Activity Theory and Language Teacher Agency

ANNE FERYOK
University of Otago
Department of English
PO Box 56
Dunedin 9054
New Zealand
Email: anne.feryok@otago.ac.nz

This article takes a broadly sociocultural perspective on the development of an Armenian English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher. It focuses on how experiences and actions outside the professional development classroom influence language teacher agency. The paper is framed within activity theory and specifically draws on Galperin’s orienting activity, the psychological process of regulating internalization, which may occur through an image that guides actions. Data from email interviews, oral interviews, and classroom observations are iteratively analyzed to show how the participant oriented to her actions through a specific image. This image was based on the participant’s early experiences with her English teacher as a school pupil, and it mediated her developing sense of agency by guiding the way she engaged in individual actions as a language teaching student, English teacher, and teacher trainer. The participant appeared to be leading emerging activity in her local teaching situation, but social activity provided the requisite background to her individual actions. The article concludes by suggesting that individual agentive actions can contribute to local social activity, that professional development occurs over a life, and that case studies may contribute to professional development not only as a model of personal reflection but also as a professional call to action.

RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE TEACHING AND teacher development has undergone evolutionary, even revolutionary, changes in the past 40 years with growing recognition of teaching as both individually practiced and socially situated (Borg, 2006; Freeman, 2002; K. E. Johnson, 2009). To illustrate the range between the individual and the social in teacher development, the role played by the “stories” teachers tell about their contextualized personal experience has long been advocated (e.g., Freeman, 1996), while the role played by social structures, particularly of the constraints imposed by state institutions, has also long been recognized (Crookes, 1997).

It is no surprise, then, that K. E. Johnson (2009) has recently argued that “L2 teacher education needs to redraw the boundaries that have typically defined professional development” (p. 5), suggesting that teacher educators recognize that learning goes on “beyond visible professional development activities” (p. 5). Taking a sociocultural approach would acknowledge both the social forces and the individual experiences that shape language teaching “while embracing the processes of teacher socialization that occur in classrooms, schools, and wider professional communities” (p. 6).

Studies aimed at uncovering the roles of personal experience and the wider context on language teachers include various topics and settings, such as Johnston’s (1997) study of English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher careers in Poland, and Duff and Uchida’s (1997) study of the identities and classroom practices of EFL teachers in Japan. This variation is also evident in studies linking contextual influences with institutional expectations and teacher agency, as Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2003) did in their study of
a U.S.–German cross-cultural telecollaboration project, and as Tsui (2007) did in her life history study of a Chinese EFL teacher.

One especially telling example of contextual influences on a teacher is in an anecdote that Pavlenko (2003) uses to highlight the impact of national ideology on language policy. In it, an English teacher explicitly draws on Soviet ideology to exhort students to study hard so they can translate “the language of the enemy” — which prompts one student, Pavlenko, to change to French. In Pavlenko’s example the teacher acts in accord with national ideological expectations. Yet teachers, like Pavlenko as a student in the anecdote, do not always do so. How do teachers learn to act on their own goals, whether or not they align with those of society? To wonder about this is to wonder about how a language teacher develops a sense of agency.

This study examines agency in language teacher development by focusing on a single case study of an Armenian EFL teacher. It does so within the broadly sociocultural perspective of activity theory, which considers the roles of both the individual and the social in activity. This approach is, therefore, particularly relevant for language teaching and for language teacher development, much of which occurs within an activity system regulated by the state, where the goals of language teachers may be reinforced or constrained by the motives of the state school system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Activity Theory

A number of approaches have arisen from Vygotsky’s work that are often grouped under the label sociocultural theory, with different claims made about the suitability of the label for different approaches (Kozulin, 1986; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; van Lier, 2004; Wertsch, 1985). What unites the different branches is the essential idea that all human development is mediated (Engeström, 1999); what distinguishes them is how mediation is conceptualized. For some the label sociocultural theory points to mediation as semiotic (for example, see van Lier, 2004, and Engeström, 2001), based on Vygotsky’s (1986) notion of the “word.” Vygotsky also raised the idea of meaningful social activity as a means of mediation (Lantolf & Appel, 1994), which was developed by Leontiev (1978, 1981) and others, including Galperin (1989a, 1989b, 1992), and is typically labeled activity theory. Although there has been debate concerning the use of the concept of activity as both object and means of analysis, it has also been suggested that this provides an empirical ground in keeping with the origins of the theory (Engeström, 1999).

As articulated by Leontiev (1981), activity theory distinguishes between social motives at the level of activity, individual goals at the level of actions, and concrete operations used to achieve goals. As with Vygotsky’s idea that functions appear twice, first interpersonally and then intrapersonally, so with activity, which appears first materially and then mentally, as an image (Galperin, 1992; Leontiev, 1978). As Leontiev (1978) explained, because of the unique set of particular circumstances that differ for each individual, there will always be a discrepancy or gap between personal meaning and social reality. Thus, an individual may not be fully aware of material activity, only of their personalized understanding of it, and may attribute their own actions (that is, their role in activity) to that personalized understanding. Through development personal meaning can be transformed, thereby lessening the gap with social reality.

