# English Language Teachers’ Agency and Identity Mediation through Action Research: A Vygotskian Sociocultural Analysis

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# Abstract

The relationship between language teacher agency and identity is emerging as an important area of inquiry and has significant implications for the field of language teacher education. As one example of an inquiry-based approach to teacher education, action research (AR) can be an empowering force for teachers to effect democratic pedagogical improvements, but little research has examined the relationship between AR and language teacher agency. Taking a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective and an agency-centered approach to understanding teacher identity, this chapter explores ESL teachers’ agency and professional identity mediation during and after their participation in an AR program. The qualitative, longitudinal study investigated how participating in a national nine-month AR program mediated the professional identities of experienced in-service ESL teachers in Australia. A series of five in-depth interviews were conducted over 12 months with five teachers during and after their AR participation, and the data were analyzed through a two-level coding process. The next stage of analysis drew on the Vygotskian concepts of ‘tools’ and ‘mediation’ in particular. The AR program provided the teachers with various conceptual and practical tools. Through transformation of these tools for their own purposes, the teachers were able to enact their agency, mediated by their future-oriented visions of self as well as their social, institutional and political environments. Implications of this study include the value of AR as an approach for equipping language teachers with a selection of tools to transform. The findings also suggest that ESL colleges need to become more conducive to sharing and supporting the benefits of teacher AR, in order to better facilitate the emergence of new professional identities and mediate agency.

# Introduction

The relationship between language teacher agency and identity is emerging as an important area of inquiry (Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Varghese, Motha, Park, Reeves & Trent, 2016) and has significant implications for the field of language teacher education. Teacher education activities such as degree programs and on-going professional development courses need to assist both pre-service and in-service language teachers in continually negotiating their dynamic professional identities, which are intrinsically connected to the changing pedagogical contexts in which teachers work. Agency is an important aspect of teachers’ professional identities because it allows them to take action in line with their goals for continuous professional development. However, when teachers’ agency is not sufficiently mediated, the impact can be detrimental, for instance leading to burnout and teacher attrition (Trent, 2017). Within the literature on language teacher identity, agency can be understood broadly as the capacity for an individual to act, as connected to and influenced by the individual’s social contexts (Feryok, 2012; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Tsui, 2007). Indeed, Vähäsantanen (2015: 1) highlights the need for agency to be viewed as ‘both socially and individually resourced’. This chapter takes a sociocultural theoretical approach to agency, and I provide more specific definitions of the central concept of ‘mediated agency’ in the next section.

Taking a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective and an agency-centred approach to understanding teacher identity emergence (Vähäsantanen, 2015), in this chapter I explore ESL teachers’ agency and professional identity mediation during and after their participation in an AR program. AR is an example of an inquiry-based approach to teacher education, and can be an empowering force for teachers to effect democratic pedagogical improvements. As Dikilitaş and Griffiths (2017: 2) propose in their recent practical handbook, AR can liberate teachers ‘with a sense of agency and ownership to deal with their own problems, critical questions, points to improve or puzzles, thereby promoting teacher autonomy’. However, there is limited empirical evidence in the literature detailing *how* AR mediates teacher agency emergence. The structure of this chapter is as follows. First, I outline the Vygotskian theoretical perspective adopted, specifically the concepts of identity, mediated agency and tools. I then describe the specific teacher education activity at the centre of the study, AR, and review the limited literature exploring language teacher agency in the context of AR engagement. Next, I explain the context and research design of the study, before presenting the findings in terms of the tools teachers appropriated from AR, and how these tools were transformed.

# A Vygotskian Sociocultural Framework: Identity and Agency Mediation

From a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, identity is conceptualised as a sense of ‘self’, which refers to how people perceive themselves, their roles and status, and how they think others perceive them: ‘the self is […] an on-going project of establishing one’s place in the world’ (van Lier, 2004: 115). Van Lier (2008: 59) adds that identity can be viewed as a continuous process of aligning and re-aligning perceptions of self from different sources (yourself, and how others see you), and he also highlights the importance of ‘future-oriented aspects of self’. My conceptualisation of identity in this chapter corresponds to Vygotsky’s work on future-oriented ‘motives’ (motivations for human actions) which drive the interaction between a person’s real (present) form and their ideal (future-oriented) form of self (Vygotsky, 1994).

