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# Unpacking perezhivanie: Implications of Vygotsky's theory for ELT

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## Abstract

This study examines Vygotsky's concept of perezhivanie in English Language Teaching (ELT), focusing on teacher education, professional identity, and learners' experiences. Perezhivanie—a complex concept that connects emotion, cognition, and environment and explains how teachers and learners create meaning from their experiences—has gained growing scholarly attention. Using sociocultural theory, this study reviews various empirical studies that demonstrate how perezhivanie influences the development of teacher identity and professional growth. Findings from narrative inquiries and longitudinal case studies suggest that teachers' experiences shape their professional perceptions, their ability to navigate challenges, and the evolution of their sense of self over time. Similarly, research on learners reveals how intense classroom events and emotional reactions interact with cognitive strategies, leading to changes in learner identity and language use. The study also addresses broader issues in education, including social justice and emotional labor, illustrating how teachers navigate tensions between institutional requirements and personal convictions and adapt their professional practices in relation to perezhivanie. Additionally, studies conducted in practicum settings and intercultural environments show that both pre-service and in-service teachers continually reinterpret past experiences to address new challenges, highlighting the role of perezhivanie in fostering reflective practice. Overall, the study argues that the interaction among emotion, cognition, and social context supports teacher development and contributes to more meaningful learning experiences. Ultimately, perezhivanie is positioned as a key theoretical and practical concept that enriches discussions of identity in ELT.

**Keywords** perezhivanie, Vygotsky, teacher identity, learner identity, sociocultural theory

## 1. Introduction

In The Psychology of Art, Perezhivanie, introduced by Vygotsky (1971), is discussed in relation to motivation as a psychological process (González Rey, 2016). Initially dismissed, the concept of perezhivanie later became the centerpiece of further study (González Rey, 2016; Roth & Jornet, 2016). Vygotsky associated it with the emotional aspect of artistic performance, within a framework in which, as John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) put it, "Vygotsky conceptualized development as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized processes" (p. 192) and, in the cultural-historical approach, affect and intellect are treated as a unity (Kozulin et al., 2003). Vygotsky links the term to motivation, which González Rey (2016, p. 306) characterizes as "essentially an unconscious process" within a humanistic perspective. Since perezhivanie has no equivalent in English and is nearly impossible to translate (Veresov, 2017), it is described as "a concrete lived experience of an event within a specific situation" (Cong-Lem, 2025, p. 230). Cong-Lem (2025) explores perezhivanie in educational research and identifies it as "lived experiences" in fields such as language learning, teacher education, and teacher identity (p. 232).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, applied to the teaching of critical thinking, emphasizes that knowledge construction through dialogue, scaffolding, and problem-solving activities provides fertile ground for developing learners' reasoning skills and reflective abilities. As Daniels (2012) puts it, "At the heart of the

Vygotskian understanding of obuchenie is a dialogic conception of pedagogy" (p. 77). Hajhosseiny and Mehran (2011) noted that Vygotsky viewed individuals as active agents whose identities and learning are shaped by dialogic and socially mediated experiences. Elements of sociocultural theory, together with metacognitive and constructivist perspectives, support the development of critical thinking in teaching (Masoudian et al., 2018). For Ay et al. (2015), "for a successful life, critical thinking is considered as a crucial way of thinking today, not only by educational professionals and public officials but also employers" (p. 30). Here, exploring the perspectives, practices, and career paths of other teachers is essential to understanding how teacher identity develops. From a perezhivanie perspective, the development of critical thinking is not merely a cognitive process but is shaped by learners' emotional experiences and their engagement with social and instructional contexts, reinforcing the inseparable relationship between emotion, cognition, and learning.

This study explores the concept of perezhivanie in ELT, particularly in teacher education and the development of teacher identity, as well as in language learners. The questions addressed here—how interactions with students shape teacher identity, how that identity evolves over time, and how it fosters critical reflection on what is considered proper to teacher identity—arise from the authors' own classroom experience, but they are examined exclusively through the published literature rather than through original data. Moreover, this study examines the concept of perezhivanie by reviewing related studies and reflecting on the experiences of other teachers, given that teaching is a complex profession constantly shaped by new experiences.