Galperin, like Vygotsky, was concerned with developing a non-reductionist account of the subject matter of psychology (Haenen, 1998), as is captured in his focus on internalization or the transition from action to thought, which he termed orienting activity (Haenen, 2001). Orienting activity is the visualization or verbalization of the performance of an external action that contributes to its internalization (Galperin, 1989b). Orienting activity includes both the actor’s conceptual understanding and its meaningfulness for the individual (Galperin, 1992). The importance of orienting activity lies in presenting a “field of possible action” (Galperin, 1992, p. 55) where procedural options can be considered, rather than haphazardly chosen through trial and error (Galperin, 1989b). Visualization or verbalization, such as a mental model or image, slows down the procedure, making the means for achieving a goal available for inspection and control (Galperin, 1967), which facilitates identification and correction of missteps (Galperin, 1989a). Although this step-wise procedure was developed for pedagogical purposes (Haenen, 2001), as noted earlier, Galperin’s aim was to explore more generally how mental action develops from material action, “as the fundamental mechanism of human learning and development” (Arievitch, 2003, p. 286).

Activity theory continues to be developed, particularly the different levels of activity, the interrelationships between social or collective activity
systems, and the role of historicity and diversity, which have been elaborated by Engeström (1999, 2001). Recent work highlights how motives, systems, and time contextualize actions: “Activity theory conceptualizes actions in the broader perspectives of their systematic and motivational context and, thus, aims at going beyond a given situation” (Sannino, Daniels, & Gutiérrez, 2009). It acknowledges the historical past and the present and is aimed toward the future (Sannino et al., 2009).

These developments suggest that an activity theory analysis of individual actions would examine them within the social and historical context of the activity system in which they occur. This accords with interpretations of Galperin that claim “individual mental development is the gradual internalization and transformation of socially constructed shared activities” (Arievitch, 2003, p. 284).

Agency

Agency is a complex notion, with different approaches to agency founded on different assumptions. One view of agency focuses on the individual exercise of power; it includes the interrelated notions of someone (or something, i.e., an institution) having control over behavior, being able to produce an effect with consequences, and being subject to evaluation (Duranti, 2004/2006). Although it is clear in this view that others can impinge on acts of agency, it focuses on the agent and the control, power, and value of her acts.

Another view of agency focuses on how it is constituted by relationships and holds that it is mediated (Ahearn, 2001). This view situates agency within its social context, including past history, current situation, and future prospects; it recognizes agency in responses to the affordances and constraints of a particular context (van Lier, 2002); it understands agency as including intentionality and the attribution of meaningfulness (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This view makes agency “a contextually enacted way of being in the world” (van Lier, 2008), involving both what is done and how it is understood to be significant (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). This acknowledgment of context places agency displayed through action at the individual level within an activity system at the social level.

Within agency theory, individual agency has been conceptualized as being on a continuum with society, with both viewed as co-evolving processes that originate in and serve everyday practices (Stetsenko, 2005; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). Individuals are understood as being practically relevant (as they perform actions that contribute to social activity), just as social practices are understood to be personally relevant (as they contribute to the meaningfulness of individual actions), making the individual and the social mutually influential (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). Individuals can transform social reality in the production of new activities in everyday social practices and in that sense they “lead” emerging forms of activity through individual agency (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004).

AIMS

Galperin’s notion of orienting activity may be useful in exploring agency in action and activity. Galperin eschewed relying on observation rather than studying action under development (Arievitch, 2003). Nonetheless, different types of actions may require different techniques. It is possible that an analysis of retrospective accounts may offer insight into how an individual orients to action and activity over time. The material origins of the image and the development of the image itself may be traced through the way an individual represents and situates their actions within the social activity system, thereby illuminating the individual goals and social motives that an individual regards as meaningful. In this way individual agency may be revealed.

Galperin’s field of possible action suggests that agency is realized by choosing different possible individual actions within an activity system and its interrelationships with other activity systems. It may be possible for individuals to test or stretch or push beyond the established boundaries of a field in a particular locale through their agentive actions; one way would be through distributing individual knowledge of other practices in other activity systems that has not yet been widely disseminated. This extension of what is possible within a field of action would show an individual contributing to the transformation of activity.

Yet clearly there are many constraints on the development and expression of agency, including the reproduction of activities and attitudes in the socialization processes that K. E. Johnson (2009) referred to and that Crookes (1997) focused on. Lortie (1975) famously directed attention to the apprenticeship of observation, the constraint that years of being a student within a system may have on teacher development. The apprenticeship of observation is often viewed as a conservative force reinforcing tradition and preventing teacher education from having its desired effect. However, observation is also a source of experience for
reflection, as Freeman (1996) noted. Student experience might also prime development by facilitating recognition of and openness to certain possible actions, thus acting as a historical antecedent that reaches into the future to guide action. In other words, personal experiences in local contexts may be the material origins of individual professional development.

