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Perezhivanie-agency dialectic: Examining Vietnamese EFL educators' experiences and negotiation of dramatic classroom events

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ABSTRACT

Tensions and conflicts are common in teachers' everyday professional lives, yet research on how these experiences influence pedagogical decisions and teacher agency remains limited. This study employs a broad sociocultural perspective, integrating cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and Vygotsky's concept of perezhivanie, to examine how two Vietnamese English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) educators responded agentively to emotionally charged events. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings of the study illustrate that mismatches between educators' expectations and students' behaviors not only underpin educators' negative emotions and cognitive responses but also catalyze a cycle of reflection, which subsequently leads to modifications in teaching practices and strengthens educators' agency. This study underscores the complex interplay between teachers' experiences of dramatic events and their agency, highlighting the importance of equipping educators with the necessary knowledge and skills to constructively manage difficult emotions and enhance their problem-solving capabilities. This study exemplifies a critical integration through the development of Integrative Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (iCHAT), which synergistically combines elements of CHAT and Vygotsky's perezhivanie, providing a robust framework to investigate a range of complex phenomena beyond teacher agency in diverse educational and cultural contexts.

1. Introduction

Teacher agency has emerged as a prominent topic in teacher development research, practice and policy (Cochran-Smith et al., 2022). Teacher agency, defined as teachers' willingness and capacity to act in response to changes in their professional practices, plays a crucial role in facilitating student learning, fostering professional development, and driving school improvement (Toom et al., 2015). The success of educational reforms largely depends on teachers' ability to cope with and transform everyday challenges in their teaching practices (Datnow, 2020; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018).

Foreign language educators, particularly those operating within evolving educational landscapes, encounter a myriad of emotionally charged challenges in their classrooms (Benesch, 2018; Zembylas, 2010). Examples of challenges faced by foreign

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language educators include increasing learner diversity, constant education reforms, policy constraints, and inadequate teaching resources (Bao et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Yakavets et al., 2022). There is a clear need for language teachers to act as change agents who have the capacity to adapt to, as well as resist, new practices not properly or readily implemented in the local context (Bao et al., 2020; Fullan, 2007). Exploring language teacher agency (LTA) helps shed light on how language teachers navigate challenges to transform their own pedagogies, the practices of their institutions (Cong-Lem, 2024; Nguyen & Dang, 2021; Yakavets et al., 2022), and the outcomes of educational change initiatives (Tao & Gao, 2017).

Challenges associated with dramatic classroom events present opportunities for LTA to manifest. Dramatic classroom events refer to instances of confrontational classroom incidents that trigger or intensify teachers' awareness and emotional reactions (Agnoletto et al., 2021; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). Exploring teachers' experiences and agency in handling dramatic classroom events in their teaching holds crucial implications for teacher professional learning and, consequently, teaching outcomes (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Yang, 2019; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22).

Prior research has established that LTA is influenced by a combination of personal and external factors, including teacher emotion, cognition, social relationships, and working conditions (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023; Tao & Gao, 2017; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). While existing studies have predominantly focused on exploring how teacher cognition and emotions influence teacher agency, there has been limited research into how teachers' agentic actions towards tensions can, in turn, enhance their experiences (Tao et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). In the same vein, the multidimensional interplay between teacher emotion, cognition, and agency in dealing with dramatic classroom events remains under-explored (Golombek, 2015; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). Research in this area holds the potential to unveil not only the sources of LTA in addressing everyday classroom challenges but also the dynamic mechanisms through which teachers may undertake transformative actions to enhance their pedagogical practices, thereby improving students' learning engagement and outcomes.

This study endeavors to address these identified gaps by investigating how Vietnamese EFL educators in a tertiary setting experience dramatic events in their classrooms and how such experience interplays with their professional agency. It draws on a broad sociocultural perspective, including cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and Vygotsky's concept of perezhivanie (i.e., commonly defined as the emotional and intellectual experience of a person in a specific situation) (Cong-Lem, 2022a; Vygotsky, 1994). It responds well to recent calls for research that explores the complex and multidimensional relationships between language teacher emotion, cognition, and agency (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Two research questions addressed in this study include:

- How does Vietnamese EFL educators' experience of dramatic events inform their professional agency?
- How does their agency impact on their experience of the situations?

This study contributes to the existing literature by revealing how teachers' agency is shaped by and shapes their experiences of classroom events. The findings can enhance understanding of LTA, inform policy-making to support teacher agency, and guide teacher educators/trainers in developing more effective professional development interventions to support teachers' well-being as well as professional effectiveness and innovation.

2. Research background

2.1. Language teacher agency in educational change

Many countries have undertaken English language teaching reforms with the aim of fostering the instruction of English as a global language, thereby enhancing integration and maintaining competitiveness within the global arena (Hamid, 2010; Le et al., 2021). Previous research studying educational change has underscored the role of teacher agency in influencing the outcomes of local reforms (Tao & Gao, 2017).

