Professional Agency of English Teachers at Chinese Local Undergraduate Universities: A Perspective of Activity Theory

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ABSTRACT

Many Chinese local undergraduate universities are now being engaged in transition development. The aim of this study is to explore professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities from the perspective of activity theory. In the view of activity theory the power to make choices and the power to take actions are the key properties of professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities. In the present sociocultural environment English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities exercise their professional agency to take control the directions and routes of their professional development by involving in activities, adapting to the environment, striving for control and organizing goal engagement and goal disengagement. This study provides English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities with positive enlightenment and makes them realize the importance of taking control of personal professional trajectories in the environment of transition development of their universities.

Key words: Professional Agency, English Teachers at Chinese Local Undergraduate Universities, Activity Theory, Transition Development, Sociocultural Environment

INTRODUCTION

The professional development of teachers includes not only the growth of procedural skills and competence, but also the construction of teachers' identity and agency (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011:817). Agency is an emerging phenomenon. It is not what people have, but what people do. To be more exact, it is what people gain (Priestley et al., 2015). Professional agency refers to the fact that professionals such as teachers have the power to make choices and decisions, to affect matters, to take actions, to take stances in relation to their work and professional identities (Vähäsantanen, 2015). Teachers' professional agency, the theory of agency that is constructed about teachers' activities at school (Priestley et al., 2015), plays an important role in sustaining teachers' professional development (Tao & Gao, 2017). Priestly et al. (2015) discover that when teachers perceive themselves to be able to better bring their agency into play, they tend to regard teaching as a meaningful profession rather than a job, so they identify with their profession and have a positive impact on their professional development. With the concrete implementation of the Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for China's National Economic and Social Development (2016) (thereafter shortened as "the outline") in China, many key universities in China have been strengthening the "double first-class"[1] construction, while not a few local undergraduate universities are actively being engaged in the transition development, and thus new requirements have been put forward for teachers' learning, teaching and research. The profession of teachers is under great pressure. Due to the particularity of their profession, university English teachers, who are faced with different development challenges which are quite different from other teachers' professional groups (Tao and Gu, 2016), must face many problems, such as professional transition and role shift brought about by school construction, transition development and curriculum reform (Fu, 2016). How English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities can meet the challenges in the process of professional development by giving full play to their professional agency has become a research topic of practical significance. This study aims to explore professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities from the perspective of activity theory. It seeks to find out the key properties of professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities in the view of activity theory and how English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities exercise their professional agency to take control of the directions ans routes of their professional development in the current sociocultural environment in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Activity Theory

Sociocultural theory has been put forward by the well-known former Soviet Union psychologist Vygotsky (1978) as well as his colleagues and students, such as Leontiev (1982) and Galperin (1992), on the basis of his cultural and historical psychology by absorbing and learning from the views or theories of other educators and psychologists. Many of Vygotsky's works have been labeled as sociocultural theories, with different claims made about the suitability of the label for different approaches. What connects the different approaches is the key notion that all human development is mediated. Sociocultural theory emphasizes the study of human development in the context of social interaction, and demonstrates a new perspective in the study and understanding of human development. It holds the view that the development of human being is a social activity mediated by the mediation tool in the cultural construction, and that language, as the most important mediation tool, regulates the human development in the social interaction. Mediation, activity, zone of proximal development and the relationship between learning and development are the key contents of sociocultural theory.

Activity theory was first proposed by Vygotsky (1978), and then developed by Leontiev (1982), Miettinin (2005) and Engeström (1987/2015). As a branch and an important part of sociocultural theory, activity theory is a social cognitive analysis model developed on the basis of Vygotsky's mediation notion as well as the core idea of individual cognitive development and social practice. It puts individual actions in a certain sociocultural environment and emphasizes that the development of the human mind and cognition is the result of the interaction between social practice activities and the sociocultural environment, focusing on the mediation role between individuals and the sociocultural environment. Individuals mainly refer to individual people while the environment includes the society, community, history, culture and other factors. The dynamic interaction of these factors shape teachers' identity through time, and the main factor that affects teacher' agency is the environment. Through participation in goal-oriented social practice, human beings construct knowledge and promote cognitive development in interaction with social and cultural environment. The structure of human activity (see Figure 1) is a typical representation of activity theory, which is also the theoretical framework of this study.