Methodologically, this study adopts a narrative review approach combined with a conceptual synthesis to examine how the concept of perezhivanie has been theorized and empirically explored in English Language Teaching, with particular attention to teacher and learner identity.

## 2. Teacher Identity and Development

Social and emotional environments assist in-service and pre-service teachers in developing their professional identities through the significance of the perezhivanie concept, which helps explain how past experiences shape teachers' current selves. Perezhivanie, as extended by Fedor Vasilyuk (1984) as "experience-with-struggling," is then assigned by Wei (2021) to present a longitudinal study in which teachers reflect on their past, present, and future narratives to form a teacher identity over the years, from 2013 to 2020. Here, Ping, the teacher in Wei's (2021) study, shares narratives spanning from her childhood to the present and includes her perspectives on being a teacher, as reflected in perezhivanie (Wei, 2021). Ping has regarded her teacher-aunt as a role model since she was young, while in ancient China, teachers were viewed as sages (Wei, 2021). She considers teaching a noble profession and admires her aunt. There, she begins her career as a teacher and encounters challenges, including heavy workloads and political and societal factors in China. Continual adaptation to an ever-changing education system and earning less than in other professions leaves her feeling vulnerable and shifts her perspective on the job.

For Wei (2021), this significant change stemmed from the teacher's experiences, which shaped her identity and professional growth. However, after curriculum design, her perspective had shifted considerably, and she finds teaching dynamic and thriving. Drawing on approximately 15 years of teaching experience, Wei (2021) shows that the events a teacher experienced appear to have shaped her views on development of teacher identity. The adjectives she used to describe her profession suggest that her emotions—and her responses to them—played an essential role in shaping her identity as a teacher—a process heavily influenced by her perezhivanie.

According to Zhang et al. (2022), university lecturers develop their teacher identities through perezhivanie, a process that shapes their identities during the transition from teacher to researcher. Zhang et al. (2022) note that recent changes in higher education require professors to focus more on research than on teaching; therefore, individuals need to understand their roles better and reflect on them to clarify their current situation. The participant, Wang (a pseudonym), faced a dilemma between being a teacher and a researcher, as he entered academia immediately after graduating from the ELT department. With responsibilities to support his family and manage financial matters, Wang is expected to teach English flawlessly under a heavy burden while also producing quality research. These environmental pressures, combined with his personal circumstances, led to a rapid emotional shift from positivity to negativity, resulting in conflicts. However, with support from his family, advisor, and a support group, his past experiences—about how he should study and respond to challenges—helped him integrate his emotions and intellect, enabling him to get through the process. Ultimately, despite the challenges within the scope of perezhivanie, Wang develops both his EFL teacher identity and his researcher identity simultaneously.

By adopting a Vygotskian sociocultural theory, emotion, cognition, perspectives, experiences, and situations are influenced. For Engeström (2014), "activity theory sees learning as an expansive, collective process driven by contradictions within activity systems" (p. 72), aligned with teachers' identities, which are shaped by emotional and social interactions in institutional contexts. Wenger (2010) similarly argues that "communities of practice are about the development of identities as well as knowledge" (p. 181); therefore, teacher identity is shaped not only by personal emotions and experiences but also by collective professional practices. Similar principles are evident in research on educational criticism. Vygotsky's emphasis on the zone of proximal development and guided interaction highlights the teacher's role in fostering learners' reasoning and shaping their evolving professional identities.

