

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

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.

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 & Mølsted, 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

(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

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.

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.

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 translanguaging 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

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

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.

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.