The model consists of seven interactive elements: subject, mediation instrument, the object, rules, community, division of labour (tasks and distribution of power among the members of the community) and outcome (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006: 222-224), integrating the elements of sociocultural environment into one activity system of three core elements (subject, object and community) and three secondary elements (instrument, rules and division of labor). It holds the view that subject does not act on object or transform it into an outcome arbitrarily. Instead, the transformation is influenced and regulated by instrument, rules, community and division of labor. The subject acts on the object (the goal) through the concrete mediation form in the sociocultural
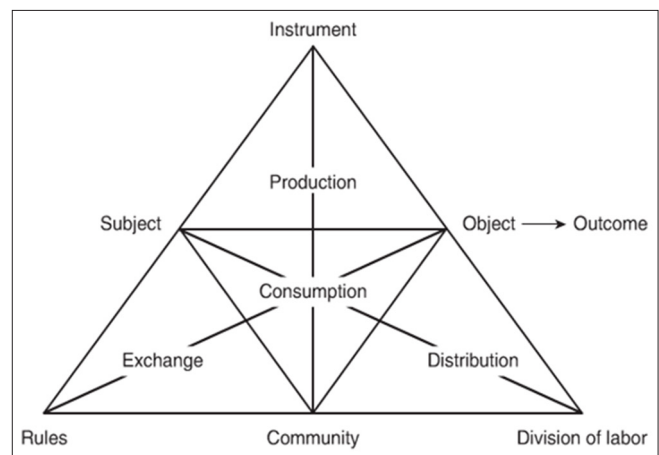

Figure 1. The structure of human activity (Engeström, 1987/2015:63)

environment composed of instrument, rules and division of labor, and finally transforms the goal into the outcome.

Agency and Teachers' Professional Agency

Agency is a complex concept as well as a compound system of multiple characteristics. Theories of agency both in the past and at present share the meta-theoretical view that organismic aspirations drive human behaviors (Little, 2006). There are a lot of views of agency, one of which approaches from the perspective of interaction between individuals and the social structure, focuses on how agency is formed by the relationship, and holds the view that agency is realized by mediation (Ahearn, 2001). This view places agency in the sociocultural context, including past history, present situations and future prospects. It recognizes agency in response to affordances and restrictions of a certain context (van Lier, 2002), acknowledging context and demonstrating the agency of individual actions within an activity system at the social level. Another activity view of agency focuses on the individual exercise of power, including the interrelated notion of someone (or something, an institution) having control over behavior, the ability to use consequences to have an impact, and being subject to evaluation (Duranti, 2007). Although it is obvious in this view that other factors may influence acts of agency, it focuses on the agent and the control, power, and the value of actions. Agency not only guides the short-term behavior of individuals, but it also can be set in the context of their overall life on a continuous timeline. It helps them to construct a specific life route and elevates the significance of agency from guiding their isolated behavior to realizing the maximum development of their overall life course (Evans, 2007; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Other scholars interpret agency as a potential and define it as "a sociocultural potential that can act purposefully and thoughtfully" (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013).

Individual agency within the framework of activity theory has been conceptualized as a social continuum in which both individuals and the society are regarded as the process of co-evolving that originates in and serves everyday practices (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004; Stetsenco, 2005). Indi-

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viduals are understood to be relevant in practice (because they perform actions that contribute to social activities), just as social practices are understood to be related to individuals (because they contribute to the meaningfulness of individual actions), enabling individuals to interact with the society (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). When individuals produce new activities in their daily social practice, they can change the social reality, so they lead the emerging forms of activities through individual agency. Teachers' professional agency not only affects teachers' short-term practice, but it also has a lasting impact on their professions (Priestley et al., 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2015). The realization form of teachers' professional agency varies from person to person. It is closely related to each teacher's growth background (Kayi-Aydar, 2015), personal goals (Ketelaar et al., 2012) and professional knowledge. Therefore, more and more scholars have proposed that only by improving teachers' professional agency can they achieve their sustainable professional development (Toom et al., 2015). Teachers' professional agency is not only the embodiment of teachers' individual cognitive behavior ability but also the product of interaction between teachers and their sociocultural environment. Professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities and its exercise ways are really worth exploring.

THE AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main aim of this study is to explore professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities from the perspective of activity theory. Recognizing the features of professional agency outlined above, it seeks to answer the following two questions:

(1) What are the key properties of professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities in the view of activity theory?