The concept of teacher agency has been explored from different theoretical perspectives (Maclellan, 2017; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015). For instance, in social cognitive theory, Bandura (2006) defined agency as the general capacity to "influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (p. 164), which are framed in four largely mental dimensions, namely intentionality (i.e, action plans and strategies for achieving intentions), forethought (i.e., anticipation of likely outcomes of action plans), self-reactiveness (i.e., ability to self-motivate and self-regulate the execution of action plans), and self-reflectiveness (i.e, ability to self-examine own functioning against action plans). Drawing on an ecological approach, Biesta et al. (2015) view agency as pragmatic actions, or something an individual does that is informed by iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions (i.e., elements of the past, present, and future). The theory of agency can, from this perspective, be referred to as "the theory of action" (Leijen et al., 2020, p. 295). Alternative perspectives on teacher agency may include Bourdieuan, subject-centered sociocultural identity, and cultural-historical activity theory approaches (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Tang, 2023; Tao & Gao, 2017). These approaches, however, tend to provide a general understanding of teacher agency without much information on the factors that drive teachers' agency in everyday teaching.

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is a useful theoretical framework to explore language teacher agency (e.g., Dang, 2013; Yang & Gong, 2023). Drawing on this perspective, teacher agency can be understood as being "driven by recurring disturbances and troubles generated by historically accumulated inner contradictions in the activity system" (Engeström & Sannino, 2021, p. 11). Tensions and conflicts often generate teachers' negative emotions but also opportunities for change and development (Cong-Lem et al., 2023; Dang, 2013; Golombek & Doran, 2014).

Previous literature has explored LTA for various purposes, including policy implementation, adoption of new pedagogies or

technologies, development of teaching materials, assessment, and professional development (Cong-Lem, 2024; Gao & Cui, 2022; Lim, 2021). For instance, Lim (2021) explored how three Korean EFL school teachers actively exercised their agency to overcome the digital divide for their students across different schools. Lastly, another portion of the literature on LTA discusses how formal professional development interventions or professional collaboration programs can enhance teacher agency for professional learning and teaching practices. Uştuk and De Costa (2021), for example, explored the use of the lesson study model in enhancing Turkish EFL teachers' professional development.

To summarize, teacher agency has been investigated from various theoretical perspectives as a key aspect of teachers' professional practices and capacity for change and innovation. Despite the rapidly increasing body of literature on the topic, there is still a lack of conceptual clarity regarding the concept of teacher agency (Pantić, 2015). Previous literature tends to emphasize agency for professional learning, especially for preservice teachers, and the effectiveness of professional development interventions among language teachers at the school level. Research on teacher agency using a cultural-historical perspective is considered important but emerging (e.g., Pantić, 2021; Xu & Fan, 2022; Yang, 2015). This study addresses this gap by examining how Vietnamese university EFL educators experience and enact agency in their classroom from a cultural-historical activity theory perspective.

2.2. Conceptual framework

2.2.1. Overview and integration of cultural-historical theories

Cultural-historical or sociocultural theory originated in the Soviet school of psychology, primarily based on the works of Vygotsky and his colleagues. It is important to note that the terms 'sociocultural' and 'cultural-historical' encompass multiple traditions, as discussed in the existing literature (Cong-Lem, 2022b; 2022c; Bakhurst, 2009; Hakkarainen, 2004; Kaptelinin, 2005). A theory closely associated with Vygotsky's cultural-historical/sociocultural theory is CHAT, which is widely attributed to the foundational works of Leontiev (1978, 1981) and was later expanded by Engeström (1987, 2001). While Vygotsky's psychological theory is commonly adopted for exploring individual psychological development, CHAT adopts a more object-oriented and systemic approach to understanding changes and transformations occuring collectively (Hakkarainen, 2004; Kaptelinin, 2005). Previous literature has encouraged scholars to integrate these cultural-historical traditions as complementary frameworks to effectively address the complexity and situatedness of real-life phenomena (Dang, 2013; Engeström, 1999; Kaptelinin, 2005).

The current study adopts this approach but emphasizes the necessity of critically integrating relevant concepts, tailored to the research purpose (Cong-Lem, 2022b; 2022c). This theoretical orientation is termed Integrative Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (iCHAT) within the study (Cong-Lem, 2023). More specifically, we have drawn more extensively upon Vygotsky's concept of perezhivanie to investigate teachers' individual subjectivity in interpreting and emotionally experiencing tensions and challenges in their classrooms (Veresov, 2019). These experiences, in turn, contribute to shaping the trajectory of their subsequent agency (e.g., Smirnova, 2020). Additionally, we utilized CHAT as a supplementary framework to conceptualize teacher agency, focusing on its object-oriented nature, mediatedness, and situatedness. The integration of perezhivanie with CHAT to investigate the complex interplay among tensions, emotions, and teacher agency has been substantiated by prior research (e.g., Dang, 2013).

2.2.2. Perezhivanie

Perezhivanie is a concept developed by Vygotsky in the last few years of his life. It is a countable noun, with its plural form being 'perezhivanijia'. Since there is no exact English translation for perezhivanie, it is often rendered as 'emotional experience' and 'experience' or is retained in its original form (Cong-Lem, 2022a; Veresov, 2017). At the overarching conceptual level, Vygotsky (1994) posits that perezhivanie represents a unity of the environment and the individual; more specifically, it involves characteristics of both the individual and the specific situation (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342). At the individual level, perezhivanie is commonly referred to as "how a child becomes aware of, interprets, and emotionally relates to a certain event" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341). Thus, within a perezhivanie, there are both environmental and personal dimensions, as well as cognitive and emotional components. The significance of this concept is that, according to Vygotsky, perezhivanie serves as a powerful psychological mechanism that helps explain individual differences in learning and development. He contends that environmental factors should not be considered objective determinants of an individual's psychological development but rather as elements that are refracted through "the prism of the child's perezhivanie" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 340). This refraction mechanism of perezhivanie significantly underpins the subjectivity in individuals' responses to environmental events or situations, leading to divergent developmental trajectories.