This article seeks to answer the following question: How does a language teacher develop a sense of agency? The article will focus on personal experiences beyond the professional development classroom. The answer will be organized as a single case study of an Armenian English language teacher who developed her sense of agency in the changing activity of language teaching in Soviet and independent Armenia by considering her understanding of her experiences as a student, teacher, and teacher trainer.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Participants**

The participant in this study is an Armenian EFL teacher who agreed to participate in a larger study on personal practical theories that focused on the role of experience and belief in the integration of theory and practice (Feryok, 2005). The original study invited 2 cohorts of a postgraduate Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program at a Western-sponsored institution in Armenia, where 2 years prior to data collection I had taught for 2 years. Of the original 6 participants, 3 were experienced teachers and 3 inexperienced. This study focuses on 1 of the experienced teachers, Nune (a pseudonym), who had been educated in Soviet Armenia and began her teaching career there in a state school in the late 1980s. Later, after Armenian independence, Nune enrolled in the TEFL program. The data were collected 3 years after Nune graduated. Nune continued teaching in the same state school throughout this period. Further details are in the findings. Specific dates and names that might compromise the anonymity of the participant have been omitted or altered.

**Data Collection**

The original data included semi-structured email interviews (see Feryok, 2008, on this term), collected over a 6-month period; two on-site classroom observations; and one on-site oral interview, all at the participant’s convenience within the timeframe of my on-site visit. The oral interview was a semi-structured interview individually designed to provide an opportunity to discuss classroom observations and revisit topics from the email interviews. It was digitally recorded and broadly transcribed for content using digital software, with shorter and longer pauses and falling and rising intonations roughly indicated. (See Appendix for transcription conventions.) Original transcripts were provided to the participant for comments; none were made. The original recordings were eventually destroyed in accordance with ethical guidelines.

Although further detail in the transcriptions would be useful, all transcription involves omission as well as interpretation (Gee, 1999). In this study the focus is on content analysis, which does not require the same degree of detail with respect to intonation and pauses as does interactional and conversation analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Since this study deals with self-reported data, I will discuss the discursive construction of this research, following Pavlenko (2007). When collecting the data I rather uncritically assumed, as apparently the participant did, that the medium of the research would be English. Because an interlocutor can influence an interviewee, I will point out that besides being an instructor of the participant, I was widely known to have come to Armenia as the spouse of a Western diplomat, although when I returned to conduct the research it was as a private individual. These factors may have influenced participant responses. However, I will also note, as mentioned in an earlier article on the participant’s classroom teaching cognitions and practices, that the participant not only discussed her commitment to the English language, but also her concern over its growing role and the influence of Western culture that might threaten Armenian identity (see Feryok, 2008). This suggests that the participant did not appear constrained by a particular monolithic view, although that does not mean she was not influenced.

This analysis is a descriptive case study (Duff, 2008) aimed at exploring the complexity and dynamism of an individual’s actions within their context (D. M. Johnson, 1992). For this study, I began by drawing on the original account (Feryok, 2005, briefly described earlier) of data analyzed through grounded theory and constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), focusing on the sections concerning the participant’s actions as a teacher. I then returned to the original email and oral interview transcripts, where I had recalled passages concerning the participant as a student and as a teacher trainer that had not been
discussed in the original account (since that study had different aims). I identified and organized information that struck me as salient to the participant’s own actions and her perceptions of the activity systems in which she was involved, which led me to realize that temporal sequencing would show any learning and development. After this reorganization I recognized that the information the participant had provided formed three broad stages (student, teacher, teacher trainer), which offered a framework for her developing agency. This recognition led me to fine-tune the data presentation and analysis concurrent with drafting. This account of my analysis, therefore, displays the iterative nature of qualitative research, with each analysis bootstrapping the next as patterns emerge through successive reorganizations of information that enable further insights into their significance.

Using three sets of data collected through different methods (email interviews, observations, spoken interview) I triangulated the data (Duff, 2008). Of particular relevance may be the way in which the spoken data expand the written data. Although this was sometimes by my design, often it was through the initiative of the participant, who recognized the oral interview as an opportunity to elaborate what she deemed to be significant. I did not recognize this until this study, where the participant’s interest in discussing her experiences as an English language learner and her opinions on professional development and education in Armenia finally emerged as a focus rather than a distraction to me, much as Riessman (2008) describes her own research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is organized around Nune’s (a) experiences as a student, (b) experiences as a teacher, and (c) experiences as a teacher trainer. Each section will present evidence from the data of how Nune’s understanding of her personal experiences within a changing context contributed to her professional development. I show this by discussing how her experiences learning language in school contributed to an image that oriented her to developing a sense of agency by guiding her later actions as a language teaching student, English teacher, and teacher trainer.

Nune’s Experiences as a Student: Language and Teacher Education in Soviet Armenia

Nune was proud of her efforts to learn the English language, to which she attributed her realization that “nothing is impossible to a willing heart, and that real success comes in small portions everyday” (1–1). (See Appendix for data reference and transcription conventions.) Nune’s experience learning English as a school pupil is the material and social origin, and “a willing heart” with resolve and persistence is the internalized image that has oriented Nune to her agentic actions as a language teaching student, English teacher, and teacher trainer.

