# Sites of Struggle: The Co-construction of Language Teacher Agency and Teacher Identity through Classroom Practice

# Conceptualizations of Human Agency (+/- 1,500 words)

To understand the concept of teacher agency, it is important to first start by examining the human agency (henceforth, agency) literature which provides the foundations from which teacher agency has been conceived. We believe that this background knowledge is essential in understanding agency in relation to teachers and what it may entail. As agency has been widely theorized, the review provided here is inevitably selective but aims to provide a general outline of the most salient issues surrounding the topic.

Agency has been extensively discussed within the social sciences and has proven to be a slippery concept due to the concept being explored from diverse theoretical framings, and intellectual positions, i.e. postmodern, post-structural, and sociocultural (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). This has resulted in a range of definitions presented throughout the literature stemming from 3 different core conceptualisations: agency as a variable, agency as an innate capacity, and agency as emergent phenomenon (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015).

As Priestley et al. (2015) point out, agency is often conflated with action. Thus, many see agency as a variable that can be used to explain or understand how people act in social situations. In this view, agency is often positioned against structure: variables that influence or limit the available choices or ability to be agentic. The key question for those that see agency as a variable is whether structure or agency is more powerful in determining or shaping an individual’s social actions. Within this view, agency has been defined as “…the socioculturally mediated capacity to act.” (Ahearn, 2001, p.112) or “the socially determined capability to act and make a difference.” (Barker, 2005, p.435)

However, conflating agency and action has led to the perception of agency as an innate capacity of the individual, and something that an individual either has or does not have. In taking this view, the influence of social factors in the construct of agency are negated and humans are seen as “self-motivated, self-directing, rational subject(s), capable of exercising individual agency” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 2). This has resulted in individualistic descriptions of the concept such as, “the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world.” (Rogers &Wetzel, 2013, p.63), or “the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations” (Emirbayer & Mische, p.971).

Alternatively, others take a more multifaceted view of agency seeing it as an emergent phenomenon which is, “achieved by individuals, through the interplay of personal capacities and the resources, affordances and constraints of the environment by means of which individuals act.” (Priestly et el., 2015, p.23). This view emphasizes the importance of both the capacity of the individual and their context, situating agency as a complex, dynamic system composed of various interrelated components. Thus, from this perspective, agency “… is not something that people can have – as a property, capacity or competence – but is something that people do. More specifically, agency denotes a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action…” (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015, p.626). Agency is therefore dependent on various internal and external factors which can impact the agentic orientations of people in different contexts and times (Paris, 1993).

Although there is variation amongst how the concept of agency is perceived and defined, a common theme amongst the various descriptions is that to be agentic one must be able to make responsible strong judgements about the actions they take within a specific context and under the influence of multiple internal and external variables. As Edwards (2015) outlines, responsibility and connection to the wider good have long been discussed in connection with agency and are high relevance to the public service that marks teaching. This has led to the growing research of the agency of teachers within their professional working contexts, which is now widely known as “teacher agency”.

# Teacher Agency

Teacher agency is a topic that is now at the forefront of educational research and has even been suggested as, “...a key capability not only for facilitating student learning but also for continuing professional development, collaborative teacher learning and school development.” (Toom et al, 2015, p.615). Although research in this area is booming, teacher agency and what it entails in the classroom is still scarce (Toom et al., 2015; Priestley et al. 2015) as most research has chosen to focus on teacher agency in regards to new policy implementation or curricular change (Buchanan, 2015; Tao & Gao, 2017). Thus, we still do not know much teacher agency at the classroom level i.e. in what ways it manifests itself, how it is supported or hindered in its development, in what circumstances or contexts flourishes or is extinguished, and how to restore it if lost (Joseph, 2006; Rogers & Wetzel, 2013).

