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Connotations of Teacher Agency and Recent Trends in Its Research

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of educational reform, college English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, as key agents implementing reform through their teaching practices, are at the forefront of educational change and the improvement of instructional quality. However, some front-line teachers in the classroom do not demonstrate sufficient enthusiasm or willingness to respond to calls for teaching reform. Teacher's lack of adequate interest, motivation, and sense of agency in the process of professional development weakens their ability to face new challenges brought about by emerging teaching models and changes in professional roles. This review examines the concept of teacher agency and summarizes the main research trends concerning both domestic and international research related to teacher agency. EFL teachers need to consciously reflect on their own agency, engage in ongoing reflection on their professional practice, and cultivate a sustained sense of agency along with a proactive attitude. Through this review, we hope to encourage EFL teachers to engage more fully in teaching and research activities in response to educational reforms, thereby facilitating their role transformation and professional development.

Keywords

Connotations, Influencing Factors, Developmental Pathways, Teacher Agency

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the concept of "teacher agency" has increasingly become a hot topic in the fields of education, psychology, and teacher professional development. In the early days, most related studies regarded teachers as active agents. It is believed that teachers have the ability to utilize their personal capabilities to plan and adjust their career development and living conditions, and they can also maintain relative stability in the constantly changing social environment

(Giddens, 1991). This perspective on teacher agency emphasizes the significance of individual teachers taking the initiative to act, thus laying the foundation for the subsequent development of the theory.

In recent years, factors such as the reform of language teaching courses, the implementation of various language education policies and plans, and the increasing pressure on teachers in both teaching and research have posed particularly significant challenges to language teaching (Xu, 2018). These changes have provided more channels for teachers to exercise their agency as co-builders of curriculum reform, autonomous executors of policies, and active researchers of professional development. Agency has become a crucial part of teachers' professional growth. Scholars believe that agency is generated in the interaction between the individual and their environment. It has the characteristics of social and cultural mediation, complexity and dynamics, and requires research in a specific context (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Mercer, 2011) to understand the concept of agency and its current research trends. It has crucial theoretical and practical significance. This article aims to sort out the essence of agency from the following aspects: connotation, research methods, and developmental paths, hoping to provide some guidance for future research.

In this review, teacher agency is interpreted as the ability of teachers to actively participate in purposeful, reflective actions that can shape their own teaching practices, rather than being regarded as a fixed, individualistic trait. Teacher agency is formed in the context of relationships with other individuals, institutions, and the broader world. It encompasses an understanding of past events, an understanding of the environment in which one is present, and reactive actions taken in response to specific individuals, circumstances, and the educational environment.

2. Connotations of Teacher Agency

Since the beginning of the 21st century, research on teacher agency has increasingly focused on theory and practice. Many scholars have conducted studies on how teacher agency functions in specific situations. Sachs (2001) proposed that there is a mutual influence relationship between teachers' professional identity and agency. This relationship highlights the significance of teachers actively shaping their identities through practice. Biesta and Tedder (2007) proposed the first comprehensive model of agency, which explains that agency emerges under the interaction of structural conditions, individual capabilities, and context-specific factors. This model transforms the manifestation of the teacher agent from a static and inherently personal attribute into a dynamic process that actively emerges in a specific context, thus providing us with another perspective for understanding the teacher agent. Goller and Harteis (2017) proposed a three-dimensional model of the teacher agent. This model is composed of agent capability, agent belief and agent personality. Interestingly, later on, the term "agency practice" was used to replace "agency capability", providing a more accurate description that reflects

the dynamic and situational characteristics of agent behavior. Eteläpelto et al. (2013) introduced the concept of "professional agency", emphasizing the connection between the individual and the structural conditions in the working environment. Priestley et al. (2015) defined "professional agency" from an ecological perspective, describing it as the result of the interaction of temporal, structural resources and personal experiences. The focus shifted from checking whether teachers have agencies to exploring the process by which they implement agencies in the context of schools and educational communities. This theoretical development process emphasizes the crucial role of teachers in the professional development, identity formation and educational reform practice of educational research.