In elucidating the meaning and theoretical significance of perezhivanie, social situation of development (SSD) and dramatic events as two important and interrelated concepts to explore (Veresov & Fleer, 2016). According to Vygotsky (1998), SSD represents the initial (transitional) period of development wherein "the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period" is found (p. 198). Particularly in this stage, old and new psychological functions interact, undergo dynamic modifications, and give rise to neo-psychological functions, paving the way for more stable mental functions in the subsequent stages of development (Veresov, 2020).

Vygotsky (1998) contends that "[t]he social situation of development …. determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development" (p. 198). Two critical points that can be inferred from this quote are: (1) SSD plays a decisive role in determining the prospective course of development for the individual, and (2) social reality or the social environment serves as the source from which SSD emerges. Importantly, social situation/environment is not identical to SSD; rather, it functions as the source of the latter.

Drama or dramatic events is another important concept that further informs the theoretical value of perezhivanie and SSD (Veresov, 2020; Veresov & Fleer, 2016; Vygotsky, 1929/1989). From Vygotsky's perspective, drama plays a pivotal role in psychological

development. Vygotsky (1929/1989) argues that psychological functions "can be most fully developed in the form of drama" (p. 60). A drama is "always a struggle of such connections (duty and feeling, passion, etc.)" (Vygotsky, 1929/1989, p. 68). Accordingly, drama inherently consists of emotional response, an integral component of perezhivanie as discussed above (Cong-Lem, 2022a; Vygotsky, 1994). While SSD and drama suggest crisis and development in a long-term development, everyday dramatic events can be considered micro-crises for development. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the impact of everyday dramatic events on an individual's psychological development, with a focus not only on determining what these dramatic events are and their characteristics but also on how they are refracted in the perezhivanie of the individual (Veresov, 2020).

Previous scholars have established the need to explore this prism in understanding teachers' subjectivity in experience, agency, and development (Golombek, 2015; Veresov, 2020; Wei, 2021). The empirical literature has advanced our understanding of perezhivanie by analyzing its components and forms in relation to teacher learning/development. Two key components of perezhivanie that have been explored are teacher cognition and emotion (e.g., Dang, 2013; Huh & Kim, 2021; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). These components are not separate but interrelated and are only distinguished for analytical purposes. Moreover, Smirnova (2020) proposed a developmental perspective on perezhivanie, based on her findings with Russian teachers. She suggested that perezhivanie consists of an initial emotional stage and a later reflective stage. This study adopts these insights into the components and forms of perezhivanie to examine the teachers' experiences.

2.2.3. Teacher agency from a cultural-historical activity theory perspective

This study adopts CHAT as a complementary framework for investigating LTA as informed by teachers' experiences (i.e., their perezhivanija). According to this framework, tensions are theoretically inherent within an activity system (i.e., the teaching activity in this study)and are regarded as an internal developmental force (Engeström, 2001). Specifically, CHAT offers a systemic framework to identify and address the contradictions and interactions between different components of the teaching activity system, focusing on how these structural tensions influence agentive actions. From this perspective, teacher agency is object-orientedness, mediatedness, and situatedness.

First, object-orientedness is considered the cornerstone concept of CHAT (Leontiev, 1978). An object can refer to an external object that has "its independent existence as subordinating to itself" or an internal "psychological reflection" of it in the individual's mind (Leontiev, 1978, p. 52). Human activity from the CHAT perspective is always oriented toward an object that is related to a specific need (Leontiev, 1978). In a professional activity, an object can refer to "the raw material or problem space at which the activity is directed" (Engeström & Sannino, 2021, p. 8).

Mediatedness is another important concept in CHAT (Lektorsky, 2009; Leontiev, 1978). Human activity is always mediated by mediational tools (psychological or material) that are culturally developed artifacts. For instance, from the CHAT perspective, language is a tool developed out of social contexts and is used to support collaboration essential for completing a social activity. Mediational tools play a crucial role in determining the operation or the method by which the activity is executed, thereby determining its quality (Wertsch et al., 1993). Mediational tools can help turn the object into an outcome (Engeström and Sannino (2021) and determine the quality of activity as "individuals can be *no more intelligent than* the psychological tools they employ" (Wertsch et al. (1993). Therefore, in explaining an activity, it is crucial to explore the tools that mediate and support that activity.

The third tenet of CHAT to be discussed is the situatedness of human activity. Situatedness refers to the interdependence of activity and the social and contextual factors that shape and are shaped by it. People transform their local conditions through their activity, and in turn, they are transformed by their activity (Leontiev, 1978). Situatedness also implies that human activities are dynamic and interactive, rather than static and isolated, and that they evolve in response to changing conditions (Engeström, 1999; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).

