

Study on the Intricacies of Teacher and Learner Agency in Foreign Language Instruction

Tenglong Gong*

School of international business and trade, Xinjiang Teachers' College, Urumuqi, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, 830043, China

**Corresponding author: Tenglong Gong*, E - mail: petergong2023@outlook.com*

Abstract

Language instruction has always revolved around the idea of agency. Learner agency has been significantly impacted by the educational objective that students become capable of independent learning. Learner agency is the term used to describe students' deliberate efforts to learn as opposed to the demands placed on them by their teachers, the curriculum, and other factors. The majority of schools in our traditional teaching mode typically use a one-size-fits-all strategy to accommodate groupings of students. Many students either became passive or felt disenfranchised. Examining the topic of agency is crucial in light of the ongoing demand to improve students' independent learning and teachers' ability to take charge of their instruction. By examining the elements of teachers' and students' agentic systems, this paper seeks to advance a more comprehensive understanding of agency. In order to help instructors and students become more proficient in teaching and learning English, this study also aims to investigate the intricate aspects of learner and teacher agency, which present a challenge for educational theory.

Keywords

teacher agency, learner agency, English teaching and learning

1. Introduction

Learners' initiative is crucial for successful language acquisition (vanLier, 2008). A learner must have a personal sense of agency, or the conviction that changing their learning is beneficial, in order to take action in their education. For someone learning a foreign language, agency is a concept similar to intelligence and motivation. Learner agency has been developed as a result of two significant advancements. Learner centeredness and autonomy, which emphasize the learner's position as an active agent in acquiring a second or foreign language, are associated with the initial development (Benson, 2001). In order to maximize learning opportunities, learners must cultivate a sense of agency in addition to the necessity of self-directed learning. Learners are agents who "actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning," according to the second development, which is linked to the increasing understanding of the interactive process between learners and their learning settings (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001, p. 145). The two significant advancements in second language learning shed light on the crucial role that learner agency plays.

In a similar vein, there is a growing global trend in educational policy to recognize the importance of teacher agency. In this sense, instructors' dedication to their jobs influences how they feel about the working environment. For instance, instructors should collaborate on curriculum development instead of using a top-down approach to improving education (Donaldson, 2011). One way to think of teacher agency, or the vital

role that teachers play, is as an essential component of educational reforms. As a result, teachers shouldn't just be given bureaucratic forms of responsibility, repressive evaluation regimes, or prescribed curricula (Biesta, 2010). Higher levels of professional judgment and discretion should be granted to teachers in their work environments (Sugrue and Dyrda-Solbrekke, 2011). Returning to teacher agency seems to be highly valuable and ought to be considered an essential component of teachers' professional development.

But there are several issues with going back to agency. First, according to Mercer (2011), agency is a dynamic, complicated system. Initiating agentic activities in learners is difficult due to the intrinsic intricacy of agency. Furthermore, even while some students make an effort to be as agentic as possible, this might not be the case for every situation or goal. Second, because of its non-visible and multi-componential aspects, defining agency is difficult. The nature of the interaction between individual, communal, and co-evolving agency across contexts is still hard to describe. Third, there are ongoing debates about whether or not educators should have greater professional autonomy, especially in light of Confucius's influence on societies like China. It appears that providing room for professional agency is connected to both the authority of legislators and policymakers as well as the institutions in which educators operate. One thing to keep in mind is that, while context and culture are crucial for agency, it's equally critical for teachers to be able to recognize affordances in these cultures. Additionally, there is the question of whether educators desire to be change agents in their job, both individually and collectively. The reality is that the systems or cultures in which teachers work may undermine their sense of self.

This paper reexamines the concept of agency with an emphasis on the function and status of students and instructors. Clarifying learner and instructor agency in foreign language instruction was the goal. The intricate dynamic interaction of a variety of elements in various context levels gives rise to the learner's sense of agency. For instance, it is positioned intrapersonally, chronologically, interpersonally, and contextually (Mercer, 2012). This emphasizes the significance of investigating learner agency's nature, evolution, and possible benefits. Additionally, teachers' work is "input" if we consider student performance to be "output." The most significant "factor" in educational discourses pertaining to specific educational "outcomes" is teachers. This demonstrates the significance of investigating teacher agency as well as the elements that restrict and limit teachers' ability to make professional decisions and take appropriate action. This paper can aid in our understanding of the function of agency in foreign language instruction by examining a wide range of viewpoints from the circumstances of students and teachers as well as sociocultural or educational contexts.

