

**Investigating the Professional Agency of English
Teachers in Rural Ukrainian Public Schools**

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this study is to understand how professional agency is constrained and enabled among English language teachers in public schools of a Ukrainian village. The data was obtained through focus group discussions, an interview, and written responses which included a total of sixteen Ukrainian English language teachers. Framed by the theory of the subject-centered sociocultural approach to teacher agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61), the study analyzed both the English language teachers as professional subjects and the sociocultural conditions in order to understand the manifestation of their professional agency. Findings show that the government, Ukrainian education program, the English language curriculum, and the school community are constraining factors of teacher agency; and the government, the school community and the English language teachers are enabling factors of teacher agency.

This study provides an updated and comprehensive overview of the professional agency of teachers in Ukraine and can be used to further improve the English language curriculum.

Keywords: subject-centered sociocultural approach; agency; professional agency; professional identity; English language teacher

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1 INTRODUCTION

Recent shifts in education policy have brought teachers to the surface as agents of change. Such a change is in contrast to past policies which aimed to “de-professionalize teachers by taking agency away from them and replacing with prescriptive curricula and oppressive regimes of testing and inspection” (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015, p. 624). While teacher agency has received significant attention in research, particularly in relation to educational reforms, the various dimensions and complexities that comprise the notion of teacher agency in different contexts have yet to be fully discovered. Exploring teacher agency manifestation, then, in different contexts should provide more insight into the factors that affect teacher agency.

The context in which this study researches teacher agency is the Ukrainian public education program, and more specifically, the English language curriculum. Existing research on teacher agency in Ukraine is extremely limited. Therefore, this research aims to shed light on the role teacher agency has on English language education in Ukrainian public schools, with data obtained from discussions and interviews with Ukrainian English language teachers.

1.1 Social and Political Context of Ukraine

This study comes just five years after the Euromaidan Revolution (or Revolution of Dignity) and the overthrow of the president, Viktor Yanukovich at that time. The revolution was initially sparked by a “few thousand students demanding that Ukraine sign an Association Agreement with the European Union, after the government had announced that work had been suspended on this agreement” (Diuk, 2014, p. 9). The protests escalated when President Yanukovich signed a business deal with Russia a few months later, which to protesters came as “a blunt confirmation that Yanukovich had no intention of giving in to the innovative protest movement that had put his government in crisis by demanding that the country look west toward Europe instead of becoming a

Russian ally once more” (Diuk, 2014, p. 9). For the younger generation, the economic repercussion of this deal was the “devaluation of education because of the severe job market” (Shveda & Park, 2016, p. 86). Joining the European Union was seen as an opportunity to start anew, without the influence of Russia, and to see concrete social reforms take place in hopes of a more prosperous future.

With the end of the revolution and the election of a new president, in June of 2014, Ukraine took its first steps towards joining the European Union by signing the Association Agreement, which established a political and economic relationship with the European Union. In 2017, holding a biometric passport allowed Ukrainian citizens to travel visa-free to countries in the Schengen territory (“EU approves visa-free travel for Ukrainians,” 2017). Opening up the European borders and expanding the territory to which Ukrainians can freely travel was a critical step towards a full integration into the European Union.

As Ukraine becomes increasingly globalized, the need for a global language, such as English, becomes a necessity for communication and future cooperation in international settings. While there are certainly other possible languages for global communication, this particular study will be focusing on English and how teachers’ professional agency plays a role in the implementation of the national English language curriculum.

1.2 English Language Education in Ukraine

The Ukrainian government’s ambition to form ties with the West, specifically in education, started in 1997 with the signing of the Bologna Agreement, which aimed at “instituting a common degree system throughout Europe” and raised the “competitiveness of European education” (Smotrova, 2009, p. 728). The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine also initiated different projects based on the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe, 2000). The national Syllabi for Secondary School and Specialized Language Schools: Foreign Languages, 2-12th Grades of 2014 was cre-

ated to officially recognize the “move towards communicative approaches sparked by globalization,” (Smotrova, 2009, p. 728) with goals to establish international relationships and integrate into Europe.

However, despite the government’s endeavors, the implementation process of the communicative approach to teaching English was a difficult transition to make in practice. Prior to shifting to communicative language teaching, teachers were trained to teach English “based on grammar-translation principles” (Smotrova, 2009, p. 729). As a result, some teachers remain unequipped and struggling to apply the teaching techniques needed for communicative language teaching and still employ repetition and memorization.

Additionally, because of the implementation of English language education starting in the second grade, the need for English language teachers increased, while the highly skilled teachers sought higher paying jobs in other areas of work such as the “developing market economy” or private language centers (Smotrova, 2009, p. 729), that offered better working conditions and encouraged innovativeness in education. As such, while the intentions of the new syllabus were to promote a more practical use of English through communication, because the complexities in the implementation process were overlooked and inadequately addressed, the English language program in public schools continued to suffer (Smotrova, 2009, p. 729).

Most of the research on English language learning in Ukraine is in the context of higher education (Shunevych & Musiyovska, 2006, p. 197), Business English (Gagina & Los, 2016, p.164) and English language centers (Tarnopolsky, 2015, p. 16) and remains limited in the context of general education. A study conducted with university-level English language learners provided the students’ perspective of the government-funded English language curriculum in public schools, but not the perspective of the English language teachers in public schools (Tarnopolsky & Goodman, 2012).

According to Vähäsantanen (2014), “all educational organizations need to innovate and to develop their practices to keep pace with social and technological change, and to respond to economic pressures” (p. 1). As teachers are at the

forefront of students' education, studying teacher agency could act as a valuable resource for understanding the challenges in the classroom in order to continuously institute necessary changes in response to the changing world. This study offers an updated look at the English language program through the lens of the teachers and introduces the concept of teacher agency to this area of research in Ukraine.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Agency has been explored from a variety of perspectives and has undergone continuous development overtime. The most debated point of contention, however, is determining how agency is manifested in relation to the individual and the social structure. This study will first layout the foundational groundwork of agency and provide a comprehensive overview of the structure-agency debate that has become prevalent in the social sciences.

Agency was examined as early as the Enlightenment movement, where notions of agency were heavily grounded on individualism. Individuals were seen as "free agents," who had the capacity to "shape the circumstances in which they live" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 965). This concept was later built upon by Western psychologists who viewed agency as a "property of the individual" (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 336), and consequent studies continued to promote the individual as the owner of their agency. In an analytical response to the Western ideology of agency, Taylor (1989) expounded on this view of the individual noting that it was based on a "typically modern notion of freedom, as the ability to act on one's own without outside interference or subordination to outside authority" (as cited in Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 337).

A similar stance was taken from the philosophical perspective, where agency was understood synonymously with free will. In seeking to understand how agentic actions differentiated from all other actions, parallel to the aims of action theory, Davidson (1980) proposed the idea that "a man is the agent of an

act if what he does can be described under an aspect that makes it intentional” (p. 46). He continued his analysis by delving deep into the nature of actions and attempting to understand to what extent one action could be responsible for the series of consequences that would follow. In trying to trace the series of actions back to the initial agentic action (so that the genesis of the agentic action could be identified and the concept of agency defined), he recognized the difficulty in determining exactly at which point in the sequence of actions agency occurred, as the actions were both a combination of “primitive actions” (actions which do not require much thought in performing) and intentional actions (Davidson, 1971, p. 59-61). He concludes by stating, however, that intention does play a key role in understanding the concept of agency.

Although these notions of agency provide a starting point to the overall conceptualization, they do not unpack the complexities of agency in its entirety. By overemphasizing the individual, these notions present agency one-dimensionally and fail to consider the sociocultural factors that affect the individual and thereby, their agency. The theories were further developed by sociologists like Giddens, who made significant contributions to the concept of agency from a sociological perspective (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 48).

2.1 Structure

Giddens work was notable for bringing to light the significance of the social aspects that were involved in the manifestation of agency in an individual. Similar to past ideas of agency, Giddens implicated agency with power, which an individual possesses to bring about change (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). His view, however, centered around the theory of structuration, which prioritized the social aspects of agency more than the individual. The theory of structuration is based on the idea that “people’s actions are shaped (in both constraining and enabling ways) by the very social structures that those actions then serve to reinforce or reconfigure” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 117). Therefore, he believed that the development and identity of the individual were defined and shaped solely by

the social structure. This is a notion which Giddens referred to as the duality of structure, whereby “structure is both a medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices” (Giddens, 1979, p. 5).

Giddens’ view, then, automatically assumed agency into the interplay between the individual and social structure, and overlooked the possibility of the individuals being influenced by their own motivations, intentions and interpretations of the social structure in their practice of agency. Since individuality is discredited in Giddens’ view, individuals and the social structure exist in a constant loop of changes that are prompted only by the social structure, leaving no room for the opportunity or explanation for social changes or transformations to occur by individuals.

2.2 Individual

On the other hand, Archer, another prominent sociologist who made significant contributions to the conceptualization of agency, criticized structuration theory and the duality of structure for lacking consideration for the individual’s own self-development in isolation from the social structure. Although Archer agreed that the individual and social structure were constantly engaged in an interplay, she disagreed that individuals’ minds were solely shaped and activated by the social world and argued that individuals should be viewed as separate entities that undergo transformations of their own, parallel to the changes in the social structure. This view was upheld by Archer’s analytical dualism, where she suggested that “the ‘people’ in society and the ‘parts’ of society are not different aspects of the same thing but are radically different in kind” (Archer, 1995, p. 15). By analyzing the individual and social structure separately, thereby, embracing a “non-conflationary theoretical lens” (Herepath, 2014, p. 858), Archer was able to focus on the individual and determine aspects of their identity which led them to their agentic actions and brought to light their “embod-

ied relations with the world – involving also corresponding actions, such as maintaining one’s physical health and well-being” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 59).