Nune was first exposed to English at school in the third grade in the 1970s, although “then English was not popular among the Armenians and only devoted people liked and investigated this language, among them my beloved teacher” (1–1). Her influence on Nune was profound, with Nune saying, “I’d like to be similar to her...I chose teaching to be my major as I thought it is the best thing close to my heart and my teacher advised me to” (1–2). Nune’s descriptions of her experiences as a pupil focused on her teacher.

She had so much inner strength and perfect knowledge of English, she possessed all the means of dealing with the students and she was highly creative, understanding. I dare say that even the teachers of those times working at my school envied her for being a respected teacher. We saw her manners of behaving, speaking to the students, and liked her for being sincere with us. She knew what she wanted to do and could furnish her students with headphones by her own expense. Later when I started my career I understood that it is very difficult to build something somewhere you had a lot of obstacles but a great army of students. (6–2)

In the oral interview Nune expanded on this passage, specifying the kinds of classroom activities she experienced as a learner and the obstacles her teacher faced. She summed up the activities as “some activities which we now call new ones,” and pointed out “educational officials didn’t understand her” (p. 11). When prompted for examples she immediately mentioned student choice of discussion topics, recording sessions, listening classes, and later added classroom decorations, a class library, individual dictionaries for students, and a map of Great Britain with lights for industrial cities, all “created by her own resolve, by her willingness” (p. 12). Nune also described the obstacles that stymied her teacher’s actions: She was forbidden to use the headphones; she was refused help for organizing listening lessons in other classes; the classroom decorations and books were stolen; and when she used the map “everything was spoiled because...the lights went off” (p. 12). In this way Nune presented her teacher persisting in innovation after innovation despite each new...
obstacle, adding that “we as students, as pupils, feel that these are artificial obstacles.”

Nune’s later experiences as a language teaching student show her acting in the same way as she had seen her teacher act, often with her teacher there to guide her. When Nune graduated she attempted to gain entry to a prestigious tertiary institution, the one her teacher had graduated from and had recommended to her, in order to become an English teacher. Entry was by competitive examination, which Nune took three times before succeeding. She attributed her difficulties to having had only 2 hours of English instruction a week, compared to students at specialized language schools with 9 hours a week (Monk, 1990). To retake the examination, “I had to work in a factory as it was a compulsory condition to have an experience of 6 months for each year in order to reapply to the Institute” (1–1). Nune studied at night with her English teacher and continued to work full-time in a factory for 2 years “and finally I managed to break the wall of misfortune, due to my hard work and willpower, persistence and sleepless nights” (1–1).

Nune was very successful at the institute, although “another stage of difficulties awaited me.” Nune was devastated by the untimely loss of her mother midway through her studies, but with the support of her English teacher “who treated me very dearly…she was beside me all the time” (6–2), Nune carried on with her studies, getting high enough marks to graduate with honors and a Red Diploma, which meant she was not required to take an assigned position (typically in a rural school). She took non-teaching work for 2 years while waiting for an opening at her own school because “I wanted to continue those good traditions existing in our school connected with English” (1–1).

Nune’s descriptions of her language and teacher education focus on facing and persevering in spite of obstacles, shown through the personal characteristics of persistence and resolve. These display the individual exercise of power and control over personal behavior of traditional views of agency. More relevant, however, is that they show how Nune responded to the constraints of her situation by acting on the few available affordances, including the support of her English teacher. Nune also aimed her actions toward the future (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004), investing them with intentionality (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), so that shift work in a factory became a means for becoming a teacher and not just a means for manufacturing a product. By being imbued with Nune’s commitments, the everyday social activities that Nune performed exhibit her agency (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004).

The actions of Nune’s English teacher, apparently at the boundaries of socially established activity, not only acted as a model and support for Nune as a student, but more importantly formed the basis for an image of teacher action within the Armenian educational activity system that has oriented Nune to her own field of possible action (Galperin, 1992) as a teacher and teacher trainer. It is the social and material origin of her developing sense of agency as a language teacher, and it is based on personal experiences that occurred outside of the professional development classroom.

Nune’s Experiences as a Teacher: Changing Activity in a Changing Context

Nune began teaching in the late 1980s, while Armenia was still a republic of the Soviet Union. She made conflicting statements about teaching during that period. On the one hand, “there were some valuable methods in teaching in the Soviet Union the results of which are the representatives of my generation” (1–1), thanks to “textbooks with rich information of English language and literature” that used “bottom-up sequenced activities which are very useful to students working under the supervision of skilled teachers” (1–5). On the other hand, Nune also explained that in the textbooks she had used as a teacher, English was taught through Russian because “they are meant for Russian pupils particularly…the grammar is compared with Russian” (1–5) as was pronunciation, and only Russian names, holidays, and traditions were used.