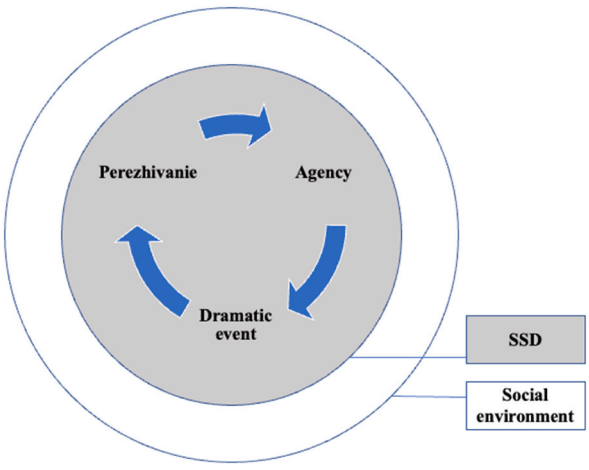


Fig. 1. A conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between perezhivanie and agency, inspired by Veresov (2019) and Yang and Markauskaite (2021).

In line with the above discussion of CHAT, this study conceptualizes teacher agency as an object-oriented, mediated, and situated activity, which is "driven by recurring disturbances and troubles" historically accumulated in the teachers' professional setting (Engeström & Sannino, 2021, p. 11). The object-orientedness underscores the personal, purposeful nature of teachers' agentic actions (Edwards, 2005; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001), which can be directed at making changes or problem-solving. A conceptualisation of teacher agency from the CHAT perspective above also emphasizes that teacher agency needs to be explored in its specific situation or local context.

2.2.4. A unifying conceptual framework to investigate perezhivanie and agency

This study utilizes a unifying conceptual framework for investigating the relationship between perezhivanie and teacher agency (see Fig. 1).

The framework is established by drawing on the theoretical insights discussed in the previous sections. Analytically, there are five major components in the framework: social environment, social situation of development (SSD), dramatic event, perezhivanie, and agency. The social environment, the first component, constitutes the context in which teachers practice their teaching and also serves as a source of tensions (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). The inner circle represents the SSD as the second component, indicating the period or situation where dramatic interactions between the individual and the environment occur, thereby setting the path for individual developmental trajectories (Veresov, 2020; Vygotsky, 1998).

Within each SSD, a dramatic event, as the third major component, is defined as "a challenge or confrontational moment encountered by an agent in a social situation" (Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, p. 4). This dramatic event serves as the catalyst and an object of the individual's perezhivanie (Vygotsky, 1994; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). Then, the fourth component, perezhivanie, serves as the prism through which the individual experiences the social situation or environment (Veresov, 2019). While not illustrated in the model, each perezhivanie can be further divided into an environmental element/object, and the individual's psychological experiences, including their emotional and cognitive interpretation of the event (Cong-Lem, 2022a; Dang, 2013; Vygotsky, 1994). Lastly, the fifth component addresses the agency of the individual educator to negotiate the tension and respond (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22).

In Fig. 1, dramatic events, perezhivanie, and agency are illustrated as cyclic and linear steps for analytical purposes, but in reality, the process may be more discursive (Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). The elements in the framework are conditioned or serve as a resource for the manifestation of the subsequent. For instance, a teacher's experience of a dramatic event usually informs their subsequent goals and actions, as commonly reported in the literature (e.g., Yang & Gong, 2023).

3. Method

3.1. Participants and setting

The participants in this study consisted of five EFL educators employed at the Faculty of Foreign Languages within a public university situated in the central region of Vietnam. The faculty provided two four-year undergraduate programs, namely English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) and Applied Linguistics. Students in these two programs shared most units, including essential English language skills (e.g., speaking, listening, grammar, academic writing), and elective courses in English linguistics, literature, and second language teaching pedagogies. Students pursuing the ELTE track are also required to complete a teaching practicum at a local primary or secondary school.

The two focal participants reported in this paper are Daisy and Grace (pseudonyms), both Vietnamese educators teaching at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the university. They were selected because their data provide ample and rich insights into their perezhivanie of dramatic events in their classrooms and their agency in response, which is the focal point of this paper. Daisy, in her mid-20s, held a bachelor's degree in English Language Teacher Education and had served as an assistant lecturer for over two years. She had dreamed about becoming a lecturer since she was a young child and had always been passionate about teaching. On the other hand, Grace, in her mid-30s, was an experienced educator, holding a master's degree in English linguistics and having accumulated nine years of teaching experience. Both of them taught English Linguistics and English pronunciation classes during the data collection period, so they are referred to as EFL educators.

Ethics approval was obtained from the researchers' university and permission from the participants' university before the data collection started. Invitations to participate in this research were extended to all lecturers employed at the Faculty, with participants being recruited on a voluntary basis. They were informed of the purpose of the study, attended an orientation, and signed a consent form.

3.2. Data collection

This paper reports on data generated as part of a larger study that involved semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, classroom observation, and document analysis as data collection instruments. In this paper, interviews and reflective journals are the two main sources of the data. The interviews were conducted twice for each participant, at the beginning of the semester and toward the end of it. Each interview lasted 60 min and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The initial interview delved into the backgrounds of the participants, exploring aspects such as their prior education, research experience, and educational/pedagogical beliefs and goals. The subsequent interview focused on more tangible experiences, specifically addressing the tensions and dramatic events encountered in their classes, their emotional reactions, and whether and how they responded to these triggering events. This

timing of the interviews was intentional in that it helped track the development of the situation and the potential difference in their perception and experience of the dramatic events. Such differences, for instance, in their thinking and actions, might suggest potential cognitive growth or if they had gained some transformative insights for their teaching practices.