Archer brought the individual to the forefront of understanding agency by recognizing how their unique identities establish a foundation for their agentic actions. She refuted past notions that “constituents of culture [or individuals] should be presumed to be coherently integrated, rather than harboring ideational contradictions” and that individuals all share a “common culture” (Archer, 2005, p. 18). Archer asserted that identity formation takes place through “reflexive deliberations,” whereby individuals engage in internal conversations with themselves about their concerns (Herepath, 2014, p. 864). She classifies the concerns as physical well-being, performative competence and self-worth (Vandenberghe, 2005, p. 227). The way in which the individual prioritizes these concerns determines their unique identities and how they will practice their agency, in turn shaping and transforming the social structure. Individuals respond to the constraints and resources of the social structure according to their own “personal concerns and degree of commitment,” (Archer, 2007, p. 21). In this way, Archer grants each individual the opportunity to transform the social structure in their own unique way through their practice of agency.

2.3 Structure and Individual

The intricate relationship between the individual and social structure in the context of agency manifestation has resulted in multiple pathways of interpretation. A significant approach to agency, which encompasses elements of both Giddens’ and Archer’s views is the interpretation of Wertsch et al. (1993) using Vygotsky law of cultural development. Vygotsky’s law of cultural development says that “All higher mental functions make their appearance in the course of child development twice: first, in collective activity, social activity, i.e. as interpsychic functions, second in individual activity, as internal properties of the child’s thinking, i.e. as intrapsychic functions” (as cited in Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 338)

Through this law, Vygotsky delineates the development of the human mind and how it is affected by two interrelated planes: the social plane and the mental plane. It is important to note that Vygotsky gives priority to the experiences and interactions the individual has on the social plane in order to understand human development and their mental functioning. Components from the social plane internalize in the individual and subsequently influence their mental functioning and practice of agency. The internalization process, or as Vygotsky refers to as “higher mental functioning,” is what happens when individuals think, reason, form concepts and develop volition (Vygotsky, 1981b, p. 163). The social plane and the individual, then, exist in a constant loop of changes powered by the conglomeration of ideas and thoughts of individuals.

So, although the individual is practicing agency on their own, because they are internalizing and acting on ideas which were contrived as a group in the social plane, the practice of agency becomes a group effort rather than the effort of one individual. As Vygotsky writes, “humans’ psychological nature represents the aggregate of internalized social relations that have become functions for the individual and form the individual’s structure” (Vygotsky, 1981b, p. 164).

The concept of agency is further developed by Vygotsky’s law of cultural development through his discussion of mediation. According to Vygotsky (1981a, p. 137), human action is carried out through “mediated agency,” or by the use of technical tools like technology or psychological tools like language (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 341). Mediational tools are a reflection of the thoughts and actions of the individual that have been shaped by the culture, history and social structure (Lasky, 2005, p. 900) and play a key part in individuals’ practice of agency. As the tools get passed down generationally, each generation internalizes these tools and “appropriates” (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 344) them according to their needs, by which individuals develop the tools but also themselves. Individuals can, therefore, be “no more intelligent than the psychological tools they employ” (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 352). Moreover, the tools employed by individuals are “provided and constrained by cultural, historical and institu-

tional context” (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 352). The unit of agency, then, is not just individuals, but “individuals-operating-with-mediational-means” (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 352).

The analysis of Wertsch et al. (1993) and elaboration of agency employing the Vygotskian approach, presents the sociocultural aspects of agency. As with Giddens’ and Archer’s approach to agency, agency through the Vygotskian perspective recognizes the interplay between the individual and the social structure. The difference with the Vygotskian framework of agency lies in the recognition of mediating tools which are created and employed by society. Although agency can be exercised by one individual, the “actions continue to be socioculturally situated” as mediating tools and individuals themselves are shaped by the social plane.

The sociocultural framework of agency, however, is not without its gaps. What the sociocultural approach lacks in discussion and has received criticism for in its analysis is its disregard for individual agency, as the discussion primarily focuses on the role of society and culture. The individual’s role is underestimated and, therefore, the theory presents an incomplete notion of agency. A theory which seeks to understand the individual in its entirety and does not “subjugate” them to the “organizational processes” is the subject-centered sociocultural approach to agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 60).

3 SUBJECT-CENTERED SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO AGENCY

Although teacher agency is still an emerging area of study and in the relatively early stages of research (Toom, Pyhältö & Rust, 2015, p. 615), existing studies on teacher agency examining the concept from multiple perspectives in a variety of contexts reveal more about the intricate nature of agency and its specific means of manifestation. The concept of teacher agency has “emerged in research to describe teachers’ active efforts to make choices and intentional action in a way

that makes a significant difference” (Toom, Pyhältö & Rust, 2015, p. 615). Data on teacher agency has been gathered through qualitative and empirical research methods, primarily drawing on in-depth interviews from teachers at various stages and pathways of their career (i.e. student-teacher, novice teachers, classroom teacher, vocational teacher). The different contexts in which it has been studied reveal key factors that affect the practice of teacher agency, and shed light on the issues in education.

3.1 Professional Identity and Agency

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of teacher agency, it is crucial to understand teachers’ identity as it provides a basis for their agentic actions. Identity has been defined as “multiple representations of self which are (re) constructed across social contexts and demonstrated through actions and emotions” (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, p. 138). Identity is fluid by nature, as it can change according to environments, relationships, and people’s perception of the individual, consequently, affecting one’s agency.

Identities can also be negotiated by the individual, further highlighting the malleable characteristic of identity. Research on teachers’ transforming identities through negotiations have been studied through interviews and written or oral narratives. By sharing their experiences as teachers through narratives, teachers engage in what Archer refers to as, “reflexive deliberation” or an “internal conversation, whereby agents literally talk to themselves (and sometimes to others) about their needs, concerns and the things that might constrain or enable them” (Fleetwood, 2007, p. 2). As a result, the narratives give researchers the opportunity to uncover teachers’ identities and, in turn, understand the basis of their agentic actions.

A study by Kayi-Aydar (2015) follows an individual on her journey of becoming a Spanish language teacher and forming her “bilingual identity” as a native speaker of English from the United States (p. 144). This particular study demonstrated the link between professional identity and agency present with

non-native foreign language teachers through a series of interviews and narrative journal entries. Findings from the study showed that the participant's ambitions for developing a "bilingual identity" were crippled by the "illegitimate speaker identity" that was "construed or implicitly imposed on her by others," because she did not display characteristics of a native Spanish-speaker (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, p. 147). The identity that was projected onto her by others constrained her sense of agency to uphold her bilingual identity and prompted her to change her career pathway to pursue an ESL teaching career instead of teaching Spanish like she had initially planned.

Although the participant had been highly motivated to maintain her bilingual identity at the beginning of her journey in the past, the discouragement she felt as a non-native speaker when interacting with native-speakers in the present caused her to take on a "positional identity as an incompetent speaker of Spanish" (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, p. 151). Her agentic action to switch career paths for the future was a direct result of the new identity she had assumed for herself and that others had projected onto her. So, her bilingual identity was challenged and her agency was constrained due to the social context, which further demonstrates how one's identity and practice of agency are inevitably intertwined. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how identities are temporally constructed and continuously developing over time, highlighting that "understanding how teachers construct and transform identities is possible only when past, present, and future narratives are analyzed together" (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, p. 156).

3.2 Professional Identity and Different Forms of Teacher Agency

Another way in which one's identities can be challenged in the educational context is in the institution of educational reforms. As educational reforms are a continuous occurrence, it is worth examining how teachers respond to changes and demands instituted from the top, and how the reform processes change

their professional identities and, in turn, affect their practice of agency. A study interviewing Finnish vocational teachers during the course of a curriculum reform demonstrated the different ways agency was practiced by teachers with relation to their professional identities (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011, p. 4). What researchers learned was that a teacher's professional identity played a key role in determining how teachers would interpret the instituted reforms and in turn, practice their agency.

The study showed that if the teacher's professional identity, or beliefs and values in education aligned with the motives of the reform, their agency would be practiced by accepting the reforms and applying changes in their teaching. If the reforms were incongruent with teacher's professional identities, however, teachers would resist the changes and agency was manifested in the form of resistance (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011, p. 9). In some cases, although the reform was initially met with resistance or uncertainty in the beginning, some teachers would renegotiate their professional identities to align them with the reforms and eventually accept the changes. This further demonstrates the inextricable link between one's practice of agency and professional identity.

3.3 Contextual Factors Affecting Teacher Agency

Teacher agency has also been studied in relation to the contextual factors in schools that enable or constrain their sense of agency. Reynolds (as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004) noted that a "teachers' workplace is a 'landscape' which can be very persuasive, very demanding and in most cases, very restrictive" (p. 113). Studies show how teachers experience agency within their specific contexts and particularly examine the factors that constrain and enable their practice of agency. A study conducted in Finnish classrooms implementing the CLIL curriculum (a Content Language Integrated Learning curriculum that teaches a foreign language by using it as the main language for content learning) sought to identify the tensions that constrained teachers' professional agency within this particular context, as well as the resources that enabled their

practice of agency (Pappa et al., 2017, p. 61). Through interviews and thematically analyzed data, the findings showed that the use of a foreign language (in this case, English) created tensions in learning for students and in their participation in class, as it was seen as a communication barrier. As a result, teachers struggled in understanding how to use the foreign language effectively and being careful to speak at the appropriate level of English for students. Additionally, class sizes and availability of resources, including time, professional development and materials, were identified as constraining factors that hindered agency (Pappa et al., 2017, p. 21).