Agency is central to a teacher’s identity, in that their actions will be aligned to their professional sense of self and visions of their future self, which will guide a teacher in their on-going development. A Vygotskian conceptualisation of agency includes the key notions of tools and mediation. Mediation explains the connection between human development and the sociocultural environment, which is considered the stimulus or the ‘starting point’ (Veresov, 2015: 5) for human development. The sociocultural environments humans live and work in encompass certain ‘artificial [i.e. social or cultural] formations’ (Vygotsky, 1997: 85), which Vygotsky commonly referred to as ‘psychological tools’ or ‘instruments’, and which have also been termed ‘mediating agents’ (Kozulin, 2003: 17). These ‘mediating agents’ facilitate a person’s relationship with the environment, and ultimately contribute to development through the process of internalization. They can be divided into three broad categories: ‘activities’ (such as an organised teacher development activity), ‘artifacts’ (physical and symbolic tools such as texts) and ‘concepts’ (understandings constructed by communities) (Lantolf, 2006). In this chapter, I primarily use the term ‘tools’, referring to the physical and symbolic artifacts that teachers gain from participation in an AR program.

Once mediating agents (such as tools) have been internalized or appropriated, they have the power to alter the structure of mental processing and ‘help individuals master their own natural psychological functions of perception, memory, attention and so on’ (Kozulin, 2003: 15-16). Smagorinsky (2011: 32-33) explains the process of the appropriation of tools as follows:

Appropriation refers to the process through which a person […] adopts and modifies the tools available for use in particular social environments and through this process develops ways of thinking endemic to specific cultural practices.

Smagorinsky also outlines the different levels of appropriation that may be achieved, ranging from a complete lack of appropriation, through to appropriating only the surface features (not the conceptual whole), and at the highest level achieving mastery of the tools. The level of appropriation achieved is influenced by the social context of learning, as well as the individual characteristics of the learner (Smagorinsky, 2011). In addition, Grimmett (2014: 17) describes mediated agency as both the ‘socioculturally mediated *awareness*’ of the opportunities a person may have to transform their current situation, and the ‘mediated capacity to *act*, by using cultural resources, in order to *actually* transcend’ their present position and abilities (emphasis in original). A final but important aspect of mediated agency is the role of power, and the rules that define and constrain the roles of individuals within a system (Lantolf & Genung, 2003). Such rules may govern, for example, the extent that a teacher can appropriate and then transform the tools they appropriate, and may result in a redirection of agency if certain restrictions exist within their context.

Drawing on the above definitions, in the current study mediated agency is conceptualised as a teacher’s ability to regulate their own activities by re-using, or transforming, the tools (or artifacts) they appropriate from the AR program. Such tools could include the cyclical AR framework (described in the next section), new concepts the teachers gain, data they generate, and written texts or projects they develop. The transformation of tools is thus considered central to language teacher agency: their agency is both mediated by the tools and evidenced by their capacity to act in transforming the tools for their own continued development. For example, after completing the AR program, a teacher may appropriate only the surface features of the cyclical AR framework tool, or gain full mastery. If the latter, then the teacher may be able to transform the AR framework tool for their own purpose, such as to guide them in systematic reflection on their teaching, or to structure and write a research proposal.

# Action Research and its Mediation of Teacher Identity and Agency

Action research (AR) is a form of systematic, inquiry-based professional development that involves a dynamic combination of action and self-reflection focusing on a particular topic, puzzle or issue of interest and importance to a teacher in their given classroom context. The broad aims of AR are to create ‘meaning and understanding in problematic social situations and [improve] the quality of human interactions and practices within those situations’ (Burns, 2005: 57). The processes of conducting AR are generally conceptualised by a cyclical framework that may involve the steps of planning, action (implementing an intervention in the classroom), observation (collecting evidence regarding the intervention’s impact) and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), although these processes are frequently quite messy in reality (Burns, 2010). A teacher might explore one topic through several iterative cycles of AR that evolve through reflection and planning based on the findings from a previous cycle. While AR can be conducted by individual teachers working alone, it is often a collaborative process involving pairs or teams of teachers working together, perhaps facilitated by a mentor or an educational organisation.

In the practice of second language teacher education, AR has become more widespread in the last decade, with programs for EFL/ESL teachers now well established in contexts such as Australia (Burns & Edwards, 2014), Chile (Smith, Connelly & Rebolledo, 2014), China (Yuan & Burns, 2017) and the UK (Borg, 2015). There has also been a surge in empirical research exploring the impact of such AR programs on language teachers’ professional development, and the themes of increased teacher autonomy and empowerment emerged from some of those studies (e.g. Banegas, Pavese, Velázquez, & Vélez; Wang & Zhang, 2013; Wyatt, 2011). For instance, the teachers in both Banegas et al.’s (2013) and Wyatt’s (2011) studies were empowered to create more relevant teaching materials, and to use them more creatively in the classroom. In Wang and Zhang’s (2014) study, some of the teachers also developed more autonomy in relation to both teaching and research.