The reflective journal offers a template with four guided questions for educators to document the classroom incidents they encounter, along with their experiences and responses. The questions primarily explore the emotional aspects of the educators' teaching, including their feelings before, during, and after the class, details about the dramatic events, and their reflections on how these events may have influenced their class teaching or subsequent teaching. There is no format or a length restriction for the responses; however, each educator was encouraged to submit at least two reflective journals. A total of eight reflective journals were collected for the two focal participants reported in this paper.

The utilization of interviews and reflective journals to explore perezhivanie aligns with practices observed in previous literature and serves to bolster the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Golombek & Johnson, 2004).

3.3. Data analysis

A directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was adopted in this study. This approach is used when "existing theory or prior research exists about a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further description" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). The directed content analysis approach is more structured (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) than conventional qualitative analysis, which avoids preconceived categories and is used in the absence of a clear theoretical framework. In directed content analysis, researchers begin by identifying key concepts or variables as initial coding categories, partially informing data analysis through existing theory or previous research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As such, this analytical approach can also serve to "validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281).

Accordingly, the conceptual framework depicted in Fig. 1 guided the data analysis process, which consists of three major stages. The data analysis was conducted using NVivo Mac OS version 1.7.1. The first stage involves reading the transcripts and reflective journals line by line to familiarize with the data and generate initial codes. In the second stage, data were coded into dramatic events, perezhivanie and agency. Dramatic events and perezhivanie, for example, were identified by locating emotive content in the data, following the approach suggested by Golombek and Doran (2014). Consistent with the discussion of perezhivanie above, the educators' emotions (both positive and negative, explicitly and implicitly expressed) and cognition (i.e., how they interpreted the event) were considered indicators of their perezhivanie. In the same vein, the participants' goals, choices, and actions in response to the dramatic event were coded into their agency.

The third stage of the data analysis deals with the generation of themes based on the meaningful connections among the categories, which were informed by the conceptual framework and previous literature. For example, a dramatic event was considered a precursor to their perezhivanie and subsequent professional agency (e.g., Golombek & Doran, 2014; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). Given the inter-relationship among these elements, the findings are organized based on the dramatic events, following which their associated perezhivanie and agency are explored.

The data analysis was first completed by the first researcher before the interpretations of individual codes and themes generated were cross-checked by the second author. Regular meetings were held among the authors to discuss emerging themes and verify interpretations of the codes.

4. Findings

In general, most of the dramatic events the educators encountered were related to student engagement or, more particularly, the gap between their expectations and the reality of student engagement. This tension was found to be the driving force behind their emotional and cognitive responses (perezhivanie), which in turn interplayed with their agentive actions to transform the events and perezhivanie.

4.1. Daisy: perezhivanie and agency in dealing with learners' lacking lesson revision and boredom

The first case in this study is a novice university educator who had been teaching for almost three years at the time of the data collection. The major dramatic event identified in Daisy's data was concerned with her teaching experiences in a linguistics class. It was her second lesson with them when a dramatic event occurred. She recalled:

> At the start of class, I was *very enthusiastic*. However, after a few questions to check their knowledge of the previous lesson, *I felt disappointed, quite annoyed, and frustrated* when my students did not revise their lesson. Despite having organized some fun games for them to remember the lesson content in the previous class, it seemed that *they did not bother revising and ended up not remembering anything*. As a result, *I lost my mood* and skipped the next fun game section that I had prepared for them at home. Was I *angry*? Maybe not to that level, but I certainly *felt quite annoyed and frustrated* at the beginning. (Daisy, Reflective Journal 2)

The dramatic event here for Daisy is the fact that her students failed to answer her questions about the content of the previous lesson. Her perezhivanie of the event, as indicated in the quote above, features an emotional shift from feeling enthusiastic to being annoyed and frustrated. Notably, Daisy's expectation that the students should have prepared adequately before coming to the class

contributed to her strongly tense emotional response (i.e., "Despite having organized some fun games for them to remember the lesson content in the previous class, it seemed that they did not bother revising it"). Her interpretation of the event was that the students did not revise the previous lesson. Faced with the unpleasant perezhivanie of the event, Daisy consequently decided to skip the game activity she had prepared for the students. In this case, her perezhivanie appears to have had an impact on her teaching practices and behaviors.

The second dramatic event also occurred in the second half of the lesson when Daisy noticed that the students started to become bored with her lesson.

> After the break, I needed to teach theoretical content. *I did notice some students yawning in class.* Another reason was that there were a few who did not pay attention. At that moment, *it was not that I was bored, but I felt that the lesson was not engaging or interesting enough.* Therefore, *my thinking was not as exciting as before, and the logic of the lesson suffered to a certain extent.* In general, I was not very happy or excited. (Daisy, Reflective Journal 2)

When seeing her students showing signs of boredom, such as yawning and not paying attention, Daisy seemed to become nervous, which in turn adversely influenced her thinking and teaching performance (i.e., "not as exciting as before, and the logic of the lesson suffered") and thus her agency to perform her teaching normally.