Starting around 2010, Chinese scholars gradually incorporated the concept of "agency" into their research on teachers' professional growth, school curricular reform, and issues related to teachers' identity (Ruan, 2018). Biesta and Tedder's (2007) ecological model, along with Eteläpelto et al.'s (2013) professional agency model, have been adapted to the Chinese context (Tang, 2022), broadening the scope of inquiry into how teachers assume various roles for development amid new curricular transformations. The scope of inquiry was expanded to include responses to teacher adaptation and resistance to policy changes, participation in school governance, teacher burnout, and aspects of positive psychology. Teacher agency has been explicitly conceptualized as the capacity of teachers to exercise autonomy, selectivity, and critical thinking within specific contexts (Teng, 2019). Rather than being mere implementers of reforms, teachers are portrayed as active agents who shape education. Since 2017, research has increasingly focused on conducting empirical studies related to the manifestation, influencing factors, and developmental trajectory of teacher agency (Ruan, 2018; Xu & Long, 2020), gradually building a comprehensive theoretical framework and practical applications. Meanwhile, some scholars propose developing a theory of teacher agency grounded in Chinese culture and perspectives. On the one hand, scholars establish their arguments based on institutional and experiential contexts (Lu, 2022; Wang & Lam, 2022). Researchers employ various research paradigms, including surveys, mixed methods, educational narratives, and action research, with an increased emphasis on contextual analysis and the integration of teachers' experiences. Concerning teacher agency, its examination includes the relationship between teacher agency and the implementation of educational policy (Xu, 2018; Long & Liao, 2021), teacher agency and identity formation (Gao et al., 2018; Teng, 2019), manifestations of teacher agency in different teacher groups (Wang, 2020; Fu, 2023), as well as teacher agency enactment during online teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Shi, 2020).

The digital transformation of education has brought about particularly significant changes in the field of foreign language teaching. Such a transformation has posed many challenges to foreign language teachers, including the redefinition of roles, adaptation to technology, and the reconstruction of cognition. Some studies have already begun to explore the performance and changes of foreign language

teachers' agency in the digital environment (Deng & Meng, 2021). Several key factors influencing teacher agency have been identified, such as digital competence, technology-related anxiety, teaching workload, and institutional support (Zhi & Wang, 2023; Yan & Liu, 2022). However, few studies have analyzed how university foreign language teachers respond to these changes in the broader digital transformation of education and promote their own professional development. There is even less research on the formation and development mechanisms of teacher agency in the context of digital transformation. Investigating the driving processes behind the development and enhancement of agency among foreign language teachers in colleges and universities within this digital transformation context is a critical issue that demands the attention of the academic community.

3. Recent Research Trends Domestically and Internationally

In recent years, both domestically and internationally, research on teacher agency has mainly focused on its concept, influencing factors, and development mechanism of teacher agency.

3.1. Research Perspectives and Concepts of Teacher Agency

Research has found that in social science research, there are various different explanations and viewpoints regarding teacher agency. First, the ecological perspective foregrounds the temporal dimension of agency. It particularly emphasizes the time dimension of agents. Priestley et al. (2012) pointed out that agents emerge at the intersection of individual capabilities and environmental resources such as capabilities or constraints, spanning different time scales. When adopting the ecological perspective of teacher agency, the issue of time can be reconsidered. This can reflect the situations at different stages of a teacher's career. The concept of agency is formed by an individual's past experiences and expected future outcomes, which is also an indispensable part of the local environment they are in. This highlights the criticality of the environment. Furthermore, from the perspective of social cognition, it regards agency as an individual's intentional behavior, and agency is defined as existing in a three-dimensional structure. This reflects that dynamic situations and spatio-temporal factors have a significant impact on teacher agency. Bandura (2001) described agency as intentional behavior with characteristics such as intentionality, foresight, self-regulation and self-reflection. These elements represent the basic components of teacher agency, which is generated by the dynamic interaction among individual, behavioral and situational factors. Teachers can exert a significant influence on students and their learning outcomes through their own decisions and actions. As a result, teachers become indispensable participants in the educational process. Next comes the socio-cultural theory, which holds that teacher agency is influenced and shaped by the cultural background. In this context, agency is either defined as resistance or as the act of choice. According to Giddens' view (1991), teacher agency is defined as the ability of teachers to plan and control their careers and lives to ensure continuity