On the other hand, contextual factors that enabled teacher agency were also identified. The autonomy and trust given to teachers played a positive role in allowing teachers to embrace their own teaching styles, plan their lessons using their own materials and work based on their own personal values and beliefs in teaching. The teachers' "openness to change," "versatility" and collaboration with colleagues also acted as a resource for agency in the implementation of a new curriculum (Pappa et al., 2017, p. 21).

3.4 Subject-Centered Sociocultural Approach to Teacher Agency

What sets the subject-centered sociocultural approach to agency apart from the sociocultural approach is its in-depth and comprehensive study of the individual as the actor of agency. In addition to identifying and examining the contextual factors and conditions of a workplace in the analysis of agency, the subject-centered sociocultural approach places significant focus on the individual's professional identity, as it finds it to be intertwined with one's professional agency. As the approach is subject-centered, the framework spotlights the individual and examines her entirely by delving into her professional identity formation and development from a life-course perspective.

The life-course perspective looks beyond the "momentary and cross-sectional point of view" (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61) and provides an all-

encompassing representation of the subject, rather than analyzing her solely in the present. Although agency can only be “acted out in the present” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963), the agentic action exercised is just one of many in a series of past interlinking actions performed by the individual. The subject’s identity transformations, “past achievements, understandings and patterns of action” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 5) contribute to the manifestation of agency in the present and “act as developmental affordances- as important resources for action in the present situation and for the planning of future goals” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 60). In other words, in order to fully make sense of the subject’s agency in the present, their past and future must be explored.

Prior to analyzing the components of agency in the professional context, a definition of professional agency must be determined. According to Eteläpelto et al. (2016), professional agency “is practiced when professional subjects and/or communities exert influence, make choices and take stances in ways that affect their work and/or their professional identities” (p. 61). In understanding the professional subject, Eteläpelto et al. (2016) looks at her professional identity (commitments, ideals, motivations, interests and goals); professional knowledge and competencies; and work history and experience in the context of different sociocultural conditions in the workplace (p. 61).

Viewing agency three-dimensionally and professional identities as temporally and continuously developing and negotiating overtime, reveals the layers that comprise the individual and help better understand how the individual practices agency in a particular context. Human agency, therefore, must be viewed as a composition of “[variables] and changing orientations within the flow of time” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 964). As the subject moves along the life-course timeline, the individual undergoes identity transformations and develops affordances, all of which contribute to the individual’s orientations for the future and practice of agency in the present within a constraining and enabling sociocultural context. Therefore, the individual cannot be studied solely in the present context, but must be examined situationally, as different identities emerge and identity negotiations take place.

While the significance of teacher agency has been recognized and widely studied in the field of education, the practical steps needed to promote teacher agency have yet to be appropriately established in education policy and implemented effectively in schools (Kuiper, Nieveen & Berkvens, 2013, p. 140). Studies around agency demonstrate the ways in which teacher agency can positively impact and contribute to the development of education, but also how circumscribing the practice of agency can be harmful. By gaining more insight into the concept of teacher agency from a subject-centered sociocultural perspective, education policymakers can see how teacher agency is constrained or enabled as well as see the value in including and supporting teachers in creating educational reforms.

4 RESEARCH PROBLEMS

Teacher agency is an emerging area of study in the field of education that could benefit from being explored in different contexts to continuously develop its concept. Since existing research on the subject-centered sociocultural approach to agency comes from studies conducted within the Finnish context (Pappa et al., 2017, p. 2), it is possible that studying it in the Ukrainian context could bring forth new insights about teacher agency.

This study explores the ways in which teacher agency is constrained and enabled in the context of foreign language education. The subject-centered sociocultural approach to agency was used as a foundation for formulating the research questions.

1. What constrains teacher agency from the teacher's perspective?
2. What enables teacher agency from the teacher's perspective?

5 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

5.1 Context of the Study

The research study took place in a public school located in a small village of approximately one thousand people in the Khmelnytska region of western Ukraine. I had previously volunteered at this school as an English language teacher for about two years. I taught English in the primary and secondary classes and helped organize various extracurricular activities that focused on practicing speaking English. Schools across Ukraine have the opportunity to participate in hosting a volunteer by applying to Peace Corps- a North American volunteer organization.

Prior to volunteering at the school, I underwent a three-month intensive Ukrainian language course. In combination with my background of growing up in Kazakhstan, another post-Soviet country, and fluent knowledge of Russian, I was able to learn Ukrainian to a sufficient level for communicating and establishing a rapport with the community and school members in the village. Establishing a professional relationship prior to the data collection was an advantage, as some of those acquaintances were also the participants of this study (Gill et al., 2008, p. 292).

5.2 Participants

The participants of the research study were found with the help of the director at the public school where the study took place. The research purpose and methods were first communicated with the school director, who willingly agreed to help in the organization of the study. I was also asked to conduct a workshop on the Finnish education system as part of their professional development day, which they were organizing for the English language teachers in the district. The director had scheduled my workshop and research study into their professional development day as a way to conveniently gather all my re-

search participants into one place at the same time. To my knowledge, the English language teachers who participated did so under their own volition and were not required to attend my workshop or participate in my research study.

Since there are usually only one or two English language teachers working in village public schools, there were no strict criteria under which my participants were selected other than that they had to be English language teachers at the time of the study. Setting any kind of criteria would have significantly limited the pool of participants and weakened the diversity of the data. Based on my time working in the district where the study was conducted and attending some of the districtwide meetings with the English language teachers, I knew that this site would be a viable location for my study.

All sixteen participants of my study were Ukrainian English language teachers from fifteen different public schools located in the same district of western Ukraine. The district consists of one main city and small villages. Two of the participants taught in the city school which had 480 students and the rest of the participants taught in small village schools with a significantly smaller number of students. The village school in which the study took place had 178 students, the neighboring village school had 130 students and the rest of the village schools from which other participants came had approximately forty to one-hundred students. Depending on the size of the school, teachers were assigned more or less grades to teach. So, the teachers who worked in smaller schools taught English in both primary and secondary classes (grades 1 to 11) and the teachers from larger schools taught English beginning in upper elementary and all throughout secondary (grades 4 to 11).

The age of the participants ranged from early twenties to over sixty years old. The years of English teaching experience was also wide ranging from novice to seasoned. Although participants were not explicitly asked to specify the number of years they taught English, it was later made known through the focus groups discussions that some teachers had been reassigned in the last couple of years to teach English at their schools, due to the lack of English language

teachers in the village. Other participating teachers, however, had originally started their teaching careers as English language teachers.

5.3 Research Methods

This study used a qualitative approach to data collection by means of focus group discussions, an interview and written responses. A focus group is a “group discussion on a particular topic organized for research purposes” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 293). Focus group discussions were chosen as the main method of data collection for this study for several reasons.

Firstly, because of the lack of existing research on the topic of teacher agency in Ukraine it was important to choose a method that would allow for deep exploration of the topic and establish groundwork for further research. Additionally, focus groups allow for a “range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues” (Rabiee, 2004, p. 656) to emerge through discussions as well as generate information on collective views and a “rich understanding of participants’ experiences and beliefs” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 293).

Secondly, although I had originally planned to use one-on-one interviews as my main method of data collection, since the data collection process required me to travel to Ukraine during the academic year and with my own financial resources, I could not afford to stay in Ukraine for an extended period of time. As a result, I had to use focus groups as a way to “generate large amounts of data in a relatively short time span,” (Rabiee, 2004, p. 656) since interviews would have taken much longer to complete with ten participants. That being said, one interview had to be conducted with two of the participants in order to accommodate their schedule, as they were unable to attend the focus group discussions on the day it was scheduled.

The opportunity for participants to answer the main discussion question (If you had the power to change anything you could in the education system to help you and other English language teachers in Ukraine, what would you

change?) in written form prior to the interview/discussion was given as a way to ensure that all participants had the opportunity to contribute an answer.

5.3.1 Pilot Focus Group

Prior to traveling to Ukraine to gather the data, I conducted a pilot focus group discussion with five of my cohorts from the Educational Sciences Master's degree program at the University of Jyväskylä. The participants were chosen based on their teaching experience and knowledge of issues in education and teaching. Through the trial run I was able to practice focus group facilitating skills and receive constructive feedback from participants on the questions and any other aspect of the discussion, in order to prepare me for the data collection process in Ukraine.

The discussion initially unfolded in a round-robin style (where participants took turns answering the question) with the first two questions, as it touched on factual matters that required a more straightforward answer from each person. It was easier to redirect the conversation towards a discussion with the key discussion question at the end. Although the discussion provided rich insights into the research topic, I noticed that too much time was spent on one question, and that at times, there was a tendency for one person to monopolize the discussion. I took note of these challenging moments as a facilitator, especially because I had been given a time limit of about thirty minutes per focus group in Ukraine. So, it was important that I was able to make the discussion flow, giving each participant equal opportunity to contribute, as well as to get through all the questions within the given time frame.

After the pilot run, I listened to the audio recording of the discussion, modified some of the questions and took note of key skills to practice as a facilitator. It was also decided with my advisor that it would be acceptable for some questions to be answered in a round-robin style rather than in a discussion format.