Considering that teaching is widely acknowledged as a complex and dynamic process (Johnson, 1999; Telles, 2000), viewing agency as an emergent phenomenon that is dependant on multiple interrelated factors may be the most suitable perspective from which to examine teacher agency. Thus, drawing from the various definitions of agency and teacher agency within social science literature, we define the concept as: the capacity and willingness for a teacher to act (physically, emotionally, socially, pedagogically, or professionally) in accordance with their own values, beliefs, goals, and knowledge within the dynamic teaching contexts and circumstances that they are situated (Lasky, 2005; Pappa, Moate, Ruohotie-Lyhty, & Eteläpelto, 2017; Toom, Pyhältö, & Rust, 2015; Turnbull 2005). ). Within this perspective it is therefore possible to see a teacher exercising more agency in one context or time and less in another (even though the situations may be similar), something that is largely influenced by the individual’s ‘teacher identity’.

## Teacher Agency and Teacher Identity

It has been contended that human agency and individual identity are intertwined in complex ways , having great influence on one another (Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Sloan, 2006). Thus, the concept of agency or the capacity for agency have been, for the most part, determined by models that explain the nature of the self (Vitanova, Miller, Gao, & Deters, 2015). The same is true in the case of teacher agency.

Most approaches to investigating teacher identity share the notion that it is influenced by, and formed within, various historical, political, social, and cultural contexts (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). More specifically, teacher identity is constructed from experiences in their own schooling, their personal experiences teaching, their current school culture, as well as the ways in which they are, or have been, affected by top-down policies and curricular mandates (see, for instance, Alsup, 2005; Beijaard et al., 2000; Lortie, 1975; Moodie, 2016; Olsen, 2008). Thus, under the constant influence of multiple changing factors, one’s teacher identity is “formed and re-formed constantly over the course of a career and mediated by a complex interplay of personal, professional and political dimensions of teachers’ lives…” (Mockler, 2011, p.518).

As an individual’s teacher identity is formed within their personal teaching context, they take actions that they believe to align with their beliefs, knowledge, values within their capacity to do so. Therefore, their teacher identity is seen as mediating and shaping their practices of agency within complex and dynamic classroom contexts, changing student populations, and shifting educational policies (Tao & Gao, 2017). The actions that a teacher takes and how they are perceived by others then feeds back into the identity construction process in an ongoing cycle between agency and identity, in which both are in a constant state of flow. Buchanan (2015) explains that teacher agency can be understood in a way as “identities in motion” (p. 714), however she cautions that teacher agency should not viewed as simply the performance of identity as identity and agency have been found to be shaped by accountability demands, sociocultural structures, and discourses in complex ways. Therefore, it may be better to view teacher agency as the performance of identity within the constraints of teachers’ professional contexts, or in other words, as a temporal, complex, continuous negotiation process between a teachers’ personal characteristics, their sense of self (identity) and the context in which they work (Toom et al., 2015).

## Findings & Outstanding Issues in Teacher Agency Research

Since recent studies have primarily characterised teacher agency through teachers’ response to educational policies or curriculum reform (Robinson, 2012; Tao & Gao, 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015), as mentioned previously, there is still little known in regards to how teachers’ agency in regards to classroom practice. This section aims to outline the findings from empirical studies investigating teacher agency, and present some of the outstanding issues which require further investigation.

In a study of 8 University language teachers in China, Tao & Gao (2017) explored how teachers enact agency to facilitate their professional development during curricular reform. They found that the teachers’ learning, teaching, and research endeavours in relation to the new curriculum were mediated by various identity commitments, and past experiences. This resulted in teachers practicing agency in highly individualized ways in response to similar contextual opportunities and constraints. The overall findings of this study corroborate the conceptualisation of teacher agency as “multidimensional, largely individually varied, temporally imbued, and both socially and individually resourced” (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p.1).

Buchanan (2015) investigated the professional agency of 9 elementary teachers in the USA. She found that the “…capacity to carry out their commitments – to be the kind of teacher they wanted to be – that formed the backbone of how their identities responded to the increased emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing in their schools.” (p.714), again suggesting that a close relationship exists between teachers’ identity and their agency. From her findings, she asserts that, the actions teachers take feed back into their identity; if those actions are constrained, identities and agency can shift. These findings align with the findings of others (see for instance, Pease-Alvarez , Samway, & Cifka-Herrera, 2010; Sloan, 2006) and demonstrate that “…teacher identity and agency are shaped by accountability demands, structures, and discourses in complex ways.” (p.714).