(2) How do English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities exercise professional agency to take control of the directions and routes of their professional development in the current sociocultural environment?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants of this study are six English teachers from different local undergraduate universities in China. They have won respect from their students before and after the transition development of their universities because their students like the courses they teach. They are typical because they are of different ages. Four of them are female teachers and two of them are male teachers. Among all the participants, there are three lecturers, two associate professors and one professor. They were invited face to face or by phone. Those who were invited all accepted the invitation and thus were selected as participants. The participants are friends, former classmates or even colleagues of the author of this study, and their full names are omitted for privacy, so we can only see their family names. In Table 1 is the personal information of the participants of this study.

Research Background

In March 2014, Lu Xin, former Vice Minister of Education, announced at the China Development Summit Forum that more than 600 local undergraduate universities would undergo transition to the type of technological application-oriented universities or to the type of universities of vocational education. As the trend of the times, the research of the transition of local undergraduate universities has become the focal point of China's higher education teaching reform. According to the outline released in 2016, the Chinese government will make overall efforts to promote the construction of the world first-class universities and first-class disciplines, focusing on supporting a number of universities and a number of disciplines into the world first-class ranks in the next five years. At the same time, the Chinese government will promote the transition of qualified undergraduate universities to technological application-oriented universities and build a number of high-level technological application-oriented universities. It is more than two years since the

Table 1. Personal information of the participants of this study

Case	Teacher	Gender	Age range (years)	Educational background	Years of teaching	Faculty position	Teaching courses
1	Zhu	Female	25-30	BA in English MS in finance (abroad)	6	Lecturer	EGP; Business English reading
2	Yang	Female	35-40	BA in English MA in linguistics	15	Lecturer	English for tourism
3	Zhao	Male	40-45	BA in English MA in English PhD	23	Associate professor	English writing
4	Liu	Female	45-50	BA in English MA in English teaching	25	Lecturer	English listening and oral English; Oral and written translation
5	Li	Female	45-50	BA in English MA in applied linguistics	27	Professor	English linguistics
6	Wang	Male	50-55	BA in English MA in English	32	Associate professor	English literature

Participants (n=6)

release of the outline and great changes have taken place in China. On 21ˢᵗ of September, 2017, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the National Development and Reform Commission in China printed and distributed *Circular on the publication of the list of the World First-class Universities and First-class disciplines Construction Universities and Construction disciplines,* promulgating the list of 42 the world first-class constructing universities and 95 universities of the world first-class constructing disciplines. Generally speaking, the goal of talent training in local undergraduate universities should be oriented to train talents of technological application, serving the local or industrial economy, and it is urgent for some teachers engaged in teaching English for general purposes (EGP) to transform into English for specific purposes (ESP) teachers (Fu, 2016). In the sociocultural environment some English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities are being engaged in teacher role-shift in their own professional development. Their experiences have a lot of implications for the practice of the professional agency of English teachers at China's local undergraduate universities.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to collect data of this study, the author of this study had in-depth interviews or on-site classroom observations of six English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities for over a 6-month period, all at the participants' convenience within the time frame of this study. Means of data collection for this study include interviews, observations, field notes, and related school documents (Gao & Gong, 2018). This study mainly tries to present the analysis results of the six teachers' in-depth interview or observation data. These in-depth interviews were conducted on the basis of a semi-structured model. That is to say, the researcher would draw up a general interview outline based on the research questions and related literature in advance, but in the course of the interview, the researcher would make timely adjustments to the participants' responses (Cohen et al., 2013). Each interview lasted about an hour. The contents of the interviews were mainly revisions of the teachers' professional development, including their experiences before the transition development of their universities or about their present conditions. The researcher listened to their voices, such as difficulties encountered in their professional development and coping plans, etc (Wen and Zhang, 2017). The in-depth interviews were conducted to provide an opportunity to discuss classroom observations and revisit topics, which included their views on the choices between learning, teaching and research as well as how to take appropriate actions in the present sociocultural environment to take control of professional development directions and construct professional development routes that suit their own needs and characteristics.

The data analysis of this study is an empirical and theory-driven exercise (Vähäsantanen, 2015). It is a descriptive case study which was aimed at discussing the complexity and dynamism of individuals' choices and actions within the sociocultural contexts (Johnson, 1992). The analysis is based