2. Determining Learner Agency

In sociology, agency is frequently defined as the ability to act differently or choose a path of action from a variety of possibilities (Giddens, 1984). To put it another way, agency is the capacity that a person has to better their current situation, path, or occurrences. In contrast, social systems are thought to be in a state of tension (Biesta and Tedder, 2006). The fact that people actively create their own learning serves as evidence of this (Allwright and Hanks, 2009). Different definitions of agency have been offered by researchers, which shed light on how agency is understood in more general contexts.

An intentional action that results in a specific outcome is called agency. It explains how people use their own activities to consciously change themselves or their circumstances (Ray, 2009). According to Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2011), p. 813, agency is defined as "the capacity to initiate purposeful action that implies will, autonomy, freedom, and choice." According to Huang and Benson (2013), p. 12, agency is not always synonymous with "taking initiative but can also be linked to those situations in which people take control of their life as a result of a perceived calling or sense of duty."

In general, the aforementioned perspectives on agency suggest that a person (agent) has the capacity to act physically, mentally, emotionally, and/or motivationally, as well as to make decisions based on their goals. A student who possesses a strong sense of agentic behaviors is able to take charge of their lives. Nonetheless, a person's learning path depends on their psychological traits. Furthermore, one's acts are socioculturally mediated, meaning that agency is connected to a historical and cultural context rather than existing only within the individual. In this sense, agency is associated with people, communities, and groups. Kohonen's (2009) claim that agency is the capacity of individuals to act in a socially constructed environment also expressed similar ideas. Thus, learners' agency is mediated by a variety of contextual factors, such as society, interaction, culture, and institution (Mercer, 2011).

There have been attempts to define agency in the fields of applied linguistics and foreign language instruction. Gao (2010) investigated the relationship between agency and contextual factors. In this case study, a student exhibited agency by using their ability and determination to accomplish goals while learning a foreign language. Therefore, agency is described as a general characteristic of agents that puts students in the role of subjects with the ability to act, as opposed to objects that are acted upon. Applied linguists Candlin and Sarangi define agency as “the self-conscious reflexive actions of human beings,” as stated in Huang and Benson (2013, p. 12).

One feature of this definition is that it emphasizes human reflexivity and links agency to actions. Prior research on learner identity in second language acquisition (e.g., McKay and Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000; Norton and Toohey, 2001) referenced agency, but they did not define it. A thorough explanation of agency has been attempted by a few earlier researchers (e.g., Lantolf, 2002; Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). One aspect of their conversations is that people’s participation in the social sphere gives rise to agency. Agency is shaped by historical and cultural trajectories rather than being a “property” of an individual (Morita, 2004, p. 590). Accordingly, agency is defined as “a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with society at large” (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148). In this sense, there might be some affordances that make it easier to carry out specific activities, as well as some limitations that make them impossible. We can also draw the conclusion that all human behavior is mediated. In certain situations, the mediation means are invisible. In some situations, though, they might be found. According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), agency is dialectically enacted and socioculturally mediated, which is consistent with the ideas of Taylor (1985). Additionally, they contended that agency entails the capacity to give things and events value and relevance.