Nune also noted advantages and disadvantages to having a state-mandated syllabus during Soviet times. It established goals and was thus helpful for teacher planning, but “the limitation of the syllabus is its not taking into account individual differences, subjective views, emotions, personality factors, learning styles” (3–4). However, when questioned further, Nune noted, “If you want to have some extra activities you can do it during your forty or forty-five minutes, but no, well, not just limitation of the syllabus, no variation of the syllabus” (p. 8). The English language teaching methodology textbook that Nune had used during her pedagogical training was quite clear on this point:

The syllabus, therefore, is a state document which lays down the aims of teaching, the extent of the knowledge, habits and skills pupils acquire, the sequence of topics which constitute the academic content of the subject. The syllabus is an essential
document for every teacher, and he is responsible for the fulfillment of its requirements. The teacher cannot make alterations to the syllabus. The syllabus is uniform for all teachers working in schools of the given type. (Rogova, 1975, p. 53)

This suggests not only the interest of the state in foreign language teaching (see Pavlenko, 2003) but also the extent to which the state maintained its role in the socialization of teachers into state-mandated practices. It provides a context for the previously quoted statement Nune made that retrospectively expressed her awareness of the obstacles facing her English teacher’s actions, establishing Nune’s continued use of her teacher as the orientation for her actions. These actions were specifically grounded in a Soviet context with clear, even rigid, boundaries for some types of action. This general context would be familiar to others working in Soviet Armenia, but for Nune it had a specific set of associations with the agentive actions of her English teacher. Education in Armenia can be said to have both remained the same and changed dramatically in the early years of Armenian independence (which occurred in 1991). Educational reform was slow to begin, initially focusing on decentralizing administration and instituting textbook reform. However, even 10 years after independence I saw 20- and 30-year-old Soviet textbooks still in use in schools. This issue also reflects the dramatic change: Independence (and closed borders as a result of a conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan) brought about the collapse of the Armenian economy. Nune’s description of those years presents her own perspective:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the attitude towards education has changed greatly as everybody’s concern was to support their families and find jobs because the factories were closed, the population became unemployed, there was a blockade for goods providers and the uncertainty lasted for years. In these years no electricity was available for Armenians and even the lessons were done under the light of candles. (5–1)

It is perhaps not surprising that Nune describes teachers as “heroes” (3–3) for working under such conditions. Although conditions had improved considerably by the time I interviewed her in Armenia, Nune pointed out that “the status of teachers has fallen greatly...formerly in the Soviet Union the teacher was more respected than now,” leading her to add, “I hope that the status of teachers in some years will be the same as it was in the former Soviet years” (p. 15).

Nune linked her concern about the status of teachers with the changing motives of a changing society where education was becoming a commodity, not valuable in itself but as a means to an end, “so you pay and you get the market you want. It means out of this pain [of the collapsed economy and blockade] and the market [economic and fiscal reforms] every other valuable thing is left. Knowledge is left aside” (p. 15). Although Nune acknowledged that, like herself and others of her generation, “some students simply love the language or are simply interested” (1–5), in addition they are aware that “if they know the language they will get a better paid job, hence they start to learn it” (1–5). Thus, Nune expressed awareness of how a changing society influences personal attitudes and goals.

These changes also affected Nune’s attitude toward her own teaching. In the midst of these changes, Nune took 3 years of compulsory maternity leave. When she returned to her job, she felt “maybe I’m not appropriate for nowadays” because of “all these doubts, all these doubts. And so I decided firmly that I should have another chance” (p. 11), prompting her to enroll in the TEFL program. Nune began taking classes, feeling that “every time when I come back from [the program] I just feel very confident” because “I find responses in myself. I think that I’m thinking in the same way, but how, why couldn’t I think about it before? ... It is the same thing that I had inside me” (p. 11). In an email interview Nune also referred to this sense of previous knowledge, saying that in the methods and materials course “I thought that I found a great forgotten thing” (4–1). She immediately began putting the ideas from her TEFL classes into practice: “I heard [the] lectures, I came into my classroom, and I tried to develop this” (p. 11). (Classroom observations 3 years after the program showed Nune still used a variety of activities that she attributed to the TEFL program, and her lessons appeared to largely be self-planned and use self-made materials [see Feryok, 2008].) How did Nune’s sense of previous knowledge and willingness to experiment in her classroom arise?

When I tried to clarify this by comparing Nune’s learning as a teacher with statements she had made about the need to make her students’ unconscious knowledge conscious, she agreed, saying:

Yes, of course it happened to me because for example all these thoughts [about teaching activities] were unconsciously entered in my inner world. Also I mentioned I had a teacher and she also did something
some activities which we call now new ones. But those times the educational officials didn’t understand her better. (p. 11)

In this passage Nune uses her English teacher as a way of orienting to her own teaching, as the source of her “unconsciously entered” knowledge of the kinds of activities her teacher had used.

However, because the context for teaching English had changed, Nune did not appear to face any obstacles over introducing novel practices in her classroom; as she pointed out, “They [the school head and other teachers] know my lessons are creative and a bit different. . . . After graduating [from the TEFL program], my colleagues try to cooperate with me, being informed about the effective approaches, activities, and new items related to school” (2-1). Here Nune presents herself as a resource for her colleagues who have not had the opportunity for the same professional development but who also face the same changing conditions. The changing motives for language learning at the social level have influenced the perception and reception of action within Nune’s school so that there no longer appears to be the same degree of constraint on what a teacher can do in the classroom. Thus, Nune is freer to express her agency in the classroom than her teacher had been.