on the panel point of the transition to the present teaching and the relevant interview data are classified according to the following two periods: before and after the transition development of their universities. Finally, using the chronological sequence as the axis, each teacher's interview is written as a summary of their professional history. Besides, cross-case analyses are used for comparing and analyzing the contents of the interviews. During the initial stage of reading the interview contents, fragments of choices of agency are searched. After further reading these fragments, it is found that choices of agency could be classified into the following three aspects of teachers' professional development: learning, teaching, and research. On this basis, the relevant fragments are encoded. First of all, the author chooses descriptive codes, and then finds common themes by reading and comparing the codes. Finally, in order to verify and make the themes perfect, the author puts the relevant fragments back into the case studies, and interprets the choices that are made and the actions that are taken to play their active role according to the summary of their previous professional history. From the analysis a new set of findings is abstracted and related issues are discussed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the case study and cross-case analysis of 6 English teachers from Chinese local undergraduate universities, findings of this study indicate that in the view of activity theory the power to make choices and the power to take actions are the key properties of professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities. In the current sociocultural environment English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities exercise their professional agency to take control of the directions and routes of their professional development by involving in activities, adapting to the environment, striving for control and organizing goal engagement and goal disengagement.

The Power to Make Choices

How teachers make choices in the present sociocultural environment to shape their professional lives is the manifestation of individuals' agency (Watkins, 2005). According to activity theory, teachers' professional agency is mediated by the interaction between them and the tools and structures of a social setting. Mediational tools like transition development of Chinese local undergraduate universities, which reflects social structures, are products of social, cultural and historical evolution (Lasky, 2005). After the transition development of Chinese local undergraduate universities, the six teachers of this study do not participate in their own life events passively. Instead, they make choices to take control of their professional development directions and routes according to their own characteristics and situations by involving in activities and adapting to the environment.

Involving in activities

Teachers' involvement in activities is the result of teachers' individual differences and the interactive adjustment of their

situations (Lasky, 2005; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Teachers' involvement in activities such as learning, teaching and research is closely related to their professional identity. According to the data, the six teachers' goal of professional involvement at the beginning of teaching includes the construction of a successful teacher identity, which is consistent with the traditional role of "preaching, teaching and solving doubts" in China. They have hardly no difficulty in getting used to the transition development of their universities. However, there are obvious differences among the six teachers in the recognition of their identity of researchers. As a matter of fact, Zhu, Yang and Liu are not qualified researchers. Both Zhu and Liu take teaching as their professional development goal and hold the view that a good teacher should regard teaching as a priority, so they devote much time and energy to preparing and giving lessons or instructing students' practice, but they devote little time to research before and after the transition development of their universities. Zhu completed her undergraduate studies and graduated from a university in China majoring in English. Then she furthered her study at a university abroad and earned a master's degree in finance. Later she found a teaching position at a Chinese local undergraduate university as a teacher of English. Before the transition development of her university, she taught EGP. After the transition development of the university, she teaches business English reading. She desires to pursue PhD studies, but her present profession and family restrain her from doing that. She finds it hard to conduct research as she did not lay a solid foundation in research in the past. Sometimes she exclaims that she is fit for teaching from birth, but not for research. Yang likes traveling, so she chooses to teach English for tourism after the transition development of her university. She spends little time on research and aims to maintain a balance between family happiness and professional development. She describes her professional planning as follows: "I prefer balanced development in all directions. I will never sacrifice one thing for another, nor will I work hard desperately to get a higher faculty position as soon as possible." Liu did not include research in her professional development planning from the very beginning of her teaching career. She became a faculty member of a local undergraduate university after she graduated from a normal university in China with a bachelor's degree in English and she was content with being a "good" teacher there. To compensate for the deficiency in her educational background, she pursued postgraduate studies and got a master's degree in English teaching before the transition development of her university. As she was good at English listening and oral English, she taught English listening and oral English before the transition development of the university. After the transition development of the university, she teaches oral and written translation. As she finds it hard to conduct research in English teaching, she never thinks of pursuing PhD studies. Zhao and Li attach much importance to research. Zhao taught at middle schools before he came to teach at the Chinese local undergraduate university. He invested a lot of time and energy in learning and teaching at the beginning of his teaching career. Then he pursued PhD studies. After he started to work at the local

undergraduate Chinese university, he gradually devoted as much time and energy to research as to teaching. After the transition development of the university, he teaches English writing. He acknowledges that he has benefited a lot from his doctoral supervisor because it is she who has led him into the grand academic hall. Li is a professor at her university. She contends that an excellent teacher should be an excellent researcher as well, so she has devoted much time and energy to research from the very beginning of her teaching career since she earned a master's degree in English at a normal university. After the transition development of the university, she teaches English linguistics. As she has very stable orientations in research, she has completed several provincial and national level research projects on English teaching. As she has the ability to carry out research alone, she has never thought of pursuing PhD studies. In her opinion, "one has to pay a high price to earn a PhD degree, both physically and mentally, so there's no need for me to do so. I can do as well in research as those with PhD degrees." Wang is a school leader of a local undergraduate university in China. He has worked at the local undergraduate university in China since he graduated from a normal university with a MA degree in English and has the basic ability to carry out research. He teaches English literature after the transition development of his university. He has always been trying hard to find a balance between management and research. His expectation of self-development has shifted from personal development to creating an ideal environment to help his colleagues achieve their professional development.

