



## Language Teacher Agency

Jian Tao and Xuesong Andy Gao, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2021, Pp. 72, ISBN 978-1-108-93276-9 (pbk): £15.00 / \$20.00

Zhang Luyao Elva & Gong Yang Frank

To cite this article: Zhang Luyao Elva & Gong Yang Frank (2022): Language Teacher Agency, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2022.2110322](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2110322)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2110322>



Published online: 16 Aug 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Language Teacher Agency**, Jian Tao and Xuesong Andy Gao, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2021, Pp. 72, ISBN 978-1-108-93276-9 (pbk): £15.00 / \$20.00

Although language teacher agency has recently emerged as a popular topic, there remains a lack of theoretical and empirical understanding of its core meaning. This book addresses the shortcomings, and aims to describe the notion of agency in a straightforward way. It presents the richness of theoretical perspectives, and contributes to current debates through an analysis of illustrative studies.

In their introduction, Tao and Gao point out that the concept of language agency remains only partially articulated. They problematise the assumption that agency is 'a natural property' (1), noting that individual agency is strongly connected to contextual conditions – language teachers do not always serve as active agents in educational reform. Different manifestations of language teacher agency in changing educational contexts are identified; these include resistance, compliance and appropriation. Chapter 2 presents four major theoretical perspectives on teacher agency: social cognitive, sociocultural, ecological and post-structural. The authors show how each perspective conceptualises teacher agency and guides data analysis.

Chapter 3 addresses the significance of teacher agency at the macro, meso, micro and chronological levels. Discussion of two studies demonstrates how language teachers exercise their agency within highly challenging educational contexts. Chapter 4 reports on the work of the authors and other researchers that explores the relationships between teacher agency and other constructs, including emotion, beliefs, knowledge and identity. The detailed descriptions of the data findings and analysis will enable readers to locate existing research gaps.

Chapter 5 offers multiple pathways to enhance teacher agency at the personal and contextual levels, with implications for teacher educators, policy-makers and practitioners. Chapter 6 elucidates the concepts of collective agency and its emergence. The concluding chapter emphasises the necessity for a trans-perspective on language teacher agency, with detailed suggestions for advancing relevant theories and methodologies.

This volume has four impressive characteristics. First and foremost, it advances a trans-perspective. Tao and Gao articulate the concept of agency by synthesising existing theories and empirical studies. They do not aim to achieve a universal definition of agency; rather, they embrace multiple definitions. They point out that current studies on agency tend to adopt a single research conceptualisation, relying on interviews as primary data sources. In contrast, a trans-perspective encourages the adoption of a transdisciplinary framework and a variety of data types. Drawing on such a perspective, the authors design a comprehensive and holistic model. Second, they expand on the temporal dimension of agency within teachers' professional trajectories, seeking to understand the dynamic interplay between agency and context across the course of teachers' careers. The aim is to equip language teachers with the ability to orientate themselves to long-term outcomes and to facilitate the structuring of their career paths.

The authors also succeed in bringing collective agency out of the shadows. Although the concept is not new, it has been seriously under-explored, with existing studies overemphasising the individualistic nature of agency. Based on the belief that agency is both an individual and a relational issue, Tao and Gao argue that the exercise of agency does not take place in isolation – teachers also intentionally interact with others to find and exploit supportive resources – and they recognise that collective agency emerges in particular contexts. They propose a multilayered model here, one that includes groups, subgroups, individuals and the social interactions among them.

Finally, this book addresses the richness of agency in the professional development of language teachers, and the importance of enhancing agency as they build their research profiles. That is, beyond their primary duties in the classroom, teachers must also engage in research so as ensure their job security and pursue career opportunities. In attending to the vulnerable position of language teachers, Tao and Gao provide a timely response to the challenges that language teachers currently face in higher education.

Despite all these strengths, a chapter discussing the factors that enhance or constrain language teacher agency would have made the book even more comprehensive. This could have supplemented the brief treatments of the matter that appear here. And, while sufficient information about existing theories is presented, readers might have benefited more from the discussion if the authors had provided infographics listing the key features and representative studies of each conceptualisation. Overall, however, this book makes the elusive concept of agency accessible to readers. Language teachers will learn how to enhance their agency, and educators and policy-makers will learn about the organisation of collective activities and the provision of academic and emotional support to teachers..

Zhang Luyao Elva

*Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China*

Gong Yang Frank

*Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China*

 [yc17121@connect.um.edu.mo](mailto:yc17121@connect.um.edu.mo); [frankgong@um.edu.mo](mailto:frankgong@um.edu.mo)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5294-6437>

© 2022 Zhang Luyao Elva

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2110322>