5.3.2 Formulating the Discussion Questions

The guiding questions for the focus group were created with the aim of bringing to light an insufficiently explored topic regarding teacher agency in Ukraine. Elements from qualitative research interviews were drawn in the process of formulating the focus group questions, particularly from semi-structured interviews. The purpose of semi-structured interviews is to “define the areas to be explored, but also [to allow] the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 293). Semi-structured interviews are structured in that there is a set purpose to the discussion, so the questions guide the participants to stay within a certain topical framework. However, the questions are also open to new discoveries, thereby, allowing participants to develop and elaborate on new ideas (Gill et al., 2008, p. 293). The questions aimed to understand how teachers’ professional agency was constrained or enabled while working in their schools.

Although the questions were initially formulated in English, they had to be modified and rephrased for the Ukrainian language. The same set of questions were asked in both the interview and focus groups. The questions below are presented in the modified English version.

1. How did you decide to become an English language teacher?
2. Finish the sentence: In your opinion, it is important to learn English because...
3. What works at your school?
4. What makes your job as an English language teacher difficult?
5. If you had the power to change anything you could in the education system to help you and other English language teachers in Ukraine, what would you change?

Question 1 aimed to contextualize the teachers as professional subjects by giving teachers the opportunity to share about their commitments, ideals, motivations, interests, goals, professional knowledge and competencies and work his-

tory and experience (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61). Question 2 sought for additional background information on the participants, specifically on their perspective of the English language and why they consider it important to learn.

Questions 3 to 5 aimed to open up the discussion to the sociocultural factors that affect participants' professional agency. Questions 3 and 4 focused on the influencing factors in the teachers' immediate environment. Question 5 gave participants the opportunity to reflect on the struggles they face with the overall education system of Ukraine and how it affects them as English language teachers.

5.3.3 Data Collection

The focus group discussions were scheduled towards the end of their professional development day and after my workshop on the Finnish education system. So, by the time of the focus group discussions the English language teachers had time to socialize and interact with one another. The relationship among the teachers varied, but since districtwide meetings are a regular occurrence for them throughout the academic year, it could be presumed that they were sufficiently well-acquainted with one another.

Thirteen of the sixteen teachers participated in the focus group discussions. The teachers were divided into two groups of six and seven participants in order to keep the focus groups small enough to maintain orderliness, but large enough to gain diverse perspectives (Rabiee, 2004, p. 656). Two teachers were interviewed the day before, which lasted around thirty minutes. Another teacher could not participate in either the focus group discussion or interview, as she was on maternity leave, but submitted a written response to the key discussion question. A total of eleven teachers submitted their written responses. Six submissions were written in English and the other five written in Ukrainian were translated into English for the data analysis. All the answers were handwritten, with the length of each ranging from about half a page to a page and a half. The written answers were also submitted anonymously in adherence to the confidentiality terms outlined for the study.

The focus group discussions and interview were held in the school and were all audio-recorded with the participants' permission. Both were conducted in Ukrainian so that participants could express themselves freely in their native language without having to worry about vocabulary or form of expression. In fact, it was very important that their answers reflected their cultural background. Some teachers, however, chose to respond in English both in the focus group discussions and in written responses. Written responses and signed consent forms were also collected at this time.

As expected from the pilot focus group, questions 1 and 2 prompted a more round-robin response from teachers (in the interview as well), as they shared about their own professional and personal backgrounds regarding teaching and the English language. Questions 3 to 5 set grounds for a more collective response and produced more discussion.

5.4 Data Analysis

This study used a qualitative approach to data analysis by applying theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77). Framed by the theory of the subject-centered sociocultural approach to teacher agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61) and driven by a specific set of research questions to gather the data, the analysis and coding applied the deductive approach. The codes and themes sought to answer the research questions and determine what constrained and enabled teacher agency. The themes were identified at a semantic level, meaning that they were "identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84), therefore, the analysis did not look beyond what the participants said or wrote.

Moreover, because the research study sought to understand both the English language teachers (subjects) and the factors that affect their teacher agency (sociocultural conditions), the data analysis employed both the essentialist/realist approach and the constructionist perspective. The essentialist/realist lens focuses on the "motivations, experience, and meaning [of the data] in a

straightforward way,” whereas the constructionist approach “seeks to theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). Employing both approaches gave a comprehensive overview of how the agency of English language teachers was manifested specifically in the Ukrainian context.

Since the data was collected in the Ukrainian language, after transcribing verbatim in Ukrainian, the data was translated into English. The audio-recordings of the focus group discussion and interview were listened and referred to several times throughout the data analysis process. In the beginning phase, I listened to the audio-recordings to check for accuracy of the transcriptions and the translations, and then to take note of patterns and repetitive answers. The initial goal was to familiarize myself with the data collected prior to delving into an in-depth analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

Once a familiarity of the data was established, since this analysis was theory-driven, themes were identified according to the research questions based on the subject-centered sociocultural approach to agency. The data extracts were reviewed and categorized according to whether participants’ responses indicated a (i) a constraint of teacher agency or (ii) a resource for teacher agency. The data items within each category were then analyzed and coded based on recurring patterns. Once different codes were assigned to each relevant data item, they were sorted and grouped into broader identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88, 89).

Since the study is within the framework of the subject-centered sociocultural approach to agency, it was important to present the data from the perspective of the English language teachers within the sociocultural context of Ukraine. The different codes concerning the constraints and resources of teacher agency were combined and thematized by sociocultural spheres in relation to the English language teachers in the context of education: (i) teachers in relation to the government, (ii) teachers in relation to the overall education program in Ukraine, (iii) teachers in relation to the English language curriculum, (iv) teachers in relation to students and colleagues, (v) and lastly, teachers as professional

subjects. Teachers as professional subjects refers to a teachers' professional identity (commitments, ideals, motivations, interests and goals), professional knowledge and competencies and work history and experience (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61). A visual representation of the sociocultural spheres that have been identified can be seen in the figure below. The spheres are placed in proximity to the teacher. The solid line represents a constraint on teacher agency and the dashed line represents both a constraint and resource for teacher agency. Textbooks and resources were identified as provided by the government, so they are placed as seen below.

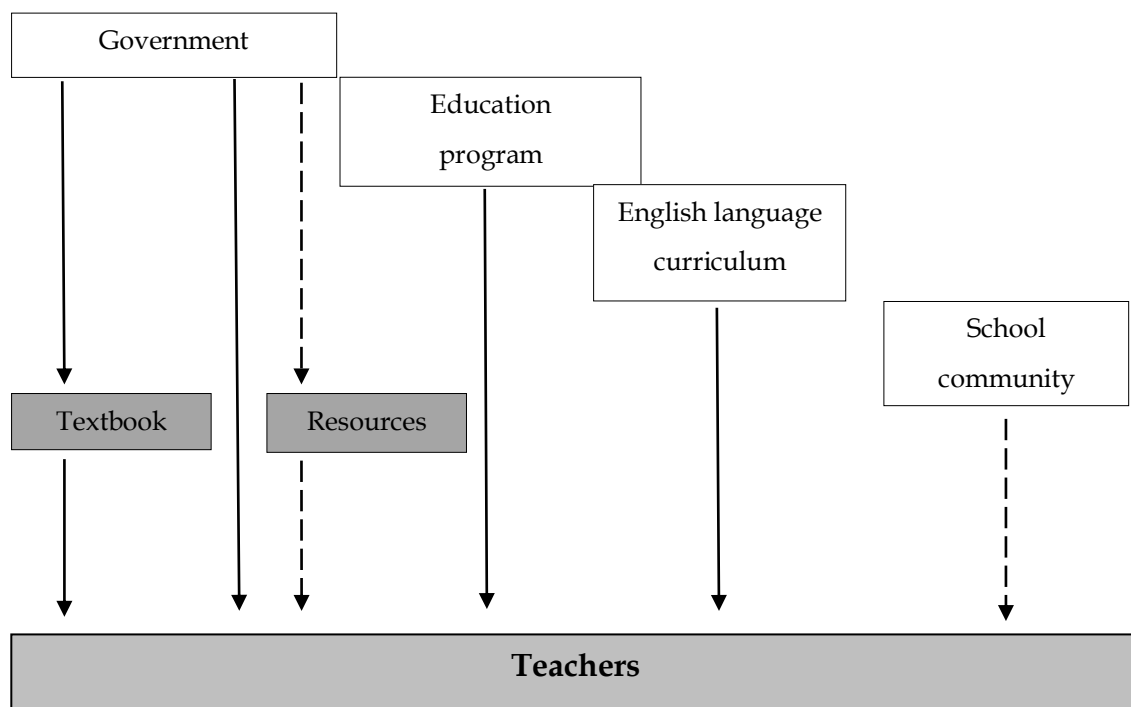


Figure 1

5.5 Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methods allow for an in-depth study on a certain topic by means of carefully guided conversations and observations. The data obtained from qualitative research has the ability to open a topic up to various perspectives and provide new avenues of thinking. However, because qualitative research relies on the thoughts, actions and words of people, the data collected

has a tendency to be fluid in interpretation (Elo et al., 2014, p. 1). Therefore, it is crucial to approach the qualitative research process meticulously in order to accurately convey the intended meaning of the research participants and to demonstrate trustworthiness in the research process. By establishing trustworthiness in the research process, the data can be cleared of any biases or hidden agendas and can be accepted as valid information and a valuable contribution to the development to the research topic (Elo et al., 2014, p. 1).