Although the TEFL program was a source of knowledge and skills, the source Nune has identified for her positive responses and active engagement is located outside of it. The conditions for change were her personal struggles as a teacher in a period of national upheaval with rapid social, political, and economic change. The image that oriented her to take a positive and active approach to these struggles was based on her personal experiences as a school pupil who enjoyed novel classroom practices but also witnessed the difficulties they created for her teacher.

Just as Nune overcame the obstacles she faced as a student, so she overcame the obstacle she faced as a teacher, through an active resolved effort to address it. Her doubts “firmly decided” her on a course of action aimed at a goal which required persistence. Nune further demonstrated her commitment by working full-time while taking classes (and, it might be added, managing her family’s domestic life). Again, her actions not only meet the historical and future-oriented nature of activity (Engeström, 1999; Sannino et al., 2009), as the kind of teaching that, in the past, apparently led her teacher into difficulties in the future led Nune to success. Besides contributing to altering her practices, Nune’s professional development also enabled her informally to act as a resource for her colleagues. Two activity systems, that of the Western TEFL program (and the many activity systems implicated in it) and that of her own neighborhood Armenian school (and the many activity systems implicated in it) have met through Nune’s everyday social practices (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). Just as the social context has affected Nune’s actions, so Nune’s developing sense of agency has affected the context in which she works.

Nune’s Experiences as a Teacher Trainer: Individual Action Leading Emerging Activity

In the previous section it is apparent that in taking action to address her own needs, Nune recognized similar needs in her colleagues who faced the same changing English teaching situation. Nune began to consider a more formal approach to the professional development of her colleagues. In doing this Nune expanded the field of action in which she operated, with obstacles as a consequence of this action.

Nune spoke of several motivations for taking this course of action. First, and perhaps most importantly, Nune had personal experience of a problem that she felt she had the professional knowledge to address. Besides the school that Nune had attended and now worked in, there was another school in the same neighborhood for students with a particular disability; many of its graduates settled in the neighborhood because they were familiar with it and their disability was accommodated there. Their children, seldom disabled themselves, attended Nune’s school. Nune believed these students had academic potential, but that her colleagues largely believed “there are
students who are clever and there are students who are stupid because their parents and family members are not helping them a lot and because they live in poor conditions and they have no opportunity to even buy a book” (p. 16).

Second, Nune believed that in general teachers had few professional development opportunities for personal, economic, and socio-political reasons. She acknowledged that many of them were uninterested, “They don’t even want to see” (p. 7), and that this indifference resulted in professional stagnation. “Life is going on and you are just separated, in your home, and no information out, no information in. You think that you are right, everything you do, and no criteria for being developed, no steps for going ahead” (p. 18). However, Nune also recognized that economic conditions limited attendance at what few professional development opportunities did exist because “Our teachers have a problem with money and that’s why they don’t want to go even by marshutka [inexpensive mini-bus transportation] because they don’t have this hundred drams [about 20 cents]. And this hundred drams is a loaf of bread” (p. 18).

Thus, in Nune’s opinion, these two reasons meant “That’s why the government should take some steps, some measures to make teachers’ lives more professionally developed. . . . If the government wants to recover education, the government should send a specialist to every school, and in this case these teachers will willingly listen to, be present at all seminars” (p. 18). But as she noted, “It is not undertaken in our society, the professional development of the teachers” (p. 18).

These personal experiences and national conditions were the motivations for Nune’s involvement as a presenter and teacher trainer in a series of professional development seminars. The seminars were supported by a Western development organization that provided training and coordination for the seminars and modest compensation for presenters, who were local Armenian teachers and teacher educators.

Nune described how her initial efforts were stymied by her local school head, who “even said no seminars without the permission of the Ministry of Education,” which was justified with the explanation “that it wasn’t mentioned in [the] syllabus” (6–1). Although the seminar coordinator came out to the school for an initial session, “all my efforts gathering the teachers were in vain as they were afraid to attend the seminars,” explaining that “[the head] didn’t allow the teachers to join us” (6–1). Nune thought these objections were specious, explaining, “[they] don’t like new ideas, they are conservative” and “they thought I got a lot of money and expected me to share it with them” (6–1).

Nune did not give up but made use of the resources she had, the unused photocopied from the unattended seminars and her persuasive powers, to gain the support of her colleagues:

Everything was just done individually. . . . “Take this and read it if you have time. It has already been made, these copies.” I just pay for these copies, I waste so much money ordering the copies. But anyhow I did it because if a teacher comes the second time to these, we will have something, and already it is progress, a step forward. (p. 17)

With an equipment grant from the sponsoring organization, Nune also persuaded her school head to permit the seminars, “This made [the head] happier and she allowed me to go a bit ahead” (6–1), although on a limited basis without the coordinator.

Both actions are agentive as Nune’s intentions create affordances (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Her redeployment of the photocopied transformed a material symbol of her failure into a means of persuasion. Her grant application not only provided needed equipment but also convinced the head of the value (possibly the material value) of permitting the seminars. Thus, Nune’s sense of agency has not only developed into her acting within a wider field but also into her transforming obstacles that constrain her agency into affordances that foster it.