Amory and Johnson (2023) demonstrate that significant classroom events affect a novice teacher's identity within the TESOL program. During the practicum phase of the program, Mae and Sina (pseudonyms) were tasked with designing and implementing lesson plans. With guidance from their advisors, teachers find themselves in an unusual situation in which students do not follow the lesson and appear confused about the material being covered. Teachers often feel emotionally drained in such moments because these events are unexpected and unplanned. With emotional support from student advisors, teachers reflect on their experiences to understand students' feelings and apply insight to improve future lessons. Responding emotionally to these events helped the teachers shape their identities and reframe their understanding of teaching to be more student-centered and more empathetic toward students' emotions. Amory and Johnson (2023) highlight that emotions remain central to social behavior, guiding one's thinking and perception of the environment. Vygotsky's concept of perezhivanie highlights the inseparable connection between emotion and cognition, showing how they jointly shape human behavior within sociocultural contexts.

Weng et al. (2024) examine the relationship between intersectionality and the lived experiences of teacher identity by collecting oral data from an American language teacher, Mark, who is Catholic, gay, and white, and a native speaker who was tutored in China. Mark shared his experiences of how these aspects influenced his agency in response to specific events. Having multiple societal identities requires him to adapt his behavior across contexts. Mark's Catholic and gay identities were confusing; however, he defines himself and introduces himself to students as a teacher. He draws his strength from religion and consistently seeks to help students. Thus, he indicates that his goal is to be a caring teacher for his students and to find a sense of purpose in life that transcends his sexual orientation. Being Catholic and gay do not fully define his identity (Weng et al., 2024). The judgment he anticipated was evident from the outset; therefore, guided by his emotions, he began sharing his personal identity with his students by disclosing his gay identity during lessons.

Another point Mark made was based on his teaching experience in China. He is readily perceived as a foreigner and has to contend with workplace bias. He noted that foreigners are often seen as lazy and indifferent to work, and that they are believed to be there to party, which frustrated and annoyed him. To avoid such judgments, he began dressing formally, since wearing only T-shirts was associated with foreigners who were assumed to be there to party. Even after leaving China, he continued to dress formally, which suggests that professional dress had become part of his identity as a teacher. Mark's perezhivanie influenced his attitudes and behaviors, shaping them through his emotions and discourse and forming his teacher's identity based on how others perceived his vulnerabilities.

Teacher agency is a vital concept that must be considered alongside teacher identity and development. It pertains to teachers' enthusiasm for embracing changes in their professional lives and modifying their knowledge and practices to improve students' educational experiences (Cong-Lem & Nguyen, 2024; Toom et al., 2015). Because the education system for foreign language learning is open to innovation driven by advances in other fields, it is essential to explore in greater depth the emotional and cognitive processes that teachers experience to understand shifts in teacher identity.

Cong-Lem and Nguyen (2024) studied two EFL instructors at a foreign language school in Vietnam, examining the relationship between teacher agency and perezhivanie through the concept of dramatic events in the classroom. The participants experienced a dramatic event when their students were unresponsive, bored, and indifferent to the lesson because they had not reviewed the previous material. As the participants noted in their reflective journals, they began the lesson with high enthusiasm; however, when they encountered their students' behaviors and attitudes, their positive mood quickly shifted to a negative one. They felt annoyed and frustrated, and this emotional state prompted their cognitive response, leading them to seek ways to adapt their lesson delivery. Thus, after receiving no response from students and becoming irritated, teachers chose not to carry out some of the activities they had already prepared. As an expression of their agency, the teachers introduced engaging activities and competitive games to boost students' moods and actively involve them in

the classroom.

Teachers' emotional experiences and cognition resolve the conflict caused by the dramatic event, leading to their sense of agency in responding to the situation and adopting a more flexible approach. This study shows that experiences involving emotion and cognition lead to changes and adjustments in teaching practices and reflective decisions within the classroom, guiding teachers' growth both inside and outside the classroom. Vygotsky (1962) proposed in his sociocultural theory that actions are realized through consideration of environmental influences, which aligns with perezhivanie. There is a reciprocal relationship between perezhivanie and teacher agency in shaping identity and professional growth (Cong-Lem & Nguyen, 2024).