Many theoretical and philosophical discussions have focused on the conception of agency. The widely accepted definition of agency in early research is “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). This definition helps us comprehend the function of mediation as well as the contextual character of agency in sociocultural terms. It appears that we must consider an individual’s physical, cognitive, affective, and motivational capacities when discussing how they are socioculturally, contextually, and interpersonally mediated. Gao (2010) went on to define agency as a person’s capacity and will to act in sociocultural discourses. Important factors to take into account are the importance of socioculturally influenced processes and the multicomponential, intrapersonal nature of agency. According to Mercer (2011), a person’s sense of agency is a measure of how agentic they feel. Participation and action are two ways that an individual might exercise their agency, as is purposeful nonparticipation or inaction. As a result, agency is connected to both visible and invisible acts, beliefs, ideas, and emotions. The different sociocultural backgrounds should be taken into account while interpreting these. However, context is dynamic and participatory rather than static and monolithic (Funder, 2001; Mercer, 2012). This implies that context is an intricate and distinct system made up of many different elements. It appears that a variety of contextual elements may influence (or be influenced by) agency, including the mix of macro- and micro-level structures and artifacts. Recent research, however, has proposed a more balanced perspective that gives equal weight to the context and the individual (e.g., Mercer, 2012). According to Carter and Sealey (2000), an excessive focus on structures deprives actors of any authority and ignores the impact of people. An excessive focus on agency ignores the very real limitations that affect us in space and time (p. 11).

3. The Difficulty of Learning a Foreign Language by Using Agentic Behaviors

Larsen-Freeman (1997) asserts that language acquisition is a complicated, non-linear process in which numerous independent agents interact with one another in unexpected and unforeseen ways. Regularities appear as a result of the intricate interconnections, and it is difficult to precisely identify or quantify every component in this intricate system. This implies that the dynamic complexity of learning a foreign language needs to be investigated and acknowledged. As a result, learning a language is not a straightforward cause-and-effect process. It should be a dynamic process that varies from person to person and is influenced by a variety of contextual circumstances. The following characteristics, according to Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008), make language learning a complicated system. First, teachers and students are at least two interconnected actors that make up language learning. Second, a system’s constituent parts may result in complex systems nested within different levels, all of which support more complex systems. Third, the setting of learning a foreign language is an individual-specific factor rather than a constant variable. Lastly, learning

a language is a dynamic process. Everything in this system is always changing. Since the system's components are independent of one another, alterations to one dimension may have unanticipated effects on other dimensions of the setup. As a result, it is contended that while the language acquisition system may occasionally alter dramatically and abruptly, it can also occasionally be smooth, continuous, and steady over time. Put differently, learning a foreign language is a process that involves both stability and variety, which can either increase or decrease learners' enthusiasm to acquire that language.

The nature of adopting agentic behaviors in language learning is also complex, given the features of complex dynamic systems. According to Mercer's (2012) theory, learner beliefs, motivation, affect, perseverance, and self-regulation all seem to interact to produce learner agency. As a result, agency is associated with several circumstances, such as the home and classroom surroundings, the sociocultural and educational contexts, and the interactional contexts of the learners. Learners' ability to exercise agency can be impacted by a variety of interrelated factors, many of which interact in unpredictable ways and may differ in their relative importance. As a result, learner agency might be seen as a dynamic, complicated system.

4. Teacher Agency Definition

The concept of teacher agency has not gotten the attention it deserves. It is theorized in recent literature (e.g., Pyö, Pietarinen, and Soini, 2014) as an alternate way to explain how instructors could engage with policy and exhibit teaching practice. Teacher agency is frequently associated with limited school management objectives, where the agency's contribution is limited to curricular reform (Fullan, 2003). Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) developed an ecological model for comprehending teacher agency based on the temporal/relational theory of agency, citing Emirbayer and Mische (1998). This model incorporated the three elements of teacher agency: the projective, practical-evaluative, and iterational dimensions.

According to the iterational dimension, instructors' agency results from their professional credentials, accumulated teaching experience, and prior thought and behavior patterns. This dimension makes a distinction between the impact of teachers' particular professional histories and their broader life histories. It suggests that understanding these two distinct effects may help educators become more equipped to handle current challenges and issues and cultivate more robust future orientations.

According to the practical-evaluative dimension, actors are able to make normative and practical decisions based on situations that are currently changing. This dimension makes a distinction between several contextual elements that support teacher agency. To put it another way, the various structural settings that give instructors the necessary conditions also give them the tools they need to acquire agency. This conundrum highlights the importance of structure and settings, which are also considered social aspects, and reveals the paradoxical character of agency. The dialogical process of agency by which actors engage with others within collectively organized settings of action is attributed to the social nature of structures and contexts. Therefore, the type of physical constraints and the availability of physical resources have an impact on teacher agency.