However, very few studies have focused specifically on teachers’ agency in connection to their identity emergence from conducting AR. One example is Trent’s (2010) study of six pre-service English language teachers on a Bachelor course in Hong Kong. Trent found that conducting AR encouraged the teachers to question current educational discourses, to contrast what they perceived of as ‘modern’ with ‘traditional’ teaching, and to make commitments to trying ‘modern’ methods (e.g. student-centred, using technology) in order to fully engage their students in learning. These emerging identities were also in response to the current educational landscape in Hong Kong and the teachers’ perceived need for change. In a more recent study of in-service teachers, Yuan and Burns (2017) investigated the identity shifts of two Chinese high school EFL teachers as a result of participating in a university-school collaborative AR program. In addition to developing pronounced ‘teacher researcher’ and ‘collaborator’ identities, the teachers also became ‘change agents’ who were able to adjust their own teaching practices and to encourage their colleagues to try their ideas. A greater sense of agency thus emerged in their professional practice and also the power to effect change more widely. In the specific context of the current study, an AR program in Australia, my previous work has also identified the empowerment of teachers’ identities as confident professionals, leaders, mentors and awakened teacher-researchers after participating in AR (Edwards & Burns, 2016a, 2016b). The current study adds to this literature base by taking a longitudinal approach to examining how teachers’ professional identities and sense of agency (more specifically) emerged over the course of their AR participation and beyond. It is also the only study, to my knowledge, to use a sociocultural ‘mediated agency’ perspective to analyse language teacher agency and identity as mediated by AR.

# Research Design

In this section, I present the study’s research design, including the research context and participants, and then the data collection and analysis procedures. The research question to be explored was: *How does participating in a national nine-month AR program mediate the professional identities and agency of experienced in-service ESL teachers?*

## Research Context and Participants

The specific teacher education context for this qualitative, longitudinal study was a national, annual nine-month AR program established in Australia in 2010 by peak body English Australia in collaboration with Professor Anne Burns and Cambridge English Language Assessment. ESL teachers working in the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector in Australia are eligible to submit a voluntary expression of interest for the program, and each year six AR projects are selected and conducted by teachers working either individually or in pairs. Since 2012, a broad theme has been chosen for each annual program (such as ‘reading’ or ‘assessment’) and teachers’ proposals can address any sub-theme that is relevant to their teaching context and current situation. The program incorporates a series of three workshops held in Sydney in March, July/August and September, which set-up, facilitate and provide the space for discussion and peer feedback on the teachers’ AR projects. Following the third workshop in September, teachers present their projects at the annual English Australia conference, and they then prepare 3,000-word AR reports for submission in November, which are published in the freely-accessible journal *Cambridge Research Notes* the following May. For a more detailed overview of this AR program, see Burns and Edwards (2014).

The Australian ELICOS sector is strongly affected by economic and political factors such as changes to government policies regarding student visa requirements, the value of the Australian dollar and global economic trends. These factors all influence student enrolment numbers, and require many ELT institutions to be profit-oriented, creating a tension between business and pedagogy, and a reliance on a workforce of casual, short-term teachers (Stanley, 2016). The sociocultural contexts of teachers’ workplaces in terms of the tensions and in particular their employment status may, therefore, play an important role in mediating, restricting or even redirecting the teachers’ agency (Lantolf & Genung, 2003). Against this backdrop, the professional development opportunities for teachers can vary considerably between institutions, but centralized support is provided by peak body English Australia. The AR program, as one of English Australia’s key professional development provisions, is still a relatively new innovation, and exploring its sustained impact on the sector is the focus of my current research (see Burns & Edwards, 2014; Edwards & Burns, 2016a, 2016b).

Five teachers who participated in a recent iteration of the AR program volunteered to participate in the current longitudinal study. Their pseudonyms and years of experience as EFL/ESL teachers are as follows: Alex (1 year), Quinn (5 years), Sarah (10 years), Katie (16 years) and Phoebe (25 years). Quinn is male, and the other teachers all female. Three of the teachers are Australians who had taught EFL overseas as well as ESL in Australia for a number of years, whereas two of the teachers had recently moved to Australia from other countries. While Alex had only been teaching ESL for a year, she had previously taught a different language in high schools, so she had considerable overall teaching experience. Most of the teachers worked in ELICOS colleges affiliated with universities, teaching Academic English programs that led to university admission for international students. The teachers’ specific AR project topics are not mentioned here in order to protect their anonymity since their AR reports are published online, but also because the focus is on their identities and agency in relation to their professional careers more broadly, rather than the specific pedagogical knowledge gained from their projects.