during periods of major social transformation. Similarly, Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) described agents as continuous negotiations between individuals and their broader socio-cultural environment. Finally, there is activity theory, which relies on the construction of "activities" to study human cognition. From this perspective, teacher agents are understood as teachers constantly using active strategies in the classroom environment to regulate and coordinate behaviors. This is to manage contradictions and conflicts. This theory emphasizes the motivation and adaptability of teachers to pursue multiple goals and complete tasks, as well as various factors that influence teachers' intentional behaviors and abilities.

3.2. Factors Influencing Teacher Agency

Scholars have identified the key factors influencing teacher agency, which include both personal and external factors. Among the personal factors are the teacher's own experiences (Biesta, 2015), the professional learning conducted by the teacher (Wang & Zhan, 2023), the teacher's identity (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011; Teng, 2019), the teaching practice carried out by the teacher (Long & Liao, 2021), the research activities participated in by the teacher (Lu, 2022), and the beliefs held by teachers (Lorenz et al., 2021). External factors such as educational policies, interpersonal relationships among teachers, and the institutional atmosphere of schools also play a crucial role in influencing the matter of teacher agency (Wang & Lam, 2022; Ruan, 2018; Du, 2023). These scholars mainly studied various factors that affect the enactment of teacher agency and also explored how teachers should implement their agency. Du (2023) employed a hybrid approach in the design, demonstrating from an individual perspective that multiple factors influence teachers' teaching agency, including both school-related and social factors. And curriculum reform is widely regarded as a crucial social determinant. Similarly, Ruan (2018) emphasized interpersonal relationships, institutional background, and the broader social environment. These are crucial as key background factors influencing the agency of university teachers. Wang (2020) classified teacher agency into several types, namely active professional agency, passive professional agency and passive resistance agency, and emphasized that teacher agency is formed by the interaction of environmental factors, social factors, cultural factors, institutional factors and personal factors.

Academic interest in foreign language teacher agency amid educational digital transformation has increased due to the rapid advancement of technology in education. Because digital technology evolves more quickly in this field than in most others, it causes a greater degree of disruption. Many teachers have adopted online language-teaching platforms and found AI translation software and multimodal instructional resources to be valuable tools (Wang, 2024a). Diverse digital technologies has been utilized in second language education, including online platforms like wikis and blogs to facilitate collaborative writing (Salem, 2025), social networking applications such as Facebook and WeChat to support learning communities (Sun & Sun, 2024), and video games as tools for situated learning (Kafai

& Burke, 2024).

As new technologies emerge, greater demands will be placed on teachers, who should no longer merely serve as knowledge transmitters but must transform their roles into facilitators of learning, integrators of resources, and users of technology. Existing literature has identified different types of teacher responses to the use of digital teaching tools, such as "technology pioneers," "neutral adapters" and "resisters" (Deng & Meng, 2021; Bian et al., 2024). Currently, there is a gap between the level of educational technology competence required for contemporary teaching and that possessed by teachers. Moreover, due to ongoing advancements in educational technology and its increased presence in classrooms, teachers face continuous challenges as they undergo professional repositioning and role transition (Cai, 2015). In the age of artificial intelligence, while we witness the continuous application of digital technology in education, its benefits are accompanied by risks such as technology anxiety, teachers' sense of alienation, and role ambiguity (Zhi & Wang, 2023). Teachers' agency can also be influenced by factors including digital literacy levels (Yan & Liu, 2022), teaching burden (Liang & Lu, 2023), curriculum reform (Qin, 2022), and professional or disciplinary growth (Goller & Paloniemi, 2017; Tian et al., 2023). To alleviate this situation, it is essential to address these issues comprehensively to minimize their impact on teachers' additional workload.

