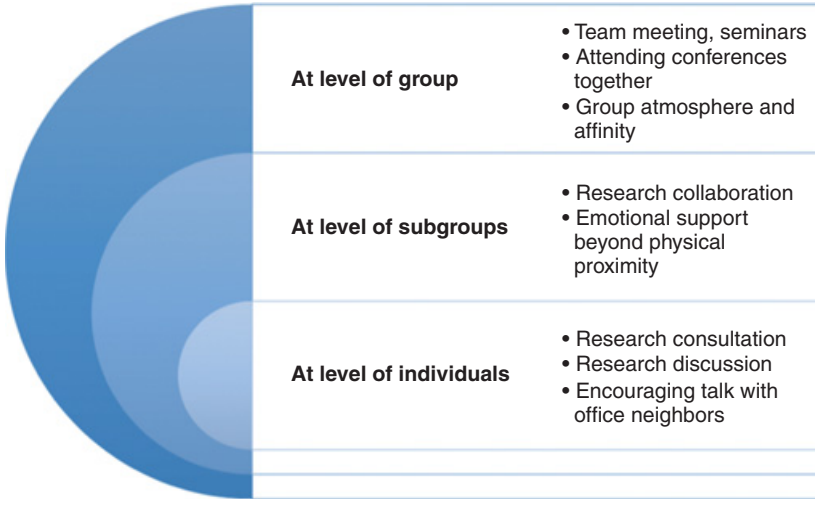


Figure 3 A multilayered framework of collective agency

Extract 1

T3: The most recent interaction [with T5] was that she approached me. We [T3 and T8] were doing a paper on language management, which T5 was highly interested in. She wanted to learn about the theory and method. She read our paper when it was not even officially published . . . Our research focused on a Spanish bank, while she wanted to adopt a similar framework to supervise a student's research project on a Japanese bank . . . She then said to me that she already had the data, and wanted to make it into a paper (with me). (Tao et al., 2020, p. 19)

Extract 2

T8: In the collaboration with T2 and T7, we started with a project on the professional development of small language teachers [or teachers teaching languages other than English]. T7 is good at teacher development while T2 has worked on small language teachers and students' motivation for years. When I collaborated with them, I was able to access good research and literature quickly, along with some research methods . . . When preparing the manuscript, T2 and I read together and had discussions on writing up the literature review . . . This kind of collaboration pushed me to read and think more, and to enter a new area more quickly through discussion with colleagues who are familiar with that field. (Tao et al., 2020, p. 20)

T2: I would approach T7 primarily when I needed to discuss with her about the structure of the paper. She would give me some advice. When I finished writing, T7 would read and revise my writing. When I was confused by some concepts, I would also ask her . . . T8 helped really a lot . . . It was [she] who ushered me into the field of multilingual education. (Tao et al. 2020, p. 20)

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Extract 3

T2: I think seminars are helpful in that they let other team members know what they are doing and learn about others' progress and ideas. If you happen to be interested in someone's research, you may seek possibilities of collaboration with him/her. If you have any questions, you can consult. All in all, we cooperate with or help each other. (Tao et al. 2020, p. 20)

These extracts reveal collective agency in lending as well as seeking intellectual support, resulting from social interactions at different levels. In Extract 3, T3 discusses the social interactions in group activities such as seminars, which encourage individual members to explore cross-linguistic research collaboration and present opportunities for them to form subgroups, like the one described in Extract 2. Through such social interactions, these teachers also stayed up to date on other members' research interests and ongoing projects, allowing them to undertake exchanges as captured by Extract 1. Extract 1 recounts how T5, a Japanese teacher, approached T3 for research consultation. Based on her knowledge of T3 and T8's research on language policy in a Spanish bank, T5 consulted T3 about the possibility of doing language policy research in a Japanese corporation and even obtained their manuscript proof to learn more about how such research could be done. Such social interaction between individual members concerning particular research endeavours was instrumental in forging the cross-linguistic research collaboration between T5 and T3 (including the similar research collaboration reported in Extract 2). Extract 2 demonstrates the collective agency in a subgroup, in which cross-linguistic collaboration allowed the language teachers to offer complementary resources from their own knowledge backgrounds to support each other's research endeavours. These resources included T8's extended engagement with researching multilingual education policymaking in the focal university, T2's experience of teaching French, and T7's expertise in language teacher education. When these three teachers worked together on a project on LOTE teachers and other policy actors in multilingual education, they were able to learn from each other and contribute to the project from different perspectives. Altogether, these three extracts indicate that intellectual exchanges occur through social interactions at different levels, which create an affordance for individual members to undertake collaborative research for professional development. As individual language teachers began to synergise their resources and expertise, the emergence of collective agency sustained and enhanced collaborative professional practice and development among the language teachers, who no longer needed to work alone.