Since the discussion started out with questions that prompted more round-robin responses from the participants rather than a discussion, it was difficult to take notes while the participants were speaking, as their body language was directed towards me when they responded. I considered it necessary at that time to maintain eye contact and listen without jotting down notes. I did not have a separate note-taker to observe and document significant behavior in participants or overall group dynamics during the discussions (Rabiee, 2004, p. 656), so, much of the constructionist perspective of the data analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 85) comes from the audio recordings along with vivid memories of some of the significant moments that took place.

Beginning the focus group discussion with personal questions that required individual answers seemingly set a tone for the rest of the discussion time, as teachers continued to take turns answering the questions instead of engaging in a discussion. In the first focus group, however, talk gradually developed into more of a discussion by the end of the meeting. In fact, there were several occasions where some participants spoke over each other, which made a few parts in the audio-recording difficult to make out. Although some participants spoke more than others in the discussion, in general, the majority of the participants spoke and answered the questions.

The participants in the second focus group were considerably more toned down than the participants in the first group. Compared to the first group, questions were getting answered at a much slower pace in the second group and some participants were noticeably quieter than others. It also did not help that the discussion was interrupted quite frequently by the English language

teacher of the school (who had been interviewed the day before) and the director of the school where the study took place. The English language teacher of that school would join in on the discussions, but since she was an English language teacher, it seemed acceptable to have her contribute, even though she had already been interviewed separately.

It is worth noting though, that as the researcher, I could immediately sense tension in the room when the school director was present and most especially after she interjected with a comment addressed towards one of the participants' answers to a discussion question. Although this moment was an explicit interference of the data collection process, the interaction between the school director and the participant actually provided additional grounds and data for analysis regarding teacher agency, which will be further detailed in the findings and discussion section.

Eleven out of the sixteen participants submitted a written document answering the key discussion question. Since every part of the data collection process ensured anonymity of the participants, names were not at any point requested from participants. As a result, the written documents could not be linked to a particular participant recorded in the focus group discussions or vice versa. Also, it is possible that providing the key discussion question for answering in written form prior to meeting gave participants the opportunity to put more thought into their answers for the interview/discussion (Tracy, 2013, p. 166). However, because participants were anonymous throughout the entire study it cannot be verified how answering the question beforehand in writing affected their participation in the focus group discussion or interview.

A recording device was taken on loan from the University of Jyväskylä to Ukraine for the purpose of collecting data for this study. However, since I only had one recording device for the interview and no back-up device, I decided to use my phone to record the interview as well. In my attempt to transfer the data from the recording device to an external drive, I learned that the USB cord, which allows for data to transfer onto other devices, was missing. As a result, I could not verify if the recorder was working properly and whether the inter-

view was recorded onto the device. So, at that time I felt I had no choice but to use my phone to record the focus group discussions. The audio-recordings of the interview and two of the focus group discussions on my phone were both immediately transferred to an external drive on the day of the data collection and deleted from my phone.

After collecting the data, the audio-recordings for this study were stored in a password-protected external drive and all written documents were stored securely in a folder. Following the completion of this research study, all data was deleted and physically destroyed using secure and appropriate methods.

Furthermore, “peer debriefing” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308) was also employed with my thesis supervisor to ensure the trustworthiness of this research. Debriefing also ensured that I remained neutral in my position as the researcher throughout the study and presented my data in an honest and unbiased way.

5.6 Ethics

The quality and ethical integrity of this study was upheld by being transparent and honest with all those involved throughout the research process. I did not get to choose the participants myself (as I was in Finland), but the director of the school, where the study took place, was able to find volunteers within the English language teaching community in the district to participate in the study. To my knowledge and according to the school director, the participants volunteered to take part in the study and were not obligated in any way. A letter detailing the study and the confidentiality agreement and consent forms were sent electronically to the director to pass along to the participants once they agreed to take part in the study (Orb et al., 2000, p. 94). I later found out that the school director had my letter and forms translated into Ukrainian, to ensure that participants fully understood the purpose of the study prior to giving consent and signing the form.

As per the consent form, participants were given the choice, both in the consent form and in person, to opt out of the study or refuse to answer any of the questions at any given time (Orb et al., 2000, p. 95). By signing the consent form participants gave their permission to audio-record their answers during the data collection process and to use the data they provide for this research. The confidentiality terms for this study were also clearly outlined for the participants both in written form and verbally (prior to starting the focus group discussions), so participants were made aware that they and the data they provide would remain anonymous throughout the entire research process.

Identifying information about the participant, such as their names, was not required at any point, only their signatures. Additionally, the name of the district or village, where the study took place was not published in order to maintain full anonymity of the participants and to ensure that the participants are not harmed in any way for their answers. The participants were also assured that the data they provide would only be used for this research and that all data would be deleted upon completion of this study.

The questions prepared for the data collection were discussed with and approved by my thesis advisor. In the discussions and interview I only asked the questions I had prepared and did my best to remain impartial and unbiased in my responses and overall interaction with the participants.

6 FINDINGS

The findings will be presented in accordance with the research questions, starting with how teachers' professional agency is constrained, followed by how teacher agency is enabled. This study understands teacher agency as "the way in which teacher intention and understanding is enacted within a particular environment, whether physical, emotional, social, pedagogical or professional" (Pappa et al., 2017, p. 4).

6.1 Constrained Teacher Agency

The constraint of teacher agency was identified in the data analysis by looking at the struggles and difficulties faced by the English language teachers in the context of Ukrainian education. As this research was studied within the framework of the subject-centered sociocultural approach to agency, the identified constraints were thematized by sociocultural spheres in relation to the teacher. The sociocultural spheres mentioned are as follows: (i) the government, (ii) the Ukrainian educational program, (iii) the English language curriculum, and (iv) the school community.

6.1.1 Government

Lack of teaching resources and learning opportunities

The government was frequently mentioned when speaking about some of the struggles the teachers faced in regards to their teaching experiences. Any time a participant spoke about the government, there seemed to be a unanimous stance regarding how the government falls short in providing for public schools.

The main issue which nearly all the teachers shared and others upheld is the government's lack of financial support for public schools, specifically in teaching resources. The specific inadequacies commonly mentioned by the teachers were technological and "modern" equipment (to keep up with the modernizing world and its technological developments), supplementary learning/practice materials for students (such as practice worksheets and workbooks) and "methodological materials for teachers." Teachers "teach by the textbook," mainly because that is the only teaching resource they have as it is funded by the government. The textbooks were widely criticized in the focus group discussions, interview and written responses as being poor in quality and inadequate for teaching English. There was also a unanimous preference among teachers for employing textbooks written by native English-speakers, such as Oxford and Cambridge publications rather than Ukrainian writers.

However, with one set of student workbooks priced at approximately 20 euros, according to one of the participants, neither the school nor parents are able to afford it. Since some students are unable to even afford basic school supplies like notebooks, having parents invest in alternative learning materials (regardless of its high quality) was considered an unrealistic option in this scenario.

Therefore, in response to the lack of teaching materials, teachers resort to finding their own supplementary resources on the internet, thereby, demonstrating their practice of agency. Teachers mentioned using online resources such as English cartoons, songs, films and videos of “different life situations [sic],” particularly in primary grades. However, despite the internet acting as an enabling force of teachers’ professional agency by connecting teachers to a myriad of supplementary resources for teaching, it simultaneously acts as a constraining factor for teachers’ professional agency because it was also described as unreliable and unstable in the villages. Additionally, lack of financial means was another critical issue among teachers as the resources they want and need (digital books, magazines, books, exercise books) are too costly and unaffordable for them.

In regards to teaching materials, two seasoned teachers recalled working during the time of the Soviet Union (prior to Ukraine’s independence in 1991) and compared it to the current teaching situation. According to the participants, teachers were given a textbook, a copy of the English language teacher’s manual for the library, as well as necessary visual materials for learning. Now, “there is nothing of the sort. If you want something, find it yourself on the internet, subscribe and pay with your own money, and then it will be yours.” Both teachers expressed themselves in exasperated tones with regard to the current lack of teaching materials provided, especially having experienced more favorable teaching conditions in the past. In general, the lack of good materials was one of the most extensively discussed topics and major factors constraining the teachers’ professional agency.

Teachers also repeatedly spoke about the lack of opportunities for both students and English language teachers to practice speaking English outside of

the lessons and highlighted the importance of incorporating English-speaking environments into the learning process.

- I think that practice for students and teachers abroad-
- especially for teachers-
- is a must! Without a doubt for teachers. What is it if I speak English but I have no idea how English-speakers speak if I haven't been abroad to an English-speaking country? You need to hear yourself in that environment and see how you'll be.

Several considered it was the government's responsibility to consider such opportunities and to oversee them financially. Suggested solutions included giving students and, particularly, teachers the opportunity to travel abroad to English-speaking countries and paying teachers to organize English-speaking clubs for students after school (both "at the cost of the government"). One teacher expressed her desire to organize English language clubs for the students.

We could have clubs, if I had no family and no garden. I want to work, but who's going to work without getting paid? What do we need the pay for? To pay for the internet, to repair computers, so we can eat normally.

While this participant wants to hold English language clubs, she cannot compromise her personal time with extra work that isn't compensated. The lack of financial consideration by the government for teachers' work and time, in this case, acts as a constraining factor of teachers' professional agency.