Another important point is social justice. Although the concept itself long predates him, Freire (1967) gave it a distinctive educational form through his critical pedagogy, framing education as a practice of freedom and tying literacy work to the development of critical consciousness. In this study, social justice is approached as an analytical lens for examining how institutional, cultural, and societal constraints shape teachers' emotional labor and professional decision-making, rather than as a prescriptive pedagogical stance. Perezhivanie was integrated into education by examining how sociocultural and political influences shape the education system. This idea merits careful examination because it has important implications for language education, guiding teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in recognizing the concept within the education system and in creating policies accordingly. Including social justice in education often brings emotional labor to the forefront of teacher identity. Coined by American sociologist Hochschild, this term describes the tension between the emotional demands and rewards of a profession and personal beliefs (Moradi et al., 2024; Benesch, 2017). By foregrounding perezhivanie and its emotional dimension, Moradi et al. (2024) examined the relationship between social justice and emotional labor among Iranian TESOL teachers. They observed that the multilingual and multicultural nature of the environment created favorable conditions for examining issues of inclusion in education, while discourse on religious or political matters, including attire such as the hijab, remained limited. In their interviews, teachers highlighted key aspects of gender equality, perceptions of it, and how they navigated situations based on administrators' expectations rather than their personal beliefs. Even though they believe both genders should be evaluated equally in society, they often feel compelled to change their attitudes to meet their employers' and parents' expectations. This sometimes leads to prioritizing boys in the classroom and warning girls about their behavior to prevent tension or questions from others.

Teachers noted that, with more advanced students, they discussed gender equality as a means of promoting social justice and advised students to keep classroom discussions confidential. Another concern teachers noted while navigating questions of equity and inclusion within institutional constraints was the presence of religious issues in the classroom. Because laws and regulations prohibit questioning religion in schools, and because some students and administrators act as guardians, teachers often have to conceal their emotions and adjust their behavior and attitudes to comply with authority, which becomes a source of emotional labor. This study indicates that integrating social justice and its principles into language classes can be challenging, depending on the region and prevailing societal norms. Under these conditions—restrictive regulations, institutional oversight, and prevailing societal norms—what a given society accepts or rejects can shape the emotional labor teachers perform, leading some to adjust their actions and to present themselves differently in the classroom. Ultimately, their perezhivanie—their lived and interpreted relation to these situations, in which emotion and cognition form a unity—can hinder their growth as teachers.

The development of teacher identity is closely linked to components of teacher education programs. The experiences teacher candidates have during their practicum strongly influence their understanding of the profession. Building on this idea, Uştuk and Yazan (2024) implemented an identity-focused practicum at a university in Türkiye for undergraduate students in the teacher education program. The aim was to actively engage participants in the process of identity formation through their perezhivanie, specifically in how they learned the language and how they teach it, while also observing how their lived experiences—positive or negative—affected their identity development during practicum sessions. Teachers participated in arts-based activities such as creating or finding memes related to their language-learning experiences and designing a workspace or classroom for future projects. The activities of teacher candidates showed that their prior experiences with language learning and observations during practicum had a significant impact on their self-evaluation as teachers.

According to teachers' reflective accounts, many emphasized that contextualizing subject matter and instructional materials helps address students' needs and enhances motivation by making language learning more engaging. Some teachers reported that during practicum observation periods, their mentors adopted a structuralist approach to language teaching, placing greater emphasis on syntax and lexis rather than

communicative functions. These experiences prompted teachers to reflect on their own language-learning histories and recall earlier instructional practices in which grammar was prioritized over meaning and communication. As a result, they articulated critical perspectives on such approaches, highlighting the impact of prior learning experiences on their current pedagogical beliefs.

Another important insight from the study concerned perezhivanie, specifically experiencing language-speaking anxiety while learning the language. One teacher noted that she was shy about speaking in public in L2 and added that this anxiety reappeared when she was asked to teach the language—even if it was less intense. Contrary to their past experiences, the participants designed a colorful, engaging, context-rich, meaningful, peaceful, and low-stress environment for their students, suggesting how perezhivanie influences teacher identity formation through practicum experiences.