In a study by Kayi-Aydar (2015), 3 pre-service K-5 English language teachers were investigated in regards to the construction of their identity and agency in relation to how they position themselves as teachers. He found that teachers’ agency and identities were affected from micro-politics within their teaching settings. For example, although one teacher described her teacher identity as a caring teacher who wanted to help students who were struggling with reading, she was unable to act in line with her desired identity due to the principle ignoring her request for help. Kayi-Aydar (2015) reports that the interplay between the self and institutional context seemed to create a process of forming and reforming of identity as well as to create a gap between desired and performed identities. When teachers felt that they did not have the power to act in line with their identity, they lost their sense of agency and became passively resistant and this became their new, less-agentic (or non-agentic) identity. The findings of his study indicate that teacher identity and agency are co-constructed, multifaceted and context dependent.

Feryok (2012), conducted a case study of a single Armenian teacher that examined agency in language teacher development and aimed to answer the question “How does a language teacher develop a sense of agency?” (p.98). She found that personal experiences, along with national and international events influenced the development of teacher agency with the need to satisfy one’s own needs driving the actions taken. She further found that, although many teachers are beset with constraints on their actions from various stakeholders involved in education, they are still able to act as agents through their individual negotiation of contextual demands.

Pappa et al. (2017), used semi-structured interviews with 14 teachers to examine factors that positively or negatively influence teacher agency in Finnish primary school CLIL education. Findings showed that classroom obstacles, language, and lack of material and developmental resources were perceived as tensions limiting teacher agency. In contrast, openness to change, teacher versatility, autonomy, and collegial community were found to support teacher agency.

To summarize the findings above and what we know about teacher agency thus far, various studies acknowledge that the beliefs and values that teachers hold in regards to teaching and learning significantly impact their teacher agency. Teacher agency is therefore connected to teacher identity in a complex manner where there is interdependence, interplay, and feedback loops between teachers’ personal qualities, their sense of self, and teacher agency. Therefore, teachers’ agency is not a fixed disposition but rather something that is situationally constructed in relation to the teaching context and past experiences. It is something that is complex, adaptive, and dynamic which can vary from person to person, moment to moment, and context to context.

Still, more research is required to understand how teacher agency is enacted within the classroom domain, or what has been termed as, teachers’ ‘pedagogical agency’ (Pappa et al. 2017, Priestley et al., 2017). How agency in involved in teachers’ daily classroom activities such as material selection and usage, selection and execution of instructional strategies and techniques, classroom management, language use, and decision making for student learning, is something that requires further inquiry. Thus, in taking the study of teacher agency forward, Edwards (2015) suggests that future research should involve following teachers, focusing on their actions in activities in practices and trying to access their judgements, intentions and evaluations as they interpret and act within their situated teaching contexts.

## References

Ahearn, L. M. (2001). Language and agency. *Annual review of anthropology*, *30(1),* 109-137.

Alsup, J. (2005). *Teacher identity discourses*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Barker, C. (2005). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice*. London, UK: Sage.

Beijaard, D., Verloop, N., & Vermunt, J. D. (2000). Teachers’ perceptions of professional identity: An exploratory study from a personal knowledge perspective. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 16 (7)*, 749–764. doi: http://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(00)00023-8

Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice, 21(6)*, 624–640.

Buchanan, R. (2015). Teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice, 21(6),* 700-719. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044

Edwards, A. (2015). Recognising and realising teachers’ professional agency. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice, 21 (6)*, 779-784. doi: 10.1080/13540602.2015.1044333

Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency?. *American journal of sociology, 103(4),* 962-1023.