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6.3.2 Emotional Support in Forging Affective Ties

In our analysis of the language teachers' narratives, we also identified instances of collective agency in supporting each other emotionally, which also occurred in social interactions on different levels. The following extracts illustrate three situations in which language teachers feel encouraged at the individual, subgroup, and team levels, respectively.

> **Extract 4**
> T6: We support each other, which I think is quite good. For example, although T2, T5, and I do research in different fields, we often boost morale for each other . . . because our offices are quite close, we all encourage each other. Then T1 likes to join us and say 'write quickly' to push us. (Tao et al., 2020, p. 21)

> **Extract 5**
> T2: We [T2, T7, and T8] have emotional support for sure. First, it's a kind of encouragement. We have formed a chat group. When I finished a manuscript draft, the other two teachers would provide some encouragement and compliments. That actually lent me a kind of spiritual power. (Tao et al., 2020, p. 22)

> **Extract 6**
> T3: It's helpful. I think that this kind of social activity can expand our social network and also strengthen communication so that we know each other better . . . Since we have this team, I feel that I belong to this team. Then I would know that we are doing something towards the same direction, including attending conferences together and also team meetings. (Tao et al., 2020, p. 22)

Extract 4 illustrates the kind of daily conversations between individuals in which they 'boost morale' and 'push' each other, which was afforded by spatial proximity. However, not all participants work in offices close to each other. Extracts 5 and 6 discuss how participants feel supported and support others emotionally when they cannot meet on a daily basis. Extract 5 reveals the affective relationships within a subgroup of three participants, who encouraged each other through online chat group whenever one of them accomplished part of their collaborative project. This kind of emotional support transcends psychical constraints and emerges when the participants have engaged in research collaboration and thus have strengthened their social relations at the subgroup level. Extract 6 suggests that the participants developed a sense of 'belong[ing]' to the team through a variety of collective activities such as 'attending conferences together'. This kind of collective experience strengthened the affective ties among all members. As a result, they felt supported to work 'towards the same direction' – that is, to enhance their research productivity on multilingual education.

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To summarise, these narratives indicate a multilayered map of collective agency. The collective power of the team as a whole cannot be realised if language teachers are not connected at the individual and subgroup levels emotionally and intellectually. At the same time, language teachers may not form these kinds of connections if the team does not engage in collective activities. Thus it is the interaction of the three layers that produces a sustained sense of collective agency among the language teachers, allowing them to transform themselves from individual actors to members of a supportive collaborative community. Based on the empirical findings and conceptual discussions we have presented so far, in the coming section, we will advocate for a *trans*-perspective in future research on language teacher agency and articulate what such a perspective can offer.

7 Advancing a *Trans*-perspective in Language Teacher Agency Research

Our initial goal was to make the concept of language teacher agency more accessible or less elusive for readers. We do acknowledge that the current literature offers an increasingly sophisticated understanding of language teacher agency, but to further deconstruct its complexity, we contend that we need a *trans*-perspective on language teacher agency – that is, one which crosses boundaries, both in the physical sense and in the sense of boundaries between knowledge and disciplines we traditionally inhabit (Hawkins & Mori, 2018). This approach mirrors the transnational, transcultural, and translingual space in which language teachers live and work. Guided by this *trans*-perspective, we put forward future directions for language teacher agency research (see Figure 4).

First, we call for more attempts to integrate theoretical frameworks from other disciplines as well as concepts that intersect with agency. So far, many studies have relied on particular conceptualisations of agency to inform research design and data interpretation.

- We would like to encourage researchers to adopt new theories/models as a complement to what has been used in the past so that the concept of language teacher agency can be better operationalised in research and to provide more explanatory power for data interpretation. An excellent example of the potential of such an approach is the integration of the ecological perspective with life-course theory to explore the time frame of teacher agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). We believe this kind of theoretical 'meshing' can facilitate intellectual exchange on agency across different disciplines and enrich our understanding of language teacher agency.