Nune commented on her partial success by writing, “I’d like you to know the way I fulfill half of my plans and ideas. I like freedom though I know it is a heavy thing to carry for a single person,” adding, “I always have a special fight inside me” (6–1). These comments, with their references to the burden of freedom and fighting spirit, suggest how Nune has conceptualized her efforts as a battle for agency by an individual, just as she has presented her English teacher battling to exercise control over her classroom. As previously described, both make active choices to introduce innovations; both persist despite the obstacles they face; both kinds of obstacles are perceived as lacking substance.

There is further evidence that Nune orientates to these actions based on the image of her teacher. Nune’s teacher eventually emigrated from Armenia, but they kept in touch. When Nune wrote to her about the seminars, her teacher responded, “from a defeated teacher to a winner student.” Nune explained that she was telling me this because “I only wanted to show that she can’t
fight with the members of society” (p. 12). Nune appears to be suggesting that her teacher was “defeated” because she was either unable or unwilling (depending on how “can” is understood) to fight with society, suggesting that Nune has also surpassed her teacher because she has fought better. (As noted earlier, she says she has “a special fight” inside her.) The different outcomes of the two teachers’ actions highlight how, even when the similarity between their actions in terms of success breaks down, Nune views the actions that express her professional agency through the image of her English teacher. Her development of agency as a teacher trainer, like her development of agency as a teacher, has sources outside of, as well as within, formal professional development programs. Nune’s own perspective on her development shows her attributing her actions to her personal experience and individual character in response to conditions in a specific local and national context.

**Orienting Activity and a Field of Possible Action**

This article sought to explore how a language teacher develops a sense of agency. Nune’s understanding of her experiences with her school English teacher appears to have oriented Nune to her actions as a language teaching student, English teacher, and teacher trainer by being abstracted into an image. This image, an internalization of what Nune concretely experienced, mediated the development of her sense of agency. The image itself also developed, as Galperin (1992) suggests it can do, as Nune expanded the field in which she acted as an agent. Importantly, this image is founded on personal experience, rather than knowledge and skills from a professional development program. Even when the knowledge and skills from the program are implicated in Nune’s actions, as they are when she introduces novel practices in her classroom and attempts to educate her colleagues, Nune’s motivations for doing so are lodged in personal experience and shaped by the local and national context. She has not merely transferred knowledge and skills but transformed them into personally meaningful actions in response to local conditions.

Nune not only recognized the personal significance of her actions, she also recognized their social significance, as she demonstrated by saying of the growing involvement of her colleagues in the seminars, “And maybe this is the recovery of the teaching system too. Every school has inner energy, looking forward, and all these schools are just buds of the education system, so education will be alive” (p. 17). Nune sees her individual crusade as having wider significance, suggesting that she and her social world may be co-evolving (Stetsenko, 2005; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004) as Nune contributes her energy into the seminars and as professional development becomes available to her colleagues through the seminars. Nune seems not merely to be an individual struggling against society (as can be inferred from her words about herself and her teacher) but an individual struggling for society, through actions aimed at transforming activity (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004).

Nune’s actions appear to be transformative in several ways. First, the content of the seminars was based on a theory Nune had initially encountered in the TEFL program. Her personal efforts to learn even more about it in order to address a neighborhood school issue shows an individual transforming outside knowledge for a local context by recognizing, developing, and disseminating relevant knowledge.

Second, by going beyond sharing her ideas with her colleagues to taking on a more formal role by organizing seminars, Nune created a larger social role for herself. In taking on this role, Nune was imputing social significance to what she found personally meaningful.

Third, by holding seminars that involved an outside organization, Nune expanded her field of action beyond her school into the domain of professional development in educational activity in Armenia. The school head’s initial argument against the seminars, that governmental permission was needed because the syllabus did not specifically include the seminars, suggests the importance of perceived boundaries of the field of action. Because Nune’s seminars were not clearly included within the school head’s perception of the field of action, Nune had appeared to violate the parameters of appropriate action.

These were shifting parameters, however—no longer the ones established by the Soviet state but ones still being established within independent Armenia. Although Nune’s efforts to hold seminars might have violated past boundaries and thus were perceived as testing current ones, they were—as the school head may have realized—actually establishing new boundaries. Nune’s words about her contribution to the recovery of the educational system show that to some extent she understood her actions in this way. In these three senses it is possible to claim that Nune’s individual exercise of agency is leading social activity (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004); that is, Nune is extending the socially
recognized parameters of a field of action. Nune is acting as an agent of change by becoming a teacher trainer who is disseminating knowledge other than that promulgated by the state through its teacher training institutions.

It might be argued that Nune also appears to have developed, by closing the gap between individual meaningfulness and social reality (Leontiev, 1978) in her efforts to lead local activity in what appear to be socially responsible ways. However, although Nune recognizes both the social and personal significance of her actions, she appears largely to attribute their origin to herself, even though wider social changes have contributed to them. This highlights the tension between the individual and the social.

