



**Book Review: Jian Tao and Xuesong (Andy) Gao, *Language Teacher Agency*,
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Second language (L2) teacher education has witnessed a substantial shift of attention and orientation with regard to the way it looks at teaching, teachers, and various teacher-related factors. This consequential drift began to occur in the 1970s, a decade branded by Freeman (2002) as the *decade of change* where teacher education was in the van of the quest for a cognitive paradigm, in lieu of the behaviorist tradition, in which the mental lives of teachers were also taken into account. The shift has continued in an evolutionary fashion, and teachers, couched within the new tradition, are deemed to be both cognitive actors and reflective practitioners. As a reflective being, a teacher is also viewed as “an agentic social ‘subject’: individuals with identities, knowledges, and experiences who are themselves engaged in an evolving trajectory of professional development” (Cross, 2020, p. 38). As a corollary of this teacher repositioning, the notions of agency and, by implication, language teacher agency (LTA) have become a regular fixture of inquiry in both mainstream and L2 teacher education. To be sure, in terms of theorization, the construct is still in need of clarification as there is no univocal consensus on what exactly constitutes agency (Mansouri, et al., 2021). Moreover, it is sensible to consider whether agency is merely another fashionable concept in the language teaching enterprise with no positive and useful contribution to the realities of the teaching practice, or whether teachers’ involvement with agency will lead to the betterment of their professional development practices.

Language Teacher Agency is a well-timed publication making a crucial contribution to these concerns. There are seven sections to this well-written, carefully-structured book. The Introduction section is indeed a judicious opening as

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it aptly and briefly traces the driving forces behind the emergence of agency in the discussions of

teacher education. The authors, then, refer to the growing sophistication, in both theorization and research, surrounding the notion of agency, with a view to paving the way for presenting the main objectives of the book: elaborating on the what and why of agency, delineating the intersection of agency and other teacher-related constructs such as autonomy and identity, introducing ways of promoting and boosting teachers' agency, depicting the notion of collective agency, and offering a 'trans-perspective' to function as a guide in this stream of research in L2 teacher education.

Section 2 starts with an important distinction made between 'agency' and 'autonomy' which are sometimes used synonymously in the literature. The authors point out that while there are some commonalities between the two constructs, they are unconnected to each other in many ways. In the light of a comprehensive comparison of the two notions, the authors posit that agency is a more general notion embodying the construct of autonomy; in addition, they believe, agency is more closely bound up with the construct of identity than autonomy. The authors exercise caution to avoid presenting a unified definition of agency. They clearly see the elusiveness of agency lying in its being defined from a myriad of perspectives rather than its being a complex notion to define. Viewing agency as a dynamic construct, the authors then proceed to provide a fourfold typography of prisms that frame the notion of agency as reflected in the literature: social-cognitive theory (agency as a premeditated undertaking), sociocultural theory of mind (agency as a mediated act on both social and psychological planes), the post-structuralist perspective (agency as *doing*), and an ecological standpoint (agency as a *discursive practice*). The authors very briefly elucidate how self-efficacy is assumed to reflect agency in the social cognitive tradition. They also lament the scarcity of research pertaining to the application of this theory to agency investigations. After explicating agency as it is conceptualized in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the authors provide illustrative studies inspired by this conceptualization of agency and provide language teachers with ways of benefiting from the sociocultural tools they have at their disposal, a case in point being translingual practice, to improve their sense of agency. The authors then refer to the ecological perspective which has tried to advance a paradigm shift in the way agency is conceived of by leveling criticism against the sociocultural conceptualization of agency and, instead, looking at teacher agency as a matter of both sociocultural (contextual) and individual (i.e., intentional undertaking rooted in one's life history) capacity. The authors then analyze the post-structuralist conceptualization of agency where it is seen as a *discursive practice* which, in its own right, is epitomized in positioning theory. In this view, the assumption is that individuals will not embark on agentic acts unless they are entrusted with the due position to do so.