## Data Collection and Analysis

This study collected data during and after the AR program in which the five teachers all participated. A series of five in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the five teachers over 12 months to align with different stages of the AR process: in March (after the first workshop), in June (during data collection), in September (after their conference presentations), in December (soon after the official end of the program) and in March (four months after the program). The interviews were conducted face-to-face as far as possible, but sometimes Skype was more convenient due to the long distances between cities in Australia. I designed some general questions for each interview, asking teachers to describe their AR experience to date, how they felt as teachers and/or researchers, and whether they experienced any changes in their perceptions of themselves, and/or in terms of how others perceived them. I also asked what they believed they had gained from the program, and whether they continued to use these new tools. After each round of interviews, I transcribed the data and conducted one level of inductive in-vivo or descriptive coding (following Saldaña, 2013) in order to determine important categories emerging from the teachers’ experiences; I used these categories to form questions for each subsequent interview that were specific to each teacher. This process allowed me to develop detailed profiles of each teacher’s identity and agency mediation over the 12 months of data collection. At the end of the 12-month period, I then conducted a second round of coding, followed by an analysis drawing on the Vygotskian concept of mediated agency, in particular the re-use (transformation) of tools teachers appeared to have appropriated from the AR program. In the following section, the findings are presented together with data extracts from the interviews, which are labelled with the teachers’ pseudonyms and interview number (1 = March, 2 = June, 3 = September, 4 = December and 5 = March the following year).

# Findings

For each of the five teachers, new professional identities emerged over the course of the 12-month study, as mediated by their experiences of the AR program as well as the sociocultural environments of their workplaces. Table 1 shows the teachers’ ‘future self goals’, which were explicitly stated in the first interviews when I asked about their motivations for joining the AR program and their future visions of themselves. The teachers’ emerging professional identities were identified from coded data from the third, fourth and fifth interviews. Table 1 is a point of reference for the subsequent analysis of mediated agency, which teases out complexities in the relationships between teacher agency and identity.

Table 1

*Teachers’ future self goals and emerging professional identities (sense of self) from the AR program*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Teacher** | **Future self goals** | **Emerging professional identities mediated by the AR program** |
| Alex | To continually develop as a teacher and expert in her area | Becoming a go-to person and developing “maturity as a teacher” |
| Quinn | To become a more theoretically-informed teacher | “Teacher AND researcher”, able to “contribute to colleagues within the industry” |
| Sarah | To continually develop in her career | “Burnt-out” but “more explicit teacher” |
| Katie | To become a recognised and valued teacher-researcher | “An extra-terrestrial researcher” |
| Phoebe | To be a confident leader and contributor | “Kick-started” into conference engagement, and a community-focused teacher |

 NB – Use of “quotes” indicates in-vivo labels

Participating in the AR program seemed to provide the teachers with various tools, which served to mediate their agency and professional identities in myriad ways. These tools included ‘conceptual tools’ such as new theories about teaching arising from their AR projects, or the validation of a research gap in the literature. Another type of tool identified was ‘practical tools’, including the teachers’ AR project findings, materials created through their AR interventions, the AR framework (planning, acting, observing, reflecting) and data collection skills. Some of the tools teachers appropriated from the AR program were then transformed. I have categorised these transformations according to three domains of re-use of the teachers’ AR tools: (1) materials and curriculum development, (2) systematic teaching and research, and (3) further presentations or publications. The following descriptions are structured around the domains of tool re-use to describe each teacher’s agency mediation as a result of their AR participation. Each section includes a table summarising each teacher’s appropriation and transformation of the tool, and how that transformation was mediated by the teacher’s future self goal, and by the sociocultural environment of the ELICOS college where they were employed.

## (1) Materials and Curriculum Development

As the analysis in Table 2 shows, there was evidence of Alex, Quinn, Katie and Phoebe all appropriating the practical tool of their AR materials, and being aware of how they could be transformed for materials and curriculum development within their colleges. However, only Alex was specifically asked, by the leaders at her college, to continue developing the materials she initially created for her AR project in order to integrate them more widely into her college’s curricula. This outcome greatly enhanced her status at the college, which shifted from “newbie” (Alex, Interview 1) before commencing the AR program to a ‘go-to person’ afterwards. She found her new go-to person identity quite surprising but gratifying, as she received more and more frequent questions from colleagues relating to her AR materials. Alex’s supportive sociocultural context, including managers who quickly identified the value of her AR materials, mediated the emergence of her agency through transformation of her materials for college-wide use, in line with Alex’s future self goal to continually develop, and assisted the development of her “maturity as a teacher” identity (Alex, Interview 5).