She described how she responded to the situation:

> After seeing the students become very bored, *I started to use 'fun tasks', which meant letting them play competitive games among groups*. This was done to reduce the boring climate. I asked them a few critical questions for further reflection, after which I seemed to be able to regain my mood. (Daisy, Reflective Journal 2)

To re-engage the students, Daisy employed 'fun tasks', which can be seen as an agentive move, informed by her emotional and cognitive experience of the dramatic event of students lacking engagement. Furthermore, in the second half of the quote, another agentive action was identified as Daisy asked students reflective questions in response to the situation. This action seemed to address both the students' engagement issue and her own emotions as part of her perezhivanie, and thus transformed her perezhivanie as well. This suggests a mutually influential relationship between her perezhivanie and agency within the situation identified.

This section highlights two dramatic events experienced by Daisy, a novice university educator, during her teaching experiences in a linguistics class. The first event occurred when her students failed to answer questions about the previous lesson, leading to feelings of annoyance and frustration. The second event took place when Daisy noticed signs of boredom among her students. These events influenced Daisy's emotional state, thinking, and teaching practices. She took agentive actions, such as implementing fun tasks and asking reflective questions, to re-engage the students and address the situation. The reflection suggests a reciprocal relationship between Daisy's emotional experiences (perezhivanie) and her agency as an educator.

4.2. Grace: perezhivanie and agency in addressing learners' reticence and lack of engagement

The second case in this study is Grace, an educator with roughly nine years of tertiary teaching experience. Similar to Daisy, students' lack of engagement underpinned major dramatic events for Grace and triggered her unpleasant perezhivanie. In particular, the source of these events came from a class to whom she taught English pronunciation. She elaborated on a dramatic event related to the students' reticence:

> If you observe my English pronunciation class, you will see them very, very quiet. It's the quietness that I am very afraid of.… Whenever I think of that class, I feel very sad.… In the first class, they [the students] were very quiet …. Despite having mentally prepared, I was quite annoyed. (Grace, Interview 2)

In experiencing these events, Grace's perezhivanie was pervasive with negative emotions (i.e., afraid, sad, and annoyed). These events had an impact on her even outside the classroom context, as she acknowledged, "Whenever I think of that class, I feel very sad." In her interpretation of the situation, Grace viewed it as being caused by a multitude of factors:

> From the first class, I have realized that it would require me to work harder in teaching this class … I personally think that the problem with disruptive students is that they were unable to concentrate on one task for long …. The class has a lot of good and active students. However, many others did not stay focused in class, probably because the lesson content appeared to be too easy for them, and partly because these students had a pattern of being disruptive … and some students showed up late for the class. At 7:30 am, they were still drifting in. Therefore, there have been many times that I felt rather annoyed and frustrated. (Grace, Reflective Journal 2)

As indicated in the quote, there are three major factors she interpreted to be the causes of the students' lack of learning engagement, namely their short attention span, the lesson's difficulty level, and partly some students' patterns of disruptive behaviors.

The above interpretations of the situation stemming from her perezhivanie were found to inform her subsequent agency. First, she varied her teaching activities, as she explained in her reflective journal: "So in the following classes, I tried to vary my learning tasks to capture the attention of the students" (Grace, Reflective Journal 2). Second, she designed educational games that were better suited to engaging her students and making the lesson more interactive and interesting for them.

> I always integrate the knowledge from the lessons into my games … From my
>
> observation, through playing games, the social relationships among students

become better. (Grace, Interview 2)

Grace's data also indicated that her object, which oriented her agency, was formed in a dynamic and complex rather than a straightforward manner, beyond knowledge-seeking and creating new pedagogical tools. Specifically, her teaching goals and pedagogical tasks for each lesson/class were regularly adjusted, as she explained:

> In the first few days, my teaching may be relatively fixed, but for later lessons, I base my decision to innovate or repeat my teaching activities on the characteristics of each class's students. (Grace, Interview 2)

Grace's agency in applying various learning activities was based on her perception of the classroom students' characteristics. Her decision was neither fixed nor stable but was conscious and goal-oriented. Her agency, in this case, involved her evaluation of the students' characteristics, seeking knowledge if needed, and making an informed decision on whether to repeat or create a new learning activity.

Another dramatic event was also associated with the second lesson. Graced recalled:

> Last Monday, before coming to the class, I was pretty sure that everything would be okay. To my surprise, when I stepped into the class, everything was exactly the same as the previous lesson. They [the students] were very slow and unresponsive, which soon made me feel annoyed …. I then had to go online and searched for another exercise; I called it 'morning exercise' … because when I asked them to move, dance, hold hands, and do things together, it helped them to get closer to each other. In general, I was irritated at the beginning, but after the morning exercise, my mood became a bit better. Then I started my teaching …. The teaching went fine and my mood gradually became better. For these students, at the beginning of the class, we had to do something to 'push' them a bit, such as doing some activities to make them feel ready for the lesson. When they are ready, everything is ok … I can then teach happily as usual. (Grace, Interview 1)

The situation above illustrated the transformation of Grace's emotions from feeling annoyed and irritated to becoming gradually more positive. More importantly, it demonstrated how her immediate agency in response to the dramatic event (i.e., seeking and utilizing physical exercises) mitigated the situation and gradually transformed her perezhivanie of it. Her agency in this case was partly informed by her interpretation of the situation that those students needed to be 'pushed' a bit or engage in some warm-up activities before being ready for lessons. Overall, the finding above demonstrated the influence of Grace's perezhivanie on her agency and the positive impact of her agency on transforming the emotional aspect of her perezhivanie.