3.3. Developmental Pathways of Teacher Agency

Recent studies have examined the professional agency of foreign language teachers at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. For individual teachers, scholars believe that their professional growth is closely linked to their self-reflection, observation and practice through participating in various activities (Ruan, 2018). In the university environment, teacher agency can be strengthened by enhancing their understanding of professional development and actively taking countermeasures (Tang, 2022). Continuous deep reflection reconstruction can also be carried out (Wang, 2024b), and continuous learning should be emphasized (Qin & Tao, 2022). In terms of institutions, the support of organizations and the influence of culture on teacher agency are the key contents of the research. The study adopts the theory of cultural-historical activities and case study methods to examine the intervention measures of primary and secondary school teachers' education plans (Fu, 2023). The research results show that the development of teacher agency comes from the dynamic balance of teachers' work, study and life experiences. The future development direction of the school should focus on improving the training model and creating a good working environment, so as to promote the transformation of the role of teachers. At the social level, scholars study the impact of culture and institutions at the macro level on teachers' professional engagement. Applying social and cultural theories, Gao et al. (2018) analyzes the career choices of English teachers in universities along the southeast coast to understand how teacher agency is achieved through identity construction.

Based on Xu's research (2018), comparative case studies have confirmed that the social and cultural environment has a significant impact on teachers' agency practice. It is essential to enhance teacher agency from three perspectives. First, emphasize reflective practice and the proactive development of individuals. Second, optimize organizational support from a systemic viewpoint and cultivate professional communities. Third, improve situational and cultural guidance mechanisms at the social level to ensure adequate support for teacher development.

The development path of teacher agency illustrates how teachers have gradually evolved from merely rule-abiding novices to reflective, autonomous, and collaborative professionals capable of shaping classroom practices, influencing school decisions, and driving educational change. These developments are in line with the ecosystem and relationship perspectives of agencies. The approaches include the development of teachers' individual competencies, interpersonal skills, and abilities to navigate organizational structures. Gradually, teachers can draw on past experiences, consciously act in the present, and set future-oriented goals. Teacher agency can evolve from a simple state of survival to adaptation and adjustment, and ultimately achieve the construction of educational contexts.

4. Discussions and Conclusion

Nowadays, whether at home or abroad, research on teacher agency mainly focuses on several aspects, such as defining and explaining the connotation of agency, identifying the decisive factors influencing agency, and exploring the development path of agency, etc. From this perspective, both domestic and international research have employed ecological models. However, compared with many international literature, Chinese scholars place greater emphasis on the collective dimension of institutions and the significant impact brought by top-down policies. Most of the time, Chinese research highlights certain factors, such as school teams, departmental groups, and reform efforts guided by the state, which are all key factors in understanding the role of teachers in education. The collective agency of teachers can be demonstrated through their participation in various organizations, including research groups, curriculum research groups, and joint curriculum development committees, etc. With the promulgation of national curriculum policies, empirical data collected from the EFL field in China show that teachers will collaborate with their peers to develop practical methods suitable for the local classroom environment. Whereas international research has highlighted the contradiction between teachers' individual professional autonomy and performance accountability systems, such as standardized tests and authoritative checks. It has studied how teachers construct their professional identities and participate in reflective practices to mediate external control and imposed demands. However, recent research conducted from an international perspective indicates that these problems are actually issues of degree rather than fundamental differences. In fact, there are no particularly prominent differences between the viewpoints of the West and China.

Although scholars have different understandings and interpretations of teacher agency, there are similarities when defining the concept of teacher agency. First, teacher agency is multi-faceted, encompassing aspects such as the individual, society, and time. Secondly, its manifestation is not only explicit choices, decisions and actions, but also includes implicit teachers' knowledge, beliefs, emotions, motivations, reflective consciousness and inner values. Thirdly, teacher agency is formed by the complex interaction between individuals and society, and will gradually evolve over time. It is based on the dynamic interaction between individuals and the environment. These interactions foster conditions that enable teachers to determine their own career development goals, carry out professional teaching activities, and take appropriate actions based on these preset goals. The primary interest of English teachers lies in participating in curriculum reform and applying diverse educational technologies to enhance student learning. Domestic research indicates that teacher agency not only includes individual behaviors. It also includes cognitive elements, such as teachers' beliefs, values, emotions, and reflections embedded in these behaviors. This has driven the interaction between teachers and the environment, as external demands and internal factors converge in a constantly changing context. These dynamics are gradually emerging in the major challenges faced by ongoing reforms, including the growing demand for teachers' digital literacy and the evolving role of them as agents in curriculum design and implementation.