Adapting to the environment

Teachers' adaptation to the environment involves examining self-efficacy, the effectiveness of thinking and activities as well as individual pursuit of rationality (Bandura, 2006). Of all the mechanisms of human agency, belief of personal efficacy, which is the foundation of human agency, is the most central or pervasive. People of low efficacy easily give up trying in the face of difficulties, while those of high efficacy view impediments as surmountable by improving self-adaptive skills and perseverant effort (Bandura, 2006). With the increase of working years, teachers adjust their self-orientation and choose new development goals because of the change of their situations. As for research, Zhu, Yang and Liu take on a bit low efficacy. Having experienced frustration in research, they take teaching as their prior development goals. Zhu has very high efficacy in teaching. She states that among all the typical activities, teaching is what she feels most comfortable doing. Yang is no exception and she says, "Teaching is what I really enjoy, but research seems very difficult for me and have never dreamed of pursuing PhD studies. I will never put myself under too much pressure." Liu has very low efficacy in earning a PhD and in research, but she finds pleasure from teaching both in and outside of the university. Just as what she once commented, "I really like teaching, but research is really a headache for me. I have never thought of pursuing PhD studies or getting promoted in faculty positions in the future." Zhao's case is a bit different from others'. At the early stage of his teaching

career, he had very high efficacy in learning and teaching, but he had low efficacy in research. He has had high efficacy in research as well since he completed PhD studies. Li has high efficacy both in teaching and research, but Wang has high efficacy in management. In general, almost all the six teachers have exhibited pretty high efficacy in teaching after the transition development of their universities, but half of them have showed comparatively low efficacy in research and most of them have showed very low efficacy in earning PhD degrees.

When one of the activities fails and the sense of control decreases, the individuals pay particular attention to the explanation of the meanings of their activities and try to explain the adverse events, assigning the positive meaning to their behaviors as far as possible and avoiding harming the safety of the ego (Tao & Gu, 2016). For example, being weak in research is a disadvantage for Zhu and Liu in their professional development and that has led to the decrease of their research efficacy, but they have never negated their choices. Instead, they give more rationality to their ignoring research and feel comfortable about doing what they enjoy. Similarly, Yang acknowledges that research has frustrated her, but she still considers her teaching activities to be generally successful. Zhao and Li devote much time and energy to teaching and research, but they neglect their family members, so they feel lonely most of the time. They never complain about that because they confess to have found pleasure from their professions. In their view, "everyone has his own unique way of living." Wang acknowledges that he is not a traditional "official" and he is tired at times. However, he has created a positive development environment for his colleagues. In his own words, "I have provided many teachers the opportunity to develop themselves, and this satisfaction plays down the hardships and tiredness of my leadership".

The Power to Take Actions

In order to take control of the directions and routes of their professional development, English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities take appropriate actions to achieve the preset goals of developing themselves by striving for control and organizing goal engagement and goal disengagement.

Striving for control

Striving for control, which is part of the motivational make-up of human beings, refers to the striving for direct and primary control of the physical and social environment (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018). Teachers' control striving has something to do with their action strategies, which also reflect their agency. After setting the professional development goal, teachers choose the corresponding action strategies to promote the control of the goal. In order to achieve the goal of professional development, the six teachers have adopted a variety of action strategies. For example, in order to establish a successful teacher identity, Liu once worked at an American university as a visiting scholar for half a year to improve her oral English. In class she carries out