## 3. Learners of the Language

Language development and learning are closely linked to the environment and society, and interaction plays a central role. In terms of interaction, language emerges through interpersonal processes between two people who share common ground within a similar discourse community. Vygotsky (1978) proposed the Zone of Proximal Development to capture the distance between what a learner can accomplish independently and what can be accomplished with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers; thus, the environment functions not merely as a setting for development but as its source (Leontiev, 2005). Chandra (2008) demonstrated that mother–child interactions structured through a metacognitive program grounded in Vygotsky's ZPD can significantly enhance children's development of critical thinking skills. In parallel, critical thinking has been described as a systematic process that involves recognizing problems, assessing resources, and generating possible and alternative solutions (Ay et al., 2015, p. 32). This perspective is also supported by Wilson's (2016) study, which demonstrated that scaffolding based on Vygotsky's theory can significantly enhance students' critical thinking skills compared with traditional teaching methods. Supporting this view, Heydari et al. (2019) argued that Vygotsky's dialectical constructivism underpins active educational designs in which scaffolding and social interaction are central to the development of learners' higher-order thinking skills. Complementing this perspective, Hajhosseiny and Mehran (2011) emphasized that Vygotsky highlighted language's mediating role in the internalization of knowledge.

Research on critical thinking education shows that active participation in collaborative and dialogic learning not only develops problem-solving skills but also deepens learners' critical awareness of knowledge. What connects this to perezhivanie is not collaboration itself but the way learners live through it: dialogic tasks place them in situations that are simultaneously cognitively demanding and emotionally charged, and it is their interpretation of such situations, rather than the activity as such, that bears on development (Veresov, 2017). Since language learning cannot be evaluated independently of the environment, society, and interaction, emotion and cognition, which shape a learner's overall attitude and actions toward the language, can be understood through the concept of perezhivanie. In line with this, Heydari et al. (2019) highlighted that practical thinking—defined as decision-making, problem-solving, and adapting to social contexts—can be effectively fostered through instructional designs informed by Vygotsky's dialectical constructivism.

Lantolf and Poehner (2023) examined sociocultural theory and included a study by Xu and Zhang (2023) on the concept of perezhivanie to discuss its connection to language learners. The study focused on second-language learning; however, the participants' second language was Japanese rather than English. Nevertheless, it highlighted an important aspect of second-language learning, as participants' prior English experience influenced their decision to learn Japanese. One participant did not achieve a higher grade on the English exam and subsequently enrolled in a different language course, choosing Japanese in line with individual preference. The participant reported that although they did not perceive many positive aspects of the language itself, they were able to transfer the cognitive strategies developed during English learning, which supported their language learning. The other participant expressed interest in the language and its culture; however, due to a negative attitude toward the language's structural features, they devoted most of their time to vocabulary study. The study suggests that negative attitudes are not necessarily an obstacle: in these cases, they coexisted with, and appeared to prompt, a redirection of effort toward specific aspects of language learning (Xu & Zhang, 2023). By connecting emotions—whether positive or negative—to cognitive processes such as strategy use, vocabulary learning, and skill transfer, learners can adjust how they approach the task of learning.

In addition to the previous study, Qin et al. (2022) offered deeper insight into the relationships among positive emotion, cognition, and action. As technology advances, incorporating tools into classroom lessons

becomes crucial, and learners who interact with these tools experience specific emotions. Flipped classrooms are also quite common because they provide a broader context for teaching. In their study, Qin et al. (2022) assigned narratives from second-language learners involved in flipped classrooms during the semester. Some students' negative emotions lead to negative thoughts and, subsequently, negative behaviors. For example, one student says she is not confident enough to speak English and declines to participate in a presentation. Another participant's negative emotions prompted positive actions. Due to a heavy workload, she feels anxious, which serves as a form of self-regulation, helping her plan her studies and improve her planning skills. The teacher's influence, given the value of the materials they prepare, is considerable. A participant notes that, since she realizes the effort the teacher put into adapting and preparing the material, she is encouraged to study more to make the teacher proud and show that the teacher's efforts are worthwhile.