To date, many researchers have examined how individual and internal factors, together with external organizational and social factors, coexist and interact within a multi-level framework. Nevertheless, a further investigation of their respective roles and impacts is an important dimension that remains under-examined. Specifically, the inter-dependency among individual agency, identity, and autonomy requires empirical study. Although a few studies have examined teacher agency and emotions, many have not yet investigated how students' emotions influence their agency. In studies of teacher agency, contemporary researchers primarily employ either qualitative or quantitative approaches. Since teacher agency is generally regarded as highly subjective, multidimensional, and context-specific, narrative research perspectives have gained increasing scholarly popularity. As a typical qualitative method, narrative inquiry offers effective frameworks to explore, understand, and depict teacher agency in a nuanced manner. By depicting key events at various stages of a teacher's career, researchers can more readily understand the dynamic nature of teacher agency during vivid episodes, the negotiation processes between teachers and others, and the construction of teachers' professional identities alongside their decision-making.

Although some studies have employed large-scale quantitative surveys to explore the intrinsic relationships among personal factors such as self-efficacy, autonomy, role positioning, beliefs, and agency, there remains a lack of research integrating quantitative methods with qualitative narrative approaches to comprehensively explain how foreign language teachers in higher education effectively enact professional agency in their careers. The digitalization trends in educational

contexts highlight that the classroom remains essential for students' progress in learning foreign languages. In this setting, both teachers and students participate in interactive activities that enhance their language skills and comprehension. Although teacher agency is enacted through classroom communications and activities, it remains underexplored. Techniques such as Conversation Analysis and Interaction Analysis are rarely used, which could have allowed for a deeper understanding, evaluation, and development of classroom interactions. Combining these methods with more established approaches, such as interviews and diary analyses, may provide a better understanding of teacher agency.

At present, most of the research on teacher agency focuses on the group of secondary or vocational school teachers. There are relatively fewer studies on foreign language teachers in higher education. As for the role that foreign language teachers play in the digital transformation of university education, research is still very limited. The existing theories mainly developed in the cultural and institutional environment of the West. However, most of the time, these theoretical frameworks fail to accurately reflect the actual situation and reality in China. To a large extent, they ignore the broader cultural and social background factors. Generally speaking, these theories often only emphasize the individual factors that affect teacher agency, but do not fully consider the impact of the macro-level background. With the continuous integration and expansion of technology and teaching, some key issues have not been fully resolved up to now, such as the professional authority of teachers, the autonomy of teaching decision-making, and moral issues in digital teaching, etc.

The conclusion drawn in this review is that to strengthen teacher agency, it requires the joint efforts of multiple levels. At the classroom level, this includes promoting reflective practical activities among teachers and facilitating cooperation among them to encourage teachers to carry out intentional teaching that effectively meets students' needs. At the institutional level, relevant policies need to be implemented to foster professional trust and to apply courses flexibly. Supportive leadership can create a suitable environment where teachers can become agents of change. Against the backdrop of the central government's guidance on reform in China, it can promote the development of school-based research teams and course learning groups, and perhaps also align the country's standardization goals with teachers' expectations for professional autonomy. Therefore, promoting teacher agency requires a systematic framework so that EFL teachers can effectively cooperate within the community.

Under the backdrop of the digital transformation of education, it is highly necessary to explore how college English teachers can balance their own development and the external environment in the complex educational ecosystem. Studying how teachers actively exercise their agency and analyzing the strategies they adopt in response to these changes is crucial for promoting their continuous and long-term professional development. This academic field also merits further scholarly attention.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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