Table 2

*Analysis of agency mediation for the practical tool of AR materials developed*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Teacher** | **Tool appropriated?** | **Tool transformed?** | **Mediation through future self goal** | **Mediation or restriction through sociocultural environment** |
| Alex | Yes | Yes: New college-wide materials created | Yes: To continually develop as a teacher and expert in her area | Mediation: Asked by college leaders to continue developing AR materials for college-wide use |
| Quinn | Yes | In progress: Encouraging voluntary adoption of materials | Yes: To become a more theoretically-informed teacher | Restriction: Limited time and resources at this college |
| Sarah | No evidence  | No evidence | No  | Restriction: Lack of support from AR partner and lack of interest from colleagues |
| Katie | Yes | No evidence | No (but potential existed) | Restriction: Lack of interest from managers and colleagues |
| Phoebe | Yes | In progress: Optional materials created | Yes: To be a confident leader and contributor | Mediation: Position as program coordinator and permanent teacher |

However, Quinn, Sarah, Katie and Phoebe all experienced more restrictions than mediation from their sociocultural (college) environments in terms of the transformation of their AR materials. For instance, Quinn had been told by his managers that limited time and teacher training resources available restricted the extent that his materials could be used by the whole college, but he believed that he should take the initiative to continually “try and push it a bit more” (Quinn, Interview 5). He also planned to create a video for his college, explaining his AR project, his newly developed activities and how teachers could implement them, in order to encourage voluntary adoption of the materials. These actions were in line with his future self goal of becoming a more theoretically-informed teacher: “Action research is part of delving more into the theories behind what I’m doing” (Quinn, Interview 1). Like Quinn, Phoebe was also unable to make formal changes to her college curriculum, but she resisted the restrictions creatively, perhaps because of her position of relative power (discussed below). Phoebe found a way of gradually incorporating her new AR materials as supplementary lesson tasks for teachers who wished to diverge slightly from the set curriculum or to be used when students were repeating a level. Whereas at the start of the AR program, Phoebe had been reluctant to share materials she had created, one year later her reluctance had been replaced with confidence and enthusiasm in line with her future self goal of confident leader: “now you can’t stop me [developing new materials], it’s a flood” (Phoebe, Interview 5).

A key reason why Phoebe was able to enact her agency in this way was her position as a program coordinator and permanent teacher; thus the importance of power emerges (Lantolf & Genung, 2003). Phoebe’s coordinator role involved some materials development, and having worked at her college for over a decade, she had a certain degree of authority to successfully and creatively resist the (perceived) inflexible curriculum. On the other hand, Quinn had relatively less power in his college, as a sessional teacher employed on separate ten-week contracts, so his relative lack of status perhaps contributed to some of the difficulty he experienced in pushing for curricular integration of his AR materials. Katie held a similar employment status to Quinn in her workplace, and although she attempted to engage colleagues and managers in the online platform and resources she had created for her AR project, it was to no avail. Due to a lack of interest in her materials from anyone within her college, she became frustrated, and eventually dispirited about the potential transformation of her AR materials: “Because it’s not worth it. Because it’s a lot of hard work and nobody cares, nobody was paying attention, it was as if nothing has happened, frustrating” (Katie, Interview 3). Katie’s agency was necessarily re-directed towards the re-use of other tools (see domains (2) and (3)). Quinn and Katie’s experiences reflect the key tension of workforce casualization within ELICOS (Stanley, 2016) and perhaps more broadly within ELT, which can ultimately lead to a loss of teachers’ power and thus less potential for agency mediation.

Sarah was the only teacher of the five who appeared not to have appropriated the tool of her AR materials. A lack of mediation from her college environment, including little assistance from her AR partner (due to health and other commitments) and no apparent interest from her colleagues perpetuated to lead to her losing confidence in her project:

Ours wasn’t as innovative as the others [other AR program projects], and yes we had the technology, but ours was just a re-­hash of what’s been done before […] I suppose if I’d had a different partner […] we could have come up with some alternatives. (Sarah, Interview 3)

Like Phoebe, Sarah held a relatively powerful position within her college as a coordinator, and she certainly seemed to have a good relationship with her managers. However, while they valued Sarah’s project, the managers did little to promote her AR materials or ideas within the college, which highlights the importance of principals and managers in mediating the transformation of tools appropriated from an AR program, and their position of power regarding language teacher agency. Another reason why Sarah seemed unable to transform this tool relates to her future self goal of continually developing in her career, especially in quite a competitive way. She felt that she had not received sufficient recognition after completing the AR program: “some sort of […] a certificate, an announcement [at a staff meeting] would’ve been nice, a $50 voucher or anything, just a symbol really” (Sarah, Interview 4). Consequently, her perception of her AR project not being innovative or recognised meant that her AR materials lost their usefulness, from her perspective, in advancing her learning and career.