The desire to develop professionally and to practice English skills was present among many of the teachers, but, once again, due to the lack of resources and opportunities, they are unable to partake in such endeavors. Several teachers specifically mentioned wanting teacher handbooks, watching movies in English on TV, traveling, and reading useful material. Therefore, their practice of professional agency to improve themselves as teachers is con-

strained, once again, because of their lack of financial resources and opportunities to hear and speak English.

Value of teachers

Participants conveyed how they felt as teachers in relation to the government. Teachers felt that they were “not taken care of,” that the “dignity of the worker” was unrecognized and that the status of teachers should be raised in the country. This discussion was linked to the low salary of teachers, which is yet another way in which the government falls short in investing in education. One participant used a recently hired teacher at their school to paint a picture of how teachers live with the salary they are given.

Why don't we have young teachers? The approximate salary now is \$100. We have T, the physics teacher, she's still teaching at this point, but what is she doing this for? She said, 'If my parents didn't help me out, I wouldn't have anything.' [...] She said she has enough money for transportation, lunch and so on- and also on miscellaneous items. Her coat, her parents had to help. Until what point, though, will her parents be working? T is 27 years-old. I think until attention is turned to raising the status of teachers in the country- that a teacher is someone.

A low salary constrains the teachers' practice of agency as it restrains them from being able to focus on the “learning process” and their own “professional growth and creativity.” They are, instead, having to worry about how to “survive” and “make ends meet” in life.

A frustrating tone was clearly present when teachers spoke about the government and their lack of support for education. One of the teachers expressed her disappointment:

The president was taught by teachers, but right now he doesn't see the teacher, [...] and everyone, whoever it may be, anyone- prime ministers, they all passed through our hands. Things should be different.

The government presents the larger context within which the English language teachers work and sheds light on how the lack of government funding in education affects teachers' professional agency. The teachers' relationship with the government is a distant one, as they feel neglected, undervalued and "not seen." Viewing teachers in relation to this sociocultural sphere presents just one fragment of how the English language teachers' professional agency is constrained.

6.1.2 Educational Program

National Educational Program

The participants' comments also brought forth elements in the overall educational program in Ukraine which constrained teachers' professional agency. Students in the 7th grade have a total of 18 different compulsory subjects per week and students in the 11th grade have a total of 20 different compulsory subjects per week, which results in six to eight classes per day, with some subjects repeating two to three times a week. Students have "too many compulsory subjects." Since every teacher "considers their own subject to be important," students are having to meet the expectations of many teachers and complete their homework assignments. It is unrealistic for students "to learn English and all the other subjects." One participant explained that the educational program is "geared more towards 'students-with-potential,'" making it a challenge for other students to keep up. This "discourages the students and in a way, discourages [...] teachers."

Many of the teachers considered the rigorous educational program to be unnecessary and the plethora of knowledge taught to be impractical, adding that students cannot remember everything they learn. Several teachers suggested allowing parents and students to pick and choose the subjects they want to

study, according to their future professional endeavors. So, students should only study English “because they want to learn it and not because they are forced.” It was also proposed that some subjects be eliminated from the program or combined with another to make it “simple, practical and useful.” In regards to this matter, one teacher wrote: “I think our school system gives good knowledge but children cannot use it in practice.” Making the education program more practical was of great importance to the participants and a way to enable their professional agency.

Competitions

Moreover, some students are chosen by teachers to participate in different subject Olympiads (or competitions), which require additional time and work during the week to prepare both independently and with the teacher. The teacher must also accompany the student to the competition, which is usually held on Saturdays and Sundays, taking away more time from both the teachers and students. If the student passes the required rounds to get to the final stages the entire competition can last up to three months. The participants expressed their dislike for the Olympiads but seemed to accept it as a part of the school program.

Competitions are also held for teachers, like “Teacher of the Year.” The participants viewed the competition as a “distraction” that required much time and “bureaucratic paperwork.” Additionally, one participant felt the competitions did not align to her identity as a teacher.

I understand that a teacher must only teach her students, but the priority now is not about teaching the students but rather whether or not a teacher participated in competitions. The prestige of a teacher is defined more by their participation in competitions, like “Teacher of the Year.”

For this participant, the teacher competitions are interpreted as a form of validation for teachers and a marker of prestige, which do not align with her identi-

ties as a teacher. Her identity and worth as a teacher are not linked to whether or not she participates in such competitions, but rather and only in educating her students. As a result of this external pressure, which she feels is a threat to her teacher identity, her agency becomes constrained, as the extra work required for the competition and the pressure she feels to prove herself, interfere with her duties of teaching her students. So, not only are the competitions considered to be a time-consuming “distraction,” but also as a possible factor that challenges teachers’ identities, and in turn, teachers’ professional agency.

The rigorous educational program that demands much work and time, constrains the agency of students as well as the teachers. As one participant shared, some students are unable to “keep up” with the challenging program and become “discouraged,” which then discourages the teachers. This demonstrates how the constrained agency of students is linked to the constrained agency of teachers. With the overload of work, some students are unable to complete homework assignments for some classes, consequently impeding both the learning and teaching process for students and teachers.

6.1.3 English Language Curriculum

The findings also frequently showed elements of the English language curriculum as factors that constrain teacher’s professional agency. The participants had similar opinions and struggles with regard to the curriculum, one of them being that the program is too “fast paced” and “packed,” not allowing students to adequately practice new concepts (one or two lessons are given for each topic). On top of that, English is taught only twice a week, so it is likely that students forget what they had learned in previous lessons. The curriculum attempts to cover too much in a short amount of time, producing challenging grounds for teachers to thoroughly cover the material and provide sufficient practice for students to develop their English skills. As a result, teachers’ professional agency is constrained as they only have the textbook as their resource and have no choice but to adapt themselves to the curriculum, even though they know their students are struggling.

Participants also criticized the curriculum for its impracticality as it heavily focuses on grammar and inadequately focuses on the communicative aspect of English. One participant shared that “school children learn English words, grammar rules but cannot speak English.” Participants all seemed to hold the belief that speaking was an integral part of learning English. Although the current curriculum incorporates conversational elements through scripted dialogues for memorization, they were said to be too “heavy” and challenging for students to understand and remember. Coupled with grammar that is “difficult” and, as one participant described it, “unnecessary,” students overall have a difficult time grasping concepts and keeping up with the pace.

The school curriculum is rather difficult for school children. Pupils of junior school can't understand such difficult grammar rules as we give them. And for one grammar topic we have only one or two lessons. So, I think that amount of grammar materials should be less.

Teachers are stuck between following the given curriculum and their own personal beliefs about how English language learning should be approached. By following the curriculum, teachers demonstrate a negotiation of their professional identity, which, in turn constrains their professional agency as they are unable to teach according to how they believe English should be taught.

Additionally, teachers' professional agency is constrained due to limited opportunities for students (and teachers) to practice speaking English, particularly with native English-speakers. Schools have the option of applying for a native English-speaking volunteer, however, that is not always available. This further demonstrates the constraint of teachers' professional agency that comes with the lack of resources and opportunities.

English Language Textbook

Discussions about the national textbooks brought forth a variety of issues that constrain teachers' professional agency as well as teachers' solutions for im-

provement. It is important to note once again that the textbooks are issued and funded by the government for public schools and published by Ukrainian authors. Overall, many of the teachers said they would prefer using materials published by native-English speakers and, in general, exposing students to more original literary works in English.

The findings show that the struggle with using the textbook for effective teaching starts in the first grade. The textbook for primary grades was deemed too difficult for young learners, as it requires students to demonstrate literacy skills, which they had not yet mastered in their own native language. In the interview, the participant brought over the national textbook currently being used to show what kind of text first grade students were expected to work with. The following is an excerpt from the interview.

- Look, here. They are supposed to listen and memorize. They don't know how to read yet.
- This is a book being used now?
- Yes, this is first grade. They don't know how to do anything.

The national textbooks inaccurately determine the skills young learners have at this stage, making it difficult for teachers to utilize the textbook to teach English and practice their professional agency.

The issue of reading was mentioned frequently in the study by participants. One of the difficulties was in regards to young learners' inability to distinguish certain English letters from Ukrainian letters. The similar letter shapes in the English and Ukrainian alphabet are a cause for confusion for young learners as the letters look similar but produce different sounds. Two participants describe how the confusion unfolded with first grade students.

- I tell them, this is letter "n," but their teacher tells them for two lessons that this is "p."
- Yes, in Ukrainian it's a "p" and in English an "n."

- There are many letters that are similar. I tell them this is “p” and the other teacher tells them it’s an “r.” And so, we realized that children don’t know these letters later on.

In response to the struggles faced with teaching young learners, participants held similar ideas on how to make primary pedagogy more effective. Participants suggested spending less time on teaching writing and more time on letters, phonics, developing basic reading skills with the help of stories and fairytales. The idea of introducing a few letters at a time (not necessarily in order of the alphabet), was also suggested, so that students could gradually develop a vocabulary base, starting with simple words and moving on to conversational phrases and sentences. One teacher also said she would not grade young learners but focus only on familiarizing them with English.

The importance of developing vocabulary was emphasized by one of the participants, who spoke of the recent shift in pedagogical methods, which focused on teaching students how to reason logically over memorizing and regurgitating information.

- They tell us now that students must not be taught to just memorize but that students must be able to logically reason. But tell me, if I don’t know any English words, how am I supposed to reason logically? Or think?
- You still need to memorize.