very colourful teaching practice, and makes use of various methods to improve teaching effects, including encouraging students to make presentation in class, participating in extracurricular activities and guiding students' performances. These kinds of practice have given her full confidence in her teaching ability. In research, teachers also take a series of action strategies. For example, in order to become a successful researcher, Zhao pursued his doctoral studies after working on the teaching post for almost ten years. He has applied for a number of research projects of different levels, which make the virtuous circle development of research come true. He once commented on his projects like this, "The projects I successfully applied for at first are trivial, but they make me realize that I still need projects under this social system, and then I slowly join in or applied for other high-level projects." Teachers' action strategies are the ways to achieve the preset goal, so the changes of their goals often lead to the changes of their strategies (Tao & Gu, 2016). For example, Li always holds a strong interest in research, but her original research topics were not directly related to teaching. After the transition development of her university, she has begun to consciously apply for teaching reform projects to study and improve the practice of English linguistics classroom teaching. She holds the view that the process of teaching is that of trial-and-error, and she thinks it is nice to change it into a very formal style such as the teaching reform, and it triggers her to try more in this area. The data analysis of the six teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities indicates that in order to strive for control teachers need to balance different possibilities, establish professional development goals, and then take certain action strategies to guide and implement individual actions. It is also important for them to make necessary adaptations according to the change of the situations. In the present Chinese sociocultural environment, the six teachers' ability to control the physical and social environment is limited. This enlightens us to improve the developmental environment of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities and provide a broader space for them to exercise their professional agency.

Organizing goal engagement and goal disengagement

Goal engagement promotes individuals' focus on what is important and ignores what is irrelevant, while goal disengagement "involves degrading the original goal and enhancing the value and attainability of alternative goals" (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018:3). Teachers' goal engagement and goal disengagement have something to do with their action adjustment. When an action fails, teachers may also adjust their own behaviour and seek appropriate alternative strategies (Little et al., 2006: 67-68). The adjustment of teachers' actions mainly reflects the change of professional development goals and teachers make new choices after synthesizing the personal development needs, the resources, the obstacles in realistic situations, and so on. At the same time, it also reflects the teachers' compensatory ability to achieve success and satisfaction from the new goals, thus it counteracts the frustration of the original action failure (Tao & Gu, 2016). For example, Yang thinks she can "hold" the students in classroom teaching. She has

assured the happiness and health of her family in life, and that has reduced the frustration caused by unsuccessful research. It is because of her confidence and emotional support from her teaching and family that she has rekindled her passion and desire for research. Similarly, Wang has won praise from all sides since he took charge of the school's management and the rapprochement of interpersonal relationships with his colleagues has repelled his worries about less devotion to research and teaching. Obviously, teachers' goal engagement and goal disengagement cannot simply be characterized as persisting in or giving up goals. Rather, they should be regarded as the manifestation ways of teachers' professional agency. Through the adjustment of the rationality of their actions, the evaluation of the meanings and attribution of success or failure, teachers can avoid reducing their self-evaluation due to failure and protect their positive emotions.

Synthesizing the above analyses, this study draws the following two conclusions. Firstly, in the view of activity theory the key properties of professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities are the power to make choices and the power to take actions. Secondly, in the current sociocultural environment English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities exercise their professional agency to take control of the directions and routes of their professional development by involving in activities, adapting to the environment, striving for control and organizing goal engagement and goal disengagement. They cope with various pressure and challenges in their profession and aim to achieve professional development in line with individual expectations as well as social and institutional requirements, maintaining the psychological bottom line of personal motivations, self-esteem, self-efficacy and the normal progress of the whole life. As English teachers at Chinese local universities have different personal experience in life, they have quite different resources and challenges as well. Therefore, teachers exercise their own professional agency in different ways. In different stages of teachers' professional development, their situations change, and the performance and strength of their professional agency differ as well. These differences have a profound directional effect on individual development and make them take development directions and routes with distinct individual characteristics.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to qualitatively explore professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities in their professional trajectories from the perspective of activity theory. It endeavors to find out the key properties of professional agency of English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities in the view of activity theory and how English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities exercise their professional agency to take control of the directions and routes of their professional development in the present sociocultural environment. It is really challenging to develop a sense of professional agency that can meet multiple demands in a rapidly changing world, but this study shows how the six English teachers at Chinese local undergraduate universities have negotiated these chang-

ing demands in the environment of transition development of their universities. At present, English teachers at many local undergraduate universities in China are facing difficulty in their professional development, but they are actively trying to get out of the difficult situation in the environment of transition development of their universities. We hope that this study can provide them with positive enlightenment and make them realize the importance of taking control of personal professional trajectories under heavy pressure, avoiding loss of professional motivation and collapse of personal lives.

END NOTES

1 "Double First-Class" is the abbreviation of "the world First-class universities and disciplines". The construction of the world first-class universities and disciplines is a major strategic decision made by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council of China. It is beneficial to promote the comprehensive strength and international competitiveness of China's higher education. It also provides strong support for the realization of the goal of two hundred years and the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

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