Most obviously, Nune has availed herself of Western resources becoming increasingly available in Armenia after independence. Less obviously, Nune’s reference to liking freedom may also signal her accommodation to changing times through her use of language reflecting Western concepts. These factors suggest an underlying reason why Nune succeeded when her teacher did not. Just as Nune is using the language of freedom, so are others, and with that language comes everyday practices: As Gee (1999) puts it, discourse comes with Discourse. In other words, Nune is not alone in changing; the activity system is changing, both in what is happening and how it is understood and presented through language. As much as Nune may be “leading” activity (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004), she is also “following” activity. That is, even as she changes the parameters of an activity at one level (local), at other levels (national and international) she is following accepted practices. The Western organizations that have played crucial roles in developing her knowledge and practice have their own established agendas, and their presence in Armenia indicates their agendas are at least tacitly accepted. Indeed, tacit influences may be particularly powerful for not being obvious, as Lortie noted (1975): Nune’s presentation of herself and her teacher as individuals battling society may be a late overlay of Western discourse on her long-held image of her teacher as a resolute and persistent (if misunderstood) teacher and thus show how an image is developmental (Galperin, 1992) as new meanings reflecting changing activity are imputed to it.

Galperin’s notion of orienting activity has been largely understood as a pedagogical tool (Arievitch, 2004) to enable a learner to visualize or verbalize the steps needed to successfully perform an action. As a research method (Arievitch, 2004) and a view of learning, this may work for some skills and subjects, but it does not sit well with the view generally attributed to sociocultural theory of development as a dynamic, nonlinear process (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Focusing more generally on orienting theory as means-focused, goal-directed action guided by an image makes it more relevant to complex activities such as language teacher development. In particular, this wider view of orienting activity offers a tool for exploring a range of influences now recognized as relevant to language teacher development (K. E. Johnson, 2009). The data discussed here show how Nune’s personal experiences as a language pupil deeply influenced her development as a language teaching student, English teacher, and teacher trainer, as did the changing context in which her experiences and actions were situated. Such influences cannot be ignored if they form the basis for how an individual orients to activity and how individual actions within that activity are both reinforced and constrained.

CONCLUSION

In exploring the development of agency in an individual teacher, this paper is obviously limited. What, then, is its value? Although development across a group may share largely common patterns, in an individual the small scale allows a more finely grained view of the nonlinear and dynamic nature of development. This variability of individual development marks the parameters within which generality can be claimed. We need to know how individuals develop in specific contexts in order to know what is possible for development in general. In this respect, two points have been made.

One point is that individual professional development can have an impact on a local activity system. This phenomenon has been shown by tracing the development of individual agency in one teacher, Nune, as her actions expanded the field of possible action. This expanded field of action reflects not only her individual agency but also her contribution to social activity. It therefore offers empirical support for redressing a perceived imbalance within activity theory (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004) by showing how an individual influences social reality.

The second point is that individual development as a professional occurs through lived experience over a lifetime and does not begin or end with enrollment in a formal professional development program or even with professional activities, as K. E. Johnson (2009) pointed out and
as Tsui (2007) showed. Early experiences mediate later development because they are the basis for orienting to individual action. The events Nune experienced as a school pupil primed her development as a teacher who came to recognize and institute change as a teacher trainer. These events were personally meaningful for Nune, showing that obstacles needed to be faced and overcome and that personal characteristics such as resolve were necessary for doing this. They contributed to her later recognition of a wider field of action, as a teacher when she invested in further education to address changing learner motivations and as a teacher trainer when she disseminated knowledge that would address simultaneously a local issue and a national need.

Thus, these two points are linked. First, Nune’s actions involved her in making use of what she had learned from an outside activity system, which she then transformed for her own. Although it is clear that the presence of Western-supported educational options and development organizations preceded the participant’s involvement, the actual changes within the participant’s school did not come from above. Rather they came from below, at the level of material action in everyday practices by an individual in response to her own perceptions.

Teachers are beset with constraints on their actions from the many stakeholders involved in education, yet they can act as agents. To develop a sense of personal agency that can meet multiple demands in a rapidly changing world—a world in which the international as well as the national increasingly affect the local—is challenging indeed. This study shows how one teacher negotiated these changing demands during personal crises within the context of a major international event, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and a major national period, the troubled early years of Armenian independence. In doing so, it describes how these personal experiences and national and international events influenced the development of teacher agency and the power of an individual to influence her local teaching context.

Second, this study also offers further evidence of what can be captured through case studies: development in action, as the significance of early experience is realized in later action. This example may suggest to teachers, teacher educators, and researchers how individual case studies may contribute to a better understanding of how professionals develop by expanding the range of influences deemed to be relevant to development. Further studies that explore these influences may contribute not only to research on how language teachers develop, but also to better preparation of language teachers for the changing realities of their careers and classrooms, by linking the case study as a model for personal reflection with a call for professional action.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions

. = longer pause, falling intonation
? = longer pause, rising intonation
, = shorter pause
... = omitted words
[] = author words (substitution to anonymize or explanation to clarify)

Data Reference Conventions

(x–x) = email interview number, question number
(p. x) = spoken interview transcript page number