## (2) Systematic Teaching and Research

The analysis in Table 3 shows that both Alex and Quinn were able to transform the practical tool of the AR framework for their own systematic teaching or informal classroom research. Four months after the AR program had ended, they had both commenced subsequent informal AR projects. Alex was working together with a colleague, and Quinn independently to assist his own teaching: “I’m using action research techniques in my day-to-day classroom and in planning and analysing the lessons that I’m teaching. […] It seemed natural to use those [AR] tools” (Quinn, Interview 5). For Quinn, the AR framework seemed to be especially well aligned with his future self goal of theoretically-informed but practical teacher, hence his immediate re-use of the framework for his own teaching.

Table 3

*Analysis of agency mediation for the practical tool of the AR framework, and the conceptual tool of theoretical ideas from AR*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Teacher** | **Tool appropriated?** | **Tool transformed?** | **Mediation through future self goal** | **Mediation or restriction through sociocultural environment** |
| Alex | Yes: AR framework | Yes: Conducting another AR project with colleague | Yes: To continually develop as a teacher and expert in her area  | Mediation: AR culture developing in her college, colleagues interested in conducting AR projects |
| Quinn | Yes: AR framework | Yes: Conducting AR in own teaching | Yes: To become a more theoretically-informed teacher | Mediation: Free to use AR framework to inform his own classroom teaching |
| Sarah | No evidence | No evidence | No | Restriction: Lack of support from AR partner and lack of interest from colleagues |
| Katie | Yes: Theoretical ideas and gap in the literature | Yes: Informing future research proposal, gained Masters scholarship | Yes: To become a recognised and valued teacher-researcher | Restriction: Lack of interest from managers and colleagues in her research |
| Phoebe | Yes: AR framework | Not yet | No | Mediation: Developing AR culture in her college, some interest from colleagues |

Alex’s commencement of another AR project quite soon after completing the formal AR program was mediated firstly by her future self goal driving her to be a continually developing teacher. In a similar way to Sarah, Alex wanted to ensure she was always learning, but in a less competitive way than Sarah. In particular, Alex was keen to avoid a strong negative identity she imagined might emerge if she stopped learning: “If you don’t continue challenging yourself, you become one of those old, bitter, stuck in their ways teachers, and that’s always something that I’ve been very scared of becoming” (Alex, Interview 1). A second form of mediation came from an AR culture that had started to develop at Alex’s college, where most of the teachers had conducted small-scale AR projects in the same year as her program participation. This culture provided a supportive, AR-focused sociocultural environment that mediated Alex’s agency and identity emergence. In our final interview, Alex described herself as progressing steadily in her career, despite being relatively new to ELICOS, and that the AR framework had become part of her professional identity:

I think that [AR] is now part of my personality as a teacher. I don’t think, hopefully I’ll never lose it, I don’t think I could because it’s a way of thinking about your own teaching now that’s part of who I am as a teacher. (Alex, Interview 5)

In addition, as Table 3 shows, Katie was able to transform the conceptual tool of theoretical ideas she learnt while conducting AR for her own purpose, aligned with her future self goal of becoming a recognised teacher-researcher, and a career goal of becoming an academic one day. She believed that her AR project had “opened doors” (Katie, Interview 2) for her career, as she had written a future research proposal and gained a scholarship for a Masters degree before finishing the AR program. She explained that her AR project had allowed her to verify a gap in the research that she wanted to pursue further.

Sarah’s experience again revealed no evidence of tool transformation, with restrictions present in her context and a lack of alignment with her future self goal. Similarly, Phoebe did not appear to have transformed either the AR framework or theoretical ideas from the program, but she did seem to have abundant energy and a desire to develop herself further: “[I’ve] got all this energy and now it’s like well where to next?” (Phoebe, Interview 4). This quote indicates that perhaps given more time, there would be potential for Phoebe to transform these tools, especially because she worked in a mediating sociocultural environment where an AR culture was developing, like in Alex’s college.