Another important factor, the learner identity of language students, is crucial when students learn English as a foreign language in contexts where the official language differs substantially from English, such as Turkish or Japanese. In such cases, it raises a significant question for English teachers: how to encourage the development of a foreign language identity. Even if teachers push this identity, learners may refuse to fully adopt it and prefer to maintain their cultural identities while learning a foreign language. Exploring the concept of perezhivanie reveals how emotions and thoughts shape learners' foreign language identity. Bektaş-Çetinkaya (2024) studied the perezhivanie of two Turkish university students enrolled in a World English and Culture elective course. Her study aimed to connect students' emotional experiences with their developing English learner identities. Regarding bilingualism, both students stated that they focus on pronunciation and believe that achieving native-like proficiency in each language is necessary to be considered bilingual. They shared that during secondary and high school, they felt scared and humiliated because of their pronunciation; for example, speaking with a Turkish accent might lead to ridicule. This creates fear and anxiety about language learning.

Based on these emotional experiences, they indicated that they tried to improve their pronunciation to define themselves as bilinguals in English. However, the same situation led to different outcomes in shaping learner identity. As he continued taking the course and interacting with English speakers from around the world, he began to change his mindset, viewing pronunciation not as an end goal but as a means to an end. In contrast, for the other students, it led to confusion about what constitutes being bilingual and what does not. Although their experiences were similar, the outcomes were unique to each person (Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2024). In line with this perspective, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning as participation in communities of practice rather than as the individual acquisition of knowledge, emphasizing that learners' identities and experiences are shaped by their involvement in social practices. Likewise, Heydari et al. (2019) found that active educational designs grounded in Vygotsky's theory significantly enhanced students' practical thinking, illustrating how cognition and emotion interact with context to influence learners' actions. As suggested by the results, learners' emotional experiences affect how they define their identities as language learners—whether they truly see themselves as bilingual and what actions they take to improve.

Lastly, like teachers, dramatic events in the classroom also shape learners' perspectives and actions. Significant classroom events play a formative role in learners' development because they determine whether learners recognize them thoroughly or ignore them entirely. According to Yuki's (pseudonym) statements in Ng's (2024) study, her self-image as an English learner changed significantly from high school to university. In high school, she was the top student, confident in completing all assigned work and meeting her teacher's expectations. However, she felt embarrassed when she fell asleep during a class activity and woke up to find her teacher nearby. She explained that her identity as a top student was closely tied to this situation, and she was ashamed of her unconscious action; she tried to make up for it by quickly completing the activity. Years later, when she began studying at university, she faced repetitive, unengaging activities in English classes; as a result, she became bored and indifferent to the lessons, which were monotonous and unrealistic. She explained her attitude by saying that GPA is not what employers look for; they care more about whether you speak English well. As the study highlights, Yuki's perezhivanie was open to change over the years because of the dramatic events she experienced, which shaped her expectations, goals, and responses. If perezhivanie is part of how identities, goals, and decisions are formed, these are better understood as open to change than as fixed.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper contributes to ongoing discussions of perezhivanie by synthesizing recent research that highlights the dynamic interplay among emotion, cognition, and social context in English Language Teaching. By bringing together studies on teacher identity, learner identity, and classroom experiences, the review indicates that perezhivanie provides a productive analytical lens for understanding how educators and learners

interpret, negotiate, and transform their experiences over time.

From an ELT perspective, the findings suggest that teacher development and learner engagement cannot be fully understood through cognitive processes alone. Instead, emotional experiences—particularly those arising from critical classroom events, institutional pressures, and intercultural encounters—play a central role in shaping professional identity, agency, and pedagogical decision-making. Recognizing perezhivanie in teacher education and classroom practice may therefore support more reflective, responsive, and context-sensitive approaches to teaching and learning.

Finally, this review points to the need for further empirical research that examines perezhivanie longitudinally and across diverse educational contexts, particularly in relation to teacher education programs and language learning environments. Such research would deepen understanding of how emotions and cognition jointly influence identity development and professional growth in ELT.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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