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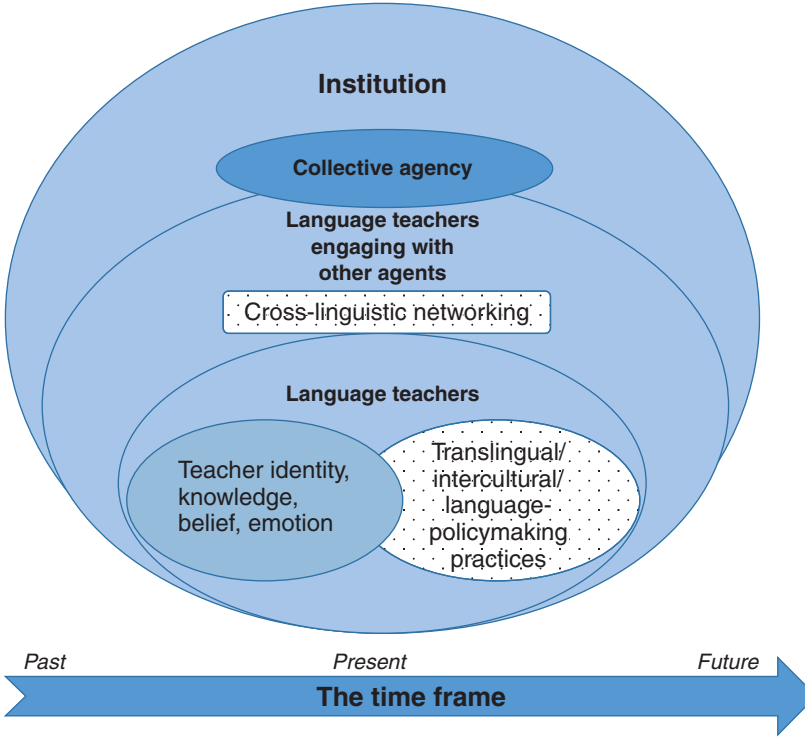


Figure 4 A *trans*-perspective of language teacher agency

- On the micro level, a language teacher is probably foremost a translingual and/or intercultural practitioner. While the ecological perspective allows a historical perspective, we can also draw upon the analytic lens from the linguistic field to conduct fine-grained micro-level analysis of their linguistic/cultural practices as manifestations of language teacher agency. Of particular relevance to language teacher agency are emerging theories like 'translanguaging' (Li, 2018). They may offer a useful analytic lens for operationalising theories of agency to examine how language teachers make agentic linguistic choices and actions *creatively and critically*. Moreover, such a lens can enable us to move beyond textual analysis and include additional social semiotics as part of the data.
- On the micro level, a language teacher is also a teacher in general sense. We thus recommend researching language teacher agency in relation to other teacher-related constructs as agency often does not operate alone on the actor side. Exploring how teacher agency interacts with other key constructs (e.g. language teacher identity, belief, emotion, and knowledge) may help explain how teacher agency is constrained and what teachers can do to overcome the

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relevant constraints. This line of research will generate significant implications for language teacher education and/or professional development programmes.

- These two aspects of the micro level are often intertwined. For example, of particular relevance to language teacher agency is the identity of language policymakers in their own classrooms, which interacts with making language choices purposively amid the shifting language policies around the world. Given this connection, theories may be borrowed from language policy and planning to inform the exercise of language teacher agency; these applications have been already attempted by several pioneering researchers (e.g. Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021).

Second, we call for more attempts to experiment with new methodologies from other fields to unveil more aspects of agency. The majority of research on language teacher agency thus far has been predominately qualitative in nature, relying heavily on interviews as the major data collection method, which makes sense in light of the nature of teacher agency. However, there is a lack of research tracking language teachers' agency developmental trajectories.

- With a focus on the time frame of language teacher agency, we encourage more longitudinal studies to be conducted on the agency development trajectories of language teachers, especially of those who experience changes in their professional life or the contextual conditions since the impact of such changes may be delayed or long-term.
- We also encourage researchers to seek out possibilities for using new research methods in both data collection and data analysis. New approaches may unveil new aspects of language teacher agency that traditional research methods cannot. For example, multimodal narratives offer a new method to collect multiple forms of narratives (Vitanova, 2018). The social network approach is another methodological innovation that visualises the multilayered map of collective agency (for further details, see Tao et al., 2020). Any method that can be adopted to improve data triangulation should be encouraged to strengthen the rigour of relevant explorations.

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