The participants argued that in order for students to logically reason, it is first necessary to equip them with the necessary tools. According to these two participants, students need to build a base of vocabulary words with which they could reason logically. To create the base of words, both participants are of the opinion that memorization was an inevitable part of the learning process. They are unable to teach according to their own methods, which they believe would work for their students, because the curriculum requires a different approach. The constraint of teacher agency, then, is manifested in the participants’ dissi-

dence with the new instituted pedagogical method as it is not in accordance to their professional beliefs in pedagogical methods.

6.1.4 School Community

Lack of English Teachers

About half of the participants in the study did not originally start out their teaching careers as English language teachers but were reassigned to teach English due to a shortage of English language teachers at the school (and in the district in general). Some had previously studied to teach history, math, German, Ukrainian or the sciences, but because jobs were difficult to find in the village, participants catered to the needs of the school for job security. Such participants took the necessary courses to requalify and become certified English language teachers.

Among those participants, there seemed to be mixed feelings and responses towards this change. One of the participants said that “it was difficult and scary at first,” (indicating constrained professional agency), but that colleagues and relevant reading materials helped her transition into her new role as an English teacher. She is in her fifth year of teaching English and so far, she said she likes being an English teacher and is “happy.” So, although sociocultural conditions placed her in this position to take on a new role that she did not feel prepared for (constraining her professional agency), she found reading materials and her colleagues as support and as means to enable her professional agency.

Another participant, sounded hopeful and accepting of her situation, but did not have the same positive tone as the previous participant. This particular participant taught biology but was asked to teach English in the primary grades as she was the only one among her colleagues that had “some basic English skills.” Regarding this transition she said, “It’s difficult, of course, as I almost don’t have any skills—only what I have learned in school. We have what we have.” Being placed in an unfamiliar territory without the necessary skills is

cause for her constrained professional agency. The lack of English language teachers in the district constrained the agency of the school, but in turn, also constrained the professional agency of this participant, who had to accept a role for which she did not feel prepared.

Students

Discussions demonstrated how different members of the school community play a role in constraining teachers' professional agency. When asked about what makes the participants' job as teachers most difficult, one of the first things several of the participants said was the lack of motivation in students to learn English; and all other participants were in unanimous agreement. For one participant, the lack of motivation was seen as the main roadblock to her professional agency. She said, "I think I would be able to deal with everything else that needs to be dealt with, if only they wanted to learn." While the reason for the lack of motivation is grounds for further research, from the teachers' perspectives, working with unmotivated students was determined as a challenging factor in teaching and, thereby, a constraint to their professional agency.

Parents

One participant attributed the issue to the country writing that, "the country has [sic] to motivate pupils to learn English." Another participant was of the opinion that, "we must convince or persuade everyone that to know foreign languages it is useful, interesting, profitable and prestigious [sic]." Moreover, another participant linked the lack of motivation to the students' parents, suggesting certain underlying sociological aspects of village life that contextualize the parents and their lack of support for students when it comes to learning English.

...the misunderstandings of parents. No one asks of them anything or explains anything to them. Maybe it's because a lot of people are moving

out of the village and into the city. Whoever is smart is in the city. The ones remaining are those who, let's say, have nowhere else to go.

There seems to be a low expectation of parents when it comes to their child's education, at least from this participants' explanation. This participant also added that students do not receive support with English at home, further constraining the teachers' professional agency, as teachers lack the support they need to motivate the students to learn English.

School Leaders

A glimpse of teachers' relationship with school leaders was also evident in the discussions. When speaking about the lack of teaching materials, one participant made a remark that explicitly demonstrated the constraint of professional agency she felt as a teacher. This excerpt is a response to Question 5 (If you had the power to change anything you could in the education system to help you and other English language teachers in Ukraine, what would you change?)

Of course, it would be nice if to the textbooks that we are given, in the back it was written plus audio CD, plus notebook, plus for the teacher, plus – it would be good – and if they also gave us additional things. I think that's the thought of each one of us **but we're too scared to say anything**, but it's true, that if students were given notebooks for free, teachers could buy extra things and look for things.

The participant's professional agency was firstly constrained by the lack of materials she had to work with. However, her response to the issue further demonstrated another layer to her constrained professional agency when she remarked that teachers are "too scared to say anything." Although, this participant did not explicitly say who the teachers were scared of, her statement indicates that there is cause for fear in speaking up. It can, therefore, be presumed that she is referring to authoritative individuals in close proximity to teachers,

such as school leaders. So, not only does the lack of materials constrain her professional agency, but her seemingly distant relationship with school leaders demonstrates how her relational agency affects her professional agency.

School leaders were rarely mentioned in the findings, but a particular moment during one of the focus group discussions, involving the school director and one of the participants, clearly displayed how a participant's relational agency constrained her professional agency. The school director entered the room where the focus group discussion was taking place and listened to the discussion for a few minutes. At this time the dynamics of the room shifted and became noticeably quieter. When the school director entered, participants were thinking about their response to Question 5 (If you had the power to change anything you could in the education system to help you and other English language teachers in Ukraine, what would you change?), so, there was a pause in the discussion. In my attempt to get participants back into the discussion, I rephrased the question and asked, "What is your ideal condition for teaching?" Only two seconds after that, the school director prompted the teachers to "answer quickly" in a rather exasperated tone. The following is an excerpt of the interaction that took place right after, and as the school director slowly walked out of the room.

Participant: More volunteers like you.

School director: That's dependent on you, that's dependent on you (in Ukrainian "you" could either be the formal or the plural form, in this case it was the latter).

Participant: Well, it's not really dependent on us...

School director: How is it not dependent on you? Then who is it dependent on?

Participant: Well, who is going to allow volunteers in a village school-

School director: All village schools-

The participant, at first, seemingly overcame her vulnerability and the barrier she felt in relation to the school director and proceeded to share. Her response, though, was quickly reprimanded by the school director. Although the participant was practicing her professional agency by contributing to the discussion, it immediately became constrained by the school director as she was unable to freely share her opinions. Although participants had not explicitly spoken about school leaders, this moment revealed how participants' relational agency with the school leader was constraining them from practicing their professional agency.

6.2 Resources for Teacher's Professional Agency

Although the discussion primarily yielded ways in which teacher's professional agency was constrained, while brief, resources that enabled teacher's professional agency were also explored.

The resources of teachers' professional agency was identified in the data analysis by looking at the positive aspects that supported the English language teachers to carry out their professional duties. The findings in this section were also thematized by sociocultural spheres in relation to the English language teachers (the subjects). The sociocultural spheres that enabled teachers' professional agency were: (i) the government, (ii) the school community, (iii) the individual.

6.2.1 Government

Although discussions about the government mainly brought forth ways in which teachers' professional agency was constrained, there is one way in which the government enables the English language teachers in Ukraine. Many of the teachers emphasized the lack of opportunities for both students and teachers to practice and apply their English skills and expressed their interest in getting an English-speaking volunteer at their school. It is worth noting that one of the

organizations that connects Ukrainian schools to volunteers is called Peace Corps and it is endorsed by the Ukrainian government.

Peace Corps is a government-run organization of the United States that sends individuals to various locations around the world to volunteer in different job sectors, such as Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Peace Corps was established in Ukraine in 1992 (after their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991) when “Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk and American President George Bush signed a bilateral agreement to establish a Peace Corps program in Ukraine” (“U.S. Peace Corps in Ukraine,” 2019). Although there are other private institutions or organizations that hire native English volunteers, what sets organizations like Peace Corps apart is that the Ukrainian government chooses to cooperate with them and allows volunteers into the country to work in areas like TEFL. In this way, the government is enabling the English language teachers’ professional agency by providing an opportunity to work closely with native English-speakers and practice communicative skills.

6.2.2 School Community

The resources of teachers’ professional agency were mainly brought forth by participants’ responses to question 3 (What works at your school?). To this question, one participant answered that “the only positive thing we have is our students, probably.” The most common response, though, was other English language teachers either in their school or in the district. One participant overcame her difficult transition period into her new role as an English language teacher with her colleague’s help. Another teacher shared that “communication with other teachers [...], older colleagues” helped her. Therefore, the social relations participants have established with certain members of the school community act as an enabling force for their professional agency.

6.2.3 Individual

Furthermore, participants saw themselves as a positive force, as they “find solutions on their own, regardless of whether they have support or not.” One partic-

ipant said that “we have ourselves” and “our own strength.” Their sense of ownership in teaching and view of the world and value of English are what motivate their practice of professional agency.

Although resources were identified as a constraint of teacher’s professional agency, teachers independently seek out supplementary materials such as “cartoons, songs and video clips” for young learners. One participant shared that “interesting online resources” she finds and uses motivates her as well as her students to learn. Technological resources were also mentioned as useful, particularly in what participants referred to as, “modern times.” One participant referred specifically to “computers,” “telephones,” and “iPads,” and had noticed that allowing students to use telephones made them “happy” and was an effective way to get students to participate in her lessons.

A commonly shared opinion was that they “increase [their] knowledge and the knowledge of the children.” Another participant said that they have “hope” and that they “inspire students and learn something” themselves. This participant spoke also in relation to the world:

Everything changes. We don’t stay in one place. Times are changing. And we must improve and change. When we were studying, we didn’t have all this technology. Now, we must be developed teachers.

Teachers display a sense of responsibility to grow and improve with their students in the context of a changing world.

Additionally, in an attempt to understand participants’ stance towards the subject they are teaching, participants were asked to explain why they considered it important to learn English. Teachers shared that English is “interesting,” “prestigious” and a “popular” “global language,” and “maybe in the future it will be one language in the world.” Additionally, they noted that knowing English allows them to “travel” and communicate with “other people in different countries.”