In the third section, the authors take the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) framework as their point of departure to elaborate on why agency really counts. In so doing, they underscore the importance of agency at three levels: individual (agency in constantly learning to teach), institutional (agency in fulfilling policies), and social (agency in promoting social justice). The authors advance a fourth level, i.e., chronological, which is concerned with agency in continuous professional development. The section concludes with the proposition that the multilingual and multicultural nature of the language teaching context brings to the fore the importance of boosting a sense of LTA in particular.

Section 4 of the book deals with the relations between LTA and other major concepts in language teacher education. The connections have focused around teacher identity, emotion, belief, and knowledge. An illustrative study by the authors (Tao & Gao, 2017), lays the foundation for the discussions in this section. The main objective of the study centers on research engagement among language teachers at Chinese universities. The authors conclude that language teachers' identity commitment heavily influenced the type of agentic acts they opted for. The findings also indicate that emotion played a key role in shaping LTA particularly as it regarded agency in policy making. As for the link between teacher agency and teacher belief, the study reveals that language teachers' sense of agency was boosted as their belief systems squared with that of the professional discourse community. At the end of the section, the authors assert that little is known about the connection between teacher agency and teacher knowledge. However, the extant literature, on the whole, bears witness to the fact that improved teacher pedagogical content knowledge is a source of agency improvement.

In Section 5, we see more focus on practice. The authors suggest two routes to promote LTA: altering contextual circumstances and enhancing teacher growth. An exemplar of the former is establishing communities of teachers which are of different sizes. This way, language teachers can pick up a good deal of expertise in different areas via the bolstering community network they have built. Additionally, their sense of agency can be enhanced by building and attending a larger teacher community, hence downplaying the repercussions of a top-down system imposed on their practice. To boost their sense of agency through growth, the authors offer, language teachers can capitalize on critical reflective practice through multimodal narratives. This reflective practice can be paired with introducing heterogeneous discourses in various modes so that agentic teachers can question their presumptions about different aspects of a typical language teaching practice, including the controversial issue of native-speakerism.

Section 6 of the book is concerned with the proposition that individual teachers do not display agency-driven behavior in an entirely separate fashion. Lamenting collective agency being under-explored and under-theorized in language teacher education, the authors turn our attention to the social and relational nature of LTA. To map language teacher collective agency, the authors examine social

cognitive, sociocultural, and ecological perspectives in terms of their investigative attention to the collective dimension of LTA, with the sociocultural paradigm considering this type of agency as one of its central pursuits, and the ecological framework having the least share of the contribution to this aspect of the construct.

In Section 7, the authors put forward the idea of a *trans*-perspective on LTA with the purpose of unraveling the intricate nature of the concept such that a more unifying understanding of it will be very likely in both theory and practice. A shortcoming of this proposal is that the very idea of a ‘unified *trans*-perspective’ is an oxymoron. This point has been echoed by the authors in Section 2 where they state “using a single definition of agency also goes against the call for a *trans*-perspective proposed at the end of the Element” (p. 4). That said, setting this *trans*-perspective as the point of reference for upcoming scholarship on the construct, the authors then put forth a research agenda to guide the general trend of future research in this area. Consequently, they invite interested researchers to use data triangulation and employ more untouched research methods such as multimodal narratives and the social network methodology as a way to uncover additional dimensions of LTA.

The book, as a philosophy-of-agency statement, does much to advance our insights into the world of LTA. Interested teachers, theoreticians, and researchers will certainly find the book having a demystifying function such that the construct of LTA being enshrouded in obfuscations is properly illuminated. Moreover, the construct, in its totality, is scrutinized from different angles, and the authors, due to their experience in carrying out research on LTA, succeed in pinpointing and dealing with the vexed issues encircling LTA. However, aside from the ‘unified *trans*-perspective’ oxymoron discussed above, it seems that what the authors are arguing for in terms of conceptual diversity in their discussions is more a matter of terminology than discrepancy and reality. Take, for instance, the additional level of continuous professional development the authors have added to the Douglas Fir Group’s framework when they try to stress the significance of agency. This *chronological* level could have been simply subsumed under the first level of the framework, i.e., agency in constantly learning to teach, since learning to teach can be regarded as a constituent component of reflective practice which, in its own right, entails constant professional development, or learning to teach for that matter, as an important dimension of its cognitive element (Akbari, et al., 2010).

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