Overall, this section underscores the significant influence of Grace's perezhivanie on her teaching agency and highlights the value of adaptive strategies in addressing student engagement challenges. It exemplifies how perezhivanie can inform educators' decision-making processes, prompting them to tailor their approaches and ultimately foster a more conducive learning environment.

5. Discussion

5.1. Impact of perezhivanie on educators' instruction and agency

The current study illustrated the potential impact of personal perezhivanie of classroom dramatic events on the educators' professional learning and instructional agency. It has been shown in the literature that when faced with unpleasant perezhivanie of dramatic events, teachers can engage in a range of agentic actions to address the situation, for instance, by improving their professional knowledge (e.g., Agnoletto et al., 2021; Dang, 2013; Golombek, 2015; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). This study provides empirical support for the applicability of this concept in the Vietnamese context, addressing the limited usage of the concept within the local context and highlighting its relevance in different cultural settings.

This study provides further insights into the cause and characteristics of teacher emotions. First, the finding in this research resonates with previous studies, highlighting expectation as an influential factor that determines the intensity of the participants' emotional experiences (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). For instance, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) studied the emotions of 15 university educators and concluded that "[a] major source of emotions appeared to be linked to whether the expectations that teachers held about students' engagement with their learning were fulfilled or not" (p. 249). Likewise, in Golombek and Doran's (2014) study, the gap between ideal and reality was contended to be a main source of emotional dissonance among the participants. Second, social relationships were further identified as the major source of teachers' emotions. In this study, the participants' emotions were largely found to be rooted in their interactions with students or the students' behaviors in class. This is in line with Benesch's (2018) conclusion that teachers' emotions are socially constructed and underscores the role of relationships in human development from a cultural-historical perspective. As Vygotsky (1929/1989) contends, "[g]enetically social relations, real relations between people, underlie all higher functions and their relationships" (p. 58).

While there was no formal counting of the emotions performed in this study, the majority of emotions reported by the participants when facing classroom tensions were initially negative. This aligns with the findings of Beltman and Poulton (2019), indicating that compared to positive emotions, teachers tend to pay more attention to negative or difficult emotions. Also, since the focus of this study is on dramatic events, teacher emotions are likely negative. However, rather than promoting the transformative effect of emotions or arguing against them (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Chang, 2009), the findings in the current study provided a nuanced understanding of emotions and their influence on teacher agency. The manifestation of negative emotions, as evidenced in the cases of Daisy and Grace, can have adverse effects on their overall well-being and impede their ability to effectively carry out their teaching responsibilities. Simultaneously, these emotional challenges can also serve as catalysts for their agency-driven efforts to enhance the situation, such as

implementing educational games as a pedagogical intervention. This provides empirical support for the finding in Benesch's (2018) study, where she explored 13 English language teachers at a university in the US and found teacher emotions as "a social tool for teacher-initiated reform" (p. 62).

This study further supports previous literature concerning the role of teacher cognition in ameliorating or transforming negative emotions, specifically the educators' capacity for reflecting on the situation to gain more constructive insights. For example, Beltman and Poulton (2019) found in their study with 73 teachers that the capacity for reflection on the situation usually after taking a break to calm down emerged as a crucial quality for teachers in effectively managing and transforming their emotions. In this study, while encountering intense negative emotions that significantly impacted their teaching performance, Daisy and Grace were able to ameliorate the circumstances and improve their instructional practices through the discovery and implementation of coping strategies. This highlights the importance of reflective practices in fostering teacher agency and enhancing professional development.

Another point worth highlighting from the findings in this study is that emotions alone were inadequate in instigating change or development; the interplay of teacher cognition (including reflective capacity, knowledge, and skills) appeared to mediate the link between teachers' emotions and their agency in response to dramatic events. Consequently, this finding points out the significance of knowledge and reflective capacity and calls for a more nuanced and dynamic perspective regarding the various types and roles of emotions in relation to teacher agency and professional growth (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Leijen et al., 2020; Pantić, 2021).

5.2. Impact of agency on the educators' perezhivanie and professional practices

The cases of Daisy and Grace provide insights into the impact and process where the educators' agentic actions generate a positive impact on teachers' perezhivanie, particularly their emotional experiences of tensions. The findings in this research thus echo the results of recent studies that pointed out the dialectical relationship between teacher perezhivanie and agency (e.g., Yang, 2021).

The findings in this study underscore educators' personal capacity as a decisive factor in determining their agency manifestations and outcomes. This agentic capacity involves at least the ability to interpret and reflect on the situation as well as the ability to devise and implement appropriate and effective problem-solving actions in response. Both Daisy's and Grace's agency was guided by their interpretations of the situation – for example, students' lack of engagement being attributed to a short attention span and physical tiredness in the morning, as well as the perception that the lesson content was not sufficiently interesting for them. The value of personal agentic capacity has been highlighted in Hadar and Benish-Weisman's (2019) study with 1197 teachers as the key factor that enabled them to translate their goals, intentions, and values into reality.