## (3) Further Presentations or Publications

In addition to presenting their AR projects at the English Australia conference and publishing their *Research Notes* reports, which are part of the program, four of the five teachers were able to re-use the practical tool of project findings for further dissemination. This analysis is demonstrated in Table 4. Alex, Quinn, Katie and Phoebe all reported having presented their findings again at local workshops as well as national and international conferences, demonstrating the relative ease of transforming AR project findings for further presentation and publication.

The format of further dissemination generally aligned with each teacher’s future self goal. For example, Quinn created and presented a poster using his AR findings for a forum at the university with which his ELICOS college was affiliated. This action helped him feel a greater sense of connection between theory and practice (his future self goal), through the university valuing his research, which also supported his emerging identity of a “teacher AND researcher” (Quinn, Interview 4) as well as feeling “like I’ve got something to say or contribute to colleagues within the industry” (Quinn, Interview 5). In addition, Katie presented her AR findings at an international conference a few months after the AR program had ended, driven by her future self goal of being recognised as a teacher-researcher, and her career goal of becoming a university academic in the future: “my ultimate goal is to become a lecturer in the future, that’s what I want to do” (Katie, Interview 5). Although Katie felt alienated from her managers and colleagues by the time the AR program had ended, due to their dismissal of her research, she was spurred on by the prospect of shifting to a new career path. Therefore, the restrictions in Katie’s sociocultural environment seemed to lead to a redirection of her agency towards a different career path, rather than remaining as an ELICOS teacher.

Table 4

*Analysis of agency mediation for the practical tool of the AR project findings*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Teacher** | **Tool appropriated?** | **Tool transformed?** | **Mediation through future self goal** | **Mediation or restriction through sociocultural environment** |
| Alex | Yes | Yes: Presented at local conference | Yes: To continually develop as a teacher and expert in her area | Mediation: AR culture at college which encouraging sharing of AR ideas |
| Quinn | Yes | Yes: Presented poster at local university forum | Yes: To become a more theoretically-informed teacher | Mediation: Opportunity to present at a nearby university forum which was encouraged by his college |
| Sarah | No | No | No | Restriction: Lack of support from AR partner and lack of interest from colleagues |
| Katie | Yes | Yes: Presented at international conference | Yes: To become a university academic | Restriction: Alienated from colleagues and managers in her college due to lack of interest |
| Phoebe | Yes | Yes: Conference engagement and presentations | Yes: To be a confident leader and contributor | Mediation: Encouragement and funding from her college |

Phoebe’s transformation of tools related to conference going was also quite profound. Despite having taught EFL/ESL for 25 years and previously attending conferences, the English Australia conference was the first event at which Phoebe presented her own research. The experience ignited an intense interest and sense of purpose for Phoebe: she described it as “kick-starting” her into thinking about the possibilities of attending more conferences and the benefits she could gain both from watching other teachers present and from feeling part of a supportive conference community. Phoebe explained her excitement at the English Australia conference as follows:

We did not leave the building […] we were just going to everything (laughing), getting everything. I came back on the plane loaded with sample bags, it was so exciting, like a child in a lolly shop. And then, because of that I decided “I’ve got to get to [name of next conference], how do I get to [next conference]?” (Phoebe, Interview 4)

Therefore, Phoebe was able to transform the practical tool of her AR findings to attend and present at future conferences, assimilating into a new conference-goers community. Unlike Quinn and Katie, her actual AR findings seemed to be of secondary importance, but provided the spring-board for mediating her agency towards her new community-focused professional identity. Given her considerable teaching experience, part of Phoebe’s motivation was to give back through mentoring and supporting other teachers who were presenting, which added an extra dimension of purpose to her teaching career.

As was the case for domains (1) and (2), Sarah had not been able to transform the tool of her AR findings either. Reasons for this lack of transformation included restrictions within her sociocultural environment, her doubts about the validity of her project, and therefore her belief that her AR project would not assist her towards her goal of continually developing. Overall, Sarah seemed to feel stuck even in her final interview six months after the end of the AR program, when she described herself as being in a “tunnel”:

I’m just wondering what else I would use my action research for. It just seems to be sitting there and […] it’s not doing anything. […] I probably haven’t quite come out the other end yet of the tunnel to sort of go “okay, well how can I implement it [her AR findings]?” (Sarah, Interview 5)

Sarah’s experiences serve as a reminder of how a tool-rich activity such as an AR program will not be able to mediate every teacher’s agency and identity emergence. Under certain conditions, which will be discussed below, excessive restrictions may exist within the sociocultural environment. However, there are also implications for optimising the environment, which I outline in the final section.