5. Teacher Agency's Complexity

The intricacy of teacher agency can be traced back to Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conclusion that teacher agency is connected to routine (e.g., the experience and expertise teachers bring to their work), purpose (e.g., the orientations that guide teachers' work), and judgment (e.g., the decisions teachers made on what to do and how to do it in the present state). A dynamic interaction is formed by the three dimensions. However, within various structural contexts of action, the three dimensions interact differently. According to this viewpoint, teacher agency should be investigated as a configuration of impacts from past experiences, future-focused orientations, and present-focused involvement. The three dimensions are proposed to be projective, practical-evaluative, and iterational. From an ecological perspective, the past, present, and future are all crucial to achieving agency. This implies that a variety of factors may influence how and to what degree instructors can exert agency within their teaching communities. This demonstrates how difficult it is for educators to develop a sense of agency.

The institution system, available resources, human efforts, and structural and contextual elements all interact to produce teacher agency. In addition to being reflexive and creative, an agentic teacher defends pupils against harmful or unhelpful practices while working against environmental restrictions. Current and prior

policies, as well as the larger goal and character of education, have a significant impact on teacher agency. Teacher agency should be recommended as a crucial component of teacher education since it may be impacted by access to broader professional discourses regarding educational goals (Biesta, 2015). Teachers must have a strong professional discourse and a set of future-focused perspectives that they can apply to their work environments. Teachers can use their ideas to achieve agency in situations that are largely—though not entirely—constructed by accountability systems by expanding their agentic possibilities. The concept of teacher agency becomes more complicated as a result.

6. Reflections on Agency

The interaction between actors and the circumstances in which they operate is the foundation of agency, a temporal and relational phenomenon that evolves throughout time. The way educators teach is greatly influenced by their professional agency. Examples of their professional agency include their attempts to build rapport with students, question the school's normative discourses, think about teaching techniques, and initiate positive changes in students' learning that align with their own educational beliefs (Roberts and Graham, 2008). Teachers can navigate, comprehend, and occasionally oppose the official school culture through their convictions about teaching.

A forward-looking teacher belief also enables teachers to interact with their situational environments in more agentic and proactive ways, in addition to Ticknor's (2015) four suggestions for fostering agency (rehearsals over time, dissonance to the point of frustration, observations and approximations in field experiences, and interactional spaces for critical reflection). There are a number of things to consider. The first problem relates to the structure and organization of teachers' continuing professional development. Teachers should be able to interact with a variety of educational discourses and discursive repertoires through teacher education. However, the current approach to teacher education has separated itself from a broader intellectual engagement with the nature of teaching, educational purpose, school, and society in favor of the instrumental side of the spectrum—getting the job done. Second, the teleological character of education—that is, the fact that education is made up of purposes—is an example of how education differs from learning. Therefore, our view or idea about the aim of education eventually shapes all of our educational behaviors and activities. This problem affects all aspects of teaching, not only curricula, schools, or education policy. Given the multifaceted nature of education, the capacity to evaluate and do so in an instructive manner is essential to support effective instruction (Biesta, 2015). However, more research is needed to determine if instructors are capable of applying judgment in the classroom and how the teacher education program may best assist teachers in doing so. Lastly, it's critical to cultivate educational virtuosity through modeling, which necessitates an embodied and contextual learning of others' virtuosity (Hillier, 2012). Understanding the nature of teaching and learning and how it relates to learner and teacher agency will be necessary for further research in this area.

References

- Ahearn, L. M., (2001). Language and agency. *Annual review of anthropology*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 109-137.
- Allwright, D. and Hanks, J., (2009). *The developing language learner: An introduction to exploratory practice*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Benson, P., (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*, Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Biesta, G., (2015). How does a competent teacher become a good teacher? In: Heilbronn, R., and Foreman-Peck, L. (eds.) *Philosophical Perspectives on Teacher Education*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 3-22.
- Biesta, G., Priestley, M. and Robinson, S., (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and teaching*, vol. 21, no. 6, pp. 624-640.
- Biesta, G. and Tedder, M., (2006). *How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement*. Working Paper 5 University of Exeter.
- Biesta, G. J. J., (2010). *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics*, London: Paradigm Publishers.