Previous scholars have documented various forms of agency that teachers employ to address a challenging situation and/or transform their negative emotions. Yuan et al. (2019), for instance, reported on the case of Francis, who sought help from peers as a form of agency, which was then found to help him "cope with learning obstacles and negative emotions" (p. 982). By the same token, Beltman and Poulton (2019) analyzed the responses of 73 teachers studying an online professional resilience course and identified four major categories of teachers' conscious actions to manage their negative experiences of classroom events, including taking a break from the conflictual situation to manage the emotions, reflecting on the situation for further insights or empathy, problem-solving the situation, and practising self-care.

5.3. Theoretical and practical implications

The study findings have both theoretical and practical implications for investigating and supporting teacher agency in classroom transformation. Firstly, this study contributes a theoretical model to the literature that facilitates an examination of the dialectical relationship between perezhivanie and agency across developmental stages. It posits social relations and the environment as sources of development, with dramatic events acting as the catalyst. This perspective aligns with the core principles of cultural-historical theory, which emphasizes that genetically social relations underpin all higher mental functions, and that their development is most fully realized in dramatic forms (Vygotsky, 1929/1989). The model illustrates the developmental process where teachers' perezhivanie of dramatic events, emerging from the social environment, can act as a catalyst for teacher agency for pedagogical change (Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22; Zhang et al., 2022). In this model, perezhivanie serves as a theoretical lens to explore the trajectory of teacher agency (Smirnova, 2023; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). Smirnova (2023) contends that analyzing teachers' perezhivanie helps to shed light on their motives as the inner drivers of their agency. Teacher agency from a CHAT perspective, as examined in this study, involves three analytical dimensions: object-orientedness, mediatedness, and situatedness. The teachers' objectives or motives can be shaped by the educators' perezhivanie of the situation, while their agency performance is influenced by personal, relational, and contextual resources or constraints.

Overall, this research advances an integrative cultural-historical framework that draws on relevant concepts from Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory and CHAT. The iCHAT model in this study allows for an investigation into teachers' cognitive-emotional experiences and professional agency for change and development across space, from the social environment to the social situation of development, and across time, from encountering dramatic events to experiencing, processing, and responding to these events. The conceptual framework emphasizes the inherent and inseparable nature of these components in driving teachers' choices and behaviors related to pedagogical or curriculum change.

On the other hand, this study underscores the necessity to comprehend and support teacher agency in two fundamental developmental stages: managing (strong) emotional reactions and developing appropriate and effective problem-solving strategies. When confronted with dramatic events in classrooms, it is crucial for teachers to remain calm to facilitate effective thinking and planning (e.g., Beltman & Poulton, 2019). At this stage, the crucial role of emotional regulation strategies comes into play. For instance, taking a

step back to manage strong emotions is a common mindfulness strategy for emotional management among teachers, as reported by Beltman and Poulton (2019). Then, the capacity to reflect and gain deep, constructive insights into the dramatic situation or tension is a desirable quality to be enhanced among teachers, as their interpretations or insights into the situation largely determine their agentic response (e.g., Cong-Lem et al., 2023; Yang, 2019; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021, pp. 1–22). In this regard, prior research has emphasized the importance of offering teachers opportunities to participate in reflective activities, facilitated through methods such as reflective journals or dialogues with colleagues, students, and self (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Khong et al., 2023).

Finally, when managing dramatic events, which often evoke strong emotions, teachers should be equipped with social-emotional skills such as mindfulness and the ability to set realistic/strategic expectations for their students' behaviors/performance (Beltman & Poulton, 2019; Buettner et al., 2016). The outcomes from these skills would assist teachers in classroom management and building trusting relationships, which are essential for students' outcomes and teacher agency (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Thornberg et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the relationship between Vietnamese EFL teachers' perezhivanie of classroom-based dramatic events and their professional agency in response. Drawing on the theoretical premises of CHAT and perezhivanie, the analysis of interviews and reflective journal data showed that the educators' experiences, referred to as perezhivanie, significantly influenced their teaching agency. When faced with student disengagement, both educators experienced negative emotions, such as frustration and sadness. However, their immediate agency, informed by their interpretations of the situations, led to the implementation of adaptive strategies, including varying teaching activities and designing interactive learning tasks. Through these strategies, the educators were able to transform their perezhivanie, create a more engaging classroom environment, and sustain their professional well-being.

This study is not without limitations. As a case study, the sample size is small, and the findings may not be generalizable to other populations or contexts. Readers of this research are thus advised to consider the similarities in the research contexts in making decisions about utilizing findings in this study. Future research should consider recruiting a larger sample to contribute rich empirical insights on the relation between perezhivanie and teacher agency. Also, although the analysis was open to any emotions associated with dramatic classroom events, the data revealed that the educators experienced mostly negative emotions. This suggests that more research is needed to understand the sources of positive emotions and how they can also have an influence on teacher agency for change and innovation. Lastly, this investigation is limited to the educators' classroom context, and thus future research should further examine teacher agency enacted for change and development beyond the classroom.

Ethics approval statement

This study was approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 2020-25304-47474).

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ngo Cong-Lem: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Minh Hue Nguyen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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