Maybe in our time we have many problems and our country has many problems and our students want to be a 'greats.' Many go to the abroad and they need to study English. We need to study English too, to know how teach them and know how to learn and to survive. We need this language (cited in the original language).

Many also linked the knowledge of English to students' "future careers" as it opens up higher paying job opportunities, particularly in today's "modern world," and, as one participant shared, in the context of Ukraine seeking membership in the European Union. English was also seen as a necessity for working with computers and accessing information.

Moreover, although some of the participants were reassigned to teach English, others aspired to become English language teachers early on in their lives. Many of them were aspiring teachers and loved children. Several of them enjoyed learning English at school or were inspired by their English language teachers to follow in their footsteps. One participant shared how as a child she thought that "an English teacher is knowledgeable in everything- not just in English," so she wanted to become an English teacher because she "wanted to know everything."

The participants' stance on the English language and the value that they see in knowing it, combined with their aspirations for becoming teachers defines the participants as professional subjects and reveals more about what enables them to practice their professional agency, despite all the constraints.

7 DISCUSSION

The study looked at the ways in which professional agency of English language teachers (ELT) was constrained and enabled from a subject-centered sociocultural approach. With the first research question- What constrains teacher agency from the teacher's perspective?- four different sociocultural spheres were identified as constraining teacher agency: the government, the Ukrainian education program, the English language curriculum, and the school community. The second research question- What enables teacher agency from the teacher's perspective?- identified two different sociocultural spheres and the subjects themselves as enabling teacher agency: the government, the school community and the ELTs. The significance of both the subject and the sociocultural conditions in understanding the manifestation of professional agency was evident in the study.

Firstly, the ELTs "embodied relations with the world" (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 59) was evident with their struggle to make a living while simultaneously trying to focus on teaching their students English. The undervalued status of teachers in the country is manifested in the government's lack of financial support for public schools, and, as a result, low teacher salaries. The ELTs want to support their students in learning English outside of the classroom, but cannot compromise their time, efforts and personal finances to work extra or purchase supplementary study materials without compensation, simply because they have their own "physical health and well-being" to oversee (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 59). This further verifies Archer's theory that individuals prioritize their concerns (physical well-being, performative competence and self-worth) and practice their agency accordingly (Vandenberghe, 2005, p. 227).

Secondly, the study reinforces the important role that one's professional identity (commitments, ideals, motivations, interests, goals) (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61) has in the manifestation of professional agency. The ELTs held similar views towards English as a valuable asset in the modern world. They argued that the English language curriculum (and overall educational program) should

equip students with practical tools to apply in the real world. The English language curriculum and textbooks, however, have differing goals and focus more on the technical aspects of learning English, rather than the practical communicative side, which the ELTs value. Combined with their limited access to alternative teaching materials and confining parameters of the educational program and English language curriculum, the ELTs are unable to teach according to their values and beliefs. Although they practice their professional agency by accepting the circumstances, their professional identities are in constant conflict with the sociocultural conditions. This also corroborates the Vygotskian notion that human action is “mediated by tools” that help “carry out mental functioning” (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 341). While the ELTs have the government-funded textbooks, it does not allow the ELTs to practice the type of professional agency that align to their professional identities. Therefore, the types of tools used are also an indication of how professional agency is practiced.

Thirdly, the findings highlight the importance of affordances- “important resources for action in the present situation and for the planning of future goals” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 60) in the manifestation of agency. The lack of people in the villages, due to many moving out into the city, is a sociocultural condition that has an impact on the schools. With the general lack of people comes a shortage of English language teachers forcing schools to employ from within and reassign an existing employee to teach English. Changing teaching roles puts the newly assigned ELTs at a disadvantage, as they feel inadequately skilled to teach English, particularly as it seemed they were in the middle of their teaching careers. In discussions it was clear that such ELTs were in the process of constructing their new identities, unlike the more seasoned and experienced teachers, who had time to develop affordances over the years. Affordances are unique to each individual and therefore, result in different practices of agency. While the newly assigned ELTs still seemed uncertain of their new role, the ELTs who taught during the time of the Soviet Union were able to provide detailed solutions to issues, based on their extensive experience. This further highlights the importance of viewing the subject from a life-course per-

spective and to analyze their “past, present and future narratives” (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, p. 156) together in order to fully understand their temporally constructed (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963) and continuously developing professional identities and in turn, their professional agency.

Moreover, the subject-centered sociocultural approach to agency also recognizes “power relations” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 60) as one of the influencing sociocultural conditions. Based on the interaction between the school director and one of the ELTs during the focus group discussion, and the mention of another ELT being “scared to say anything,” in regards to the lack of teaching materials, it can be presumed that the ELTs do not view school leaders as a reliable resource for practicing their agency. The notion of status in the workplace, in this particular sociocultural context, is still adhered to and creates a clear separation between the teachers and higher authorities in education, constraining ELT’s practice of agency. At the same time, however, it is important to note that the school director arranged the opportunity for the ELTs to take part in this study, which allowed for them to practice their professional agency.

Lastly, the value of the English language is not yet fully recognized in Ukraine as pointed out by the ELTs. As Vygotsky claimed, language “[does] not emerge de novo in small groups or individuals; instead they are embedded in a sociocultural milieu and are reproduced across generations in the form of collective practices” (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 344). The ELTs realize that in order for English language education to thrive, society has to acknowledge its worth as much as they do. Additionally, ELTs believe the government should accentuate the importance of English more by providing opportunities for its citizens to practice English. Without this support, the ELT’s professional agency is constrained. If the importance and relevance of English can be seen, then learning English can be more purposeful and motivate students and parents alike to value it more.

The enabling factors of the ELTs professional agency are all in their immediate environment. Similar to the results of a study conducted on teacher agency in Finland (Pappa et al., 2017, p. 20), the findings in this research em-

phasize the significance of collegial community and the use of resources. As in the context of teaching with a CLIL (Content Language Integrated Learning) curriculum, the ELTs “joint action can strengthen individual agency through material and conceptual resources that make sense-making and object-oriented activities clearer” (Edwards 2007, p. 4). A supportive “work culture” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61), then, is a sociocultural condition that enables the ELT’s professional agency. Moreover, both studies also recognized how “teacher-pupil relationships “act as a resource for learning for the teachers and students (Pappa et al., 2017, p. 13). Through teaching, the ELTs are becoming aware of the changing world and are committed to developing themselves as well as their students.

In addition, the subjects themselves were identified as a resource for their professional agency. This is in line with the study conducted in Finland, where “teacher versatility” (Pappa et al., 2017, p. 18) was determined as a key factor to teacher’s professional agency. The subjects are brought to light in the manifestation of agency, through their professional identities demonstrated by their goals, interests and commitment to their role of teaching English to their students. Despite all the constraints on ELTs professional agency, brought upon by various sociocultural conditions, their professional identity as ELTs remains strong, further proving that although “human agency operates relationally within and through social structures, [it] is not necessarily subjugated by them” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 57).

In accordance with the subject-centered sociocultural approach to agency, findings from the study show how both the individual and social structure play an integral part in the manifestation of agency. The ELTs construct their identity position at work and negotiate their professional agency with the help of “mediational tools” (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 341) and “construct meaningful careers and life courses,” in the context of constraining and enabling sociocultural conditions (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 60). The study also brings to light the importance of recognizing individuals’ “embodied relations to the world” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 59), which takes priority in the practice of professional

agency. Lastly, the study demonstrates that the affordances subjects develop in the past act as a crucial resource for the practice of agency in the present and orientation for the future. This further accentuates the need to view the subject from a life-long perspective to fully understand the manifestation of professional agency within a certain sociocultural context.

7.1 Limitations

The study faced several limitations during its implementation. The data collection process was initially supposed to consist of interviews, however, because of the time constraint, focus group discussions had to be used instead. Although focus groups were a practical and convenient method of gathering data in a short amount of time, it did not allow sufficient time for each participant to contribute to the discussion or for me to ask follow-up questions for clarification or elaboration. An interview would have also made participants feel more comfortable, particularly when answering questions regarding one's professional identity.

Additionally, the focus group discussions had to be cut shorter than the original agreed upon timeframe due to circumstances beyond my control, resulting in less than twenty minutes per focus group. Furthermore, the discussions were interrupted by the school director, who stepped in a few times to monitor the progress of the discussion, which made the participants noticeably uncomfortable.

Also, the lack of a note-taker during the focus group discussions was a significant limitation, as I was unable to identify the speaker when listening to the audio-recordings of the discussions. Having information of the speaker would have helped in the data analysis and see any possible correlations between the participant's professional identity and practice of professional agency.

Lastly, not all participants submitted a written response in answering the key question. Combined with the lack of records for which participants spoke

in the discussions, it was difficult to keep track of which participants contributed, making it highly probable that some participants did not contribute as much as others in the study.

7.2 Suggestions for Further Research

As Ukraine is one of the post-Soviet countries, studies on teacher agency in this context may not only benefit Ukraine, but may contribute to studies of teacher agency and/or learning English in general education in other post-Soviet contexts. A similar research could also be conducted in larger public schools located in the city to compare the results. Research in English teaching in general education could provide preventative solutions for challenges faced in higher education and help in further developing teacher training programs. Additionally, the data could be used to develop the concept of teacher agency in teacher training institutions, as a way to realize the full potential of its English language teachers in the country.

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