- Carter, B. and Sealey, A., (2000). Language, structure and agency: What can realist social theory offer to sociolinguistics? *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 3-20.
- Emirbayer, M. and Mische, A., (1998). What is agency? *American journal of sociology*, vol. 103, no. 4, pp. 962-1023.
- Fullan, M., (2003). *Change forces with a Vengeance*, London: Routledge.
- Funder, D. C., (2001). The really, really fundamental attribution error. *Psychological Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 21-23.
- Gao, X. S., (2010). *Strategic language learning: The roles of agency and context*, Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Giddens, A., (1984). *The constitution of society*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Hillier, Y., (2012). *Reflective Teaching in Further and Adult Education*, (3rd ed.) London: Continuum.
- Huang, J. P. and Benson, P., (2013). Autonomy, agency and identity in foreign and second language education. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 7-28.
- Kohonen, V., (2009). Autonomy, authenticity and agency in language education: The European language portfolio as a pedagogical resource. In: Kohonen, V., and Moilanen, P. (eds.) *Language Education, Teacher Professionalism and Intercultural Agency*. Helsinki: OKKA Foundation, pp. 12-38.
- Lantolf, J. P., (2002). Sociocultural theory and second language acquisition. In: Kaplan, R. B. (ed.) *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 104-114.
- Lantolf, J. P., (2006). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lantolf, J. P. and Pavlenko, A., (2014). (S) econd (L) anguage (A) ctivity theory: Understanding second language learners as people. In: Breen, M. P. (ed.) *Learner Contributions to Language Learning*. Harlow:: Pearson Education., pp. 141-158.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., (1997). Chaos/complexity science and second language acquisition. *Applied linguistics*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 141-165.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. and Cameron, L., (2008). *Complex systems and applied linguistics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lipponen, L. and Kumpulainen, K., (2011). Acting as accountable authors: Creating interactional spaces for agency work in teacher education. *Teaching and teacher education*, vol. 27, no. 5, pp. 812-819.
- McKay, S. L. and Wong, S.-L. C., (1996). Multiple discourses, multiple identities: Investment and agency in second-language learning among Chinese adolescent immigrant students. *Harvard educational review*, vol. 66, no. 3, pp. 577-609.
- Mercer, S., (2011). Understanding learner agency as a complex dynamic system. *System*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 427-436.
- Mercer, S., (2012). The complexity of learner agency. *Apples: Journal of Applied Language Studies*, no. 2.
- Morita, N., (2004). Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities. *Tesol Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 573-603.
- Norton, B., (2000). *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*, London: Longman.
- Norton, B. and Toohey, K., (2001). Changing perspectives on good language learners. *TESOL quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 307-322.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G. and Robinson, S., (2015). Teacher agency: What is it and why does it matter? In: Kneyber, R., and Evers, J. (eds.) *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Bottom up*. London: Routledge, pp. 134-148.
- Pyhältö, K., Pietarinen, J. and Soini, T., (2014). Comprehensive school teachers' professional agency in large-scale educational change. *Journal of educational change*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 303-325.

- Ray, J. M., (2009). A template analysis of teacher agency at an academically successful dual language school. *Journal of advanced academics*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 110-141.
- Roberts, J. and Graham, S., (2008). Agency and conformity in school-based teacher training. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 24, no. 6, pp. 1401-1412.
- Sugrue, C. and Solbrekke, T. D., (2014). *Professional responsibility: New horizons of praxis*, New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, C., (1985). *Human agency and language (Philosophical papers I)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ticknor, A. S., (2015). Critical considerations in becoming literacy educators: Pre-service teachers rehearsing agency and negotiating risk. *Teaching Education*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 383-399.
- van Lier, L., (2008). Agency in the classroom. In: Lantolf, J. P. (ed.