# Theoretical Discussion

This chapter makes a contribution to the literature by, first of all, suggesting that an AR program may provide an especially rich teacher education environment for practical tool provision. The tools appropriated by the teachers from this Australian AR program were multifaceted, and included conceptual tools (such as new theories) and practical tools (such as the AR findings and materials, and the AR framework itself). This provision of tools in turn offers significant opportunities for teachers’ mediated agency development through tool transformation. Overall, four of the five teachers (Alex, Quinn, Katie and Phoebe) experienced considerable success in transforming their AR tools for their own purposes. In addition, this study offers theoretical insights in terms of three key aspects that can mediate or restrict language teacher agency and the transformation of tools. Teachers’ success in experiencing mediated agency through the transformation of tools appropriated from teacher education activities may depend on (1) their future self goals at the time of the activity, (2) their domain of tool re-use and (3) any major meditational means or restrictions in their environments.

Firstly, if the potential re-use of appropriated tools aligns with a teacher’s future self goals in terms of their ideal (final) forms of self (Vygotsky, 1994), then these goals play a crucial role in mediating agency. For three of the teachers in the current study, their agency was successfully directed towards their future self goals, mediating the transformation of tools and facilitating the emergence of professional identities such as a mature, expert teacher (Alex), an established teacher-researcher (Quinn), and contributors to the community (Quinn and Phoebe). These findings draw parallels with other studies exploring identity emergence through AR, notably the reflective teacher-researchers in Yuan and Burns (2017) and the creative materials developers in Banegas et al. (2013). A new understanding from the current study is the need for alignment between identity goals and the ways AR tools can be transformed. This insight adds to the work of Kubanyiova (2012) on ‘possible language teacher selves’, which suggests that for conceptual development to occur through teacher education, teachers need to have strong visions of their ideal selves, but also to understand how to pursue their ideal selves through the teacher education activity. The current study shows how the future or ideal self concept can be applied to an AR context, in which AR tools provide a particularly powerful means for teachers to pursue their ideal selves.

Secondly, the domain of tool transformation plays an important role in the mediation of teachers’ agency. While most of the teachers effectively re-applied their AR tools to their teaching, informal classroom research, and further presentations and publications, it was more difficult to enact their agency in relation to the transformation of teaching materials and curricula, which were viewed as quite inflexible in this ELICOS context. Phoebe succeeded by using creative means in her position of relative power, and Quinn demonstrated considerable effort in this domain, but had yet to succeed by the time of his final interview. Katie’s attempts within the domain of materials development failed, showing that a teacher’s status and power within their institution also mediate or restrict their agency. Finding ways to navigate issues of power and status within ELICOS and ELT (Stanley, 2016) in relation to the domain of tool re-use is therefore an important way forward.

This study also shows that if agency cannot be socially resourced from a teacher’s institutional environment due to restrictions such as a lack of support, collegial interest, time or resources, then it is possible for agency to be re-directed in line with a new identity goal. In Katie’s case, her agency was gradually re-directed from her goal of being a recognised teacher-researcher within ELICOS, to a desire to eventually leave the sector and move into academia. However, if agency cannot be either individually or socially resourced, then it is likely to be partially or fully restricted. Such restriction can lead to the teacher feeling frustrated and limited, with no options available to re-use their AR tools.

# Conclusions and Implications

The analysis in this chapter has demonstrated the value of AR as an approach for equipping language teachers with a selection of tools to mediate their agency. The study contributes to theorizing of language teacher agency by explaining, from a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, how AR tools can mediate teacher agency and identity emergence. Teachers’ future self goals may be particularly important in this process of mediation. Therefore, it might be useful for teachers to reflect on their future self goals *before* conducting AR to assess whether these goals align with the practical and conceptual tools they are likely to gain, and the potential re-use of these tools.

The findings also highlight the importance of sociocultural environments in mediating teachers’ agency and identities. When these environments are too restrictive and no support or interest from colleagues is present, teachers may feel frustrated, isolated and undervalued, which can severely affect their professional identities. Indeed, as Eun (2008: 150) argues, in order to ensure sustainability of professional development after an activity or program, ‘the school context has to be transformed to be compatible with the teachers’ efforts at implementing what they have acquired from their professional experiences’. Within the Australian ELICOS context, it appears that there is potential for greater compatibility in some colleges. Teachers need to feel that their newly negotiated researcher identities are accepted and recognised, and that workplaces are conducive to sharing and supporting the benefits of teacher AR. Managers and principals seem to play an important role in creating such conditions and mediating teachers’ agency and identity after their participation in AR; therefore, the mediating contributions of educational leaders would be a fruitful area for further agency research.

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