Eteläpelto, A., Vähäsantanen, K., Hökkä, P., & Paloniemi, S. (2013). What is agency? Conceptualizing professional agency at work. *Educational Research Review, 10*, 45-65. doi: http://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2013.05.001

Feryok, A. (2012). Activity theory and language teacher agency. *The Modern Language Journal, 96(1),* 95-107.

Johnson, K.E. (1999). *Understanding language teaching: Reasoning in action.* Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle Publishing Company.

Joseph, J.E. (2006) Applied linguistics and the choices people make (or do they?). *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 16 (2)*, 237–241.

Kayi-Aydar, H. (2015). Teacher agency, positioning, and English language learners: Voices of pre-service classroom teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 45,* 94-103. doi: http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.09.009

Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and teacher education, 21(8),* 899-916.

Lortie, D. 1975. *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study.* London, UK: University of Chicago Press.

Mockler, N. (2011). Beyond ‘what works’: Understanding teacher identity as a practical and political tool. *Teachers and Teaching, 17(5),* 517–528. doi: 10.1080/13540602.2011.602059

Moodie, I. (2016). The anti-apprenticeship of observation: How negative prior language learning experience influences English language teachers’ beliefs and practices. *System, 60,* 29-41. doi: http://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2016.05.011

Olsen, B. (2008). *Teaching what they learn, learning what they live: Professional identity development in beginning teachers*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press.

Pappa, S., Moate, J., Ruohotie-Lyhty, M., & Eteläpelto, A. (2017). Teacher agency within the Finnish CLIL context: tensions and resources. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism,0(0),* 1-21. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2017.1286292

Paris, C. L. (1993). *Teacher agency and curriculum making in the classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Pease-Alvarez, L., Samway, K. D., & Cifka-Herrera, C. (2010). Working within the system: Teachers of English learners negotiating a literacy instruction mandate. *Language Policy, 9(4),* 313–334. doi: 10.1007/s10993-010-9180-5

Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Robinson, S. (2012). Constructing teacher agency in response to the constraints of education policy: adoption and adaptation. *Curriculum Journal, 23(2),* 231-245. doi:10.1080/09585176.2012.678702

Rodgers, C. R., & Scott, K. H. (2008). The development of the personal self and professional identity in learning to teach. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser, D. J. McIntyre, & K. E. Demers (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education; Enduring question in changing contexts* (3rd ed., pp. 732–755). New York, NY: Routledge.

Rogers, R., & Wetzel, M. M. (2013). Studying agency in literacy teacher education: A layered approach to positive discourse analysis. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies, 10(1),* 62-92. doi: 10.1080/15427587.2013.753845

Sloan, K. (2006). Teacher identity and agency in school worlds: Beyond the all-good/all-bad discourse on accountability-explicit curriculum policies. *Curriculum Inquiry, 36(2),* 119–152. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-873X.2006.00350.x

Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2017). Teacher agency and identity commitment in curricular reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 63*, 346-355. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2017.01.010

Telles, J. A. (2000). Biographical connections: Experiences as sources of legitimate knowledge in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 13(3),* 251-262. doi: 10.1080/09518390050019668

Toom, A., Pyhältö, K., & Rust, F. O. C. (2015). Teachers’ professional agency in contradictory times. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice, 21(6),* 615-623.

Turnbull, M. (2005). Student teacher professional agency in the practicum. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 33(2),* 195–208. doi:10.1080/13598660500122116

Usher, R., & Edwards, R. (1994). *Postmodernism and education.* London, UK: Routledge.

Vähäsantanen, K. (2015). Professional agency in the stream of change: Understanding educational change and teachers' professional identities. *Teaching and teacher education, 47,* 1-12. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2014.11.006

Vitanova, G., Miller, E., Gao, X., & Deters, P. (2015). Introduction to theorizing and analyzing agency in second language learning: Interdisciplinary approaches. In P. Deters, X. Gao, E. Miller, & G. Vitanova (Eds.), *Theorizing and Analyzing Agency in Second Language Learning: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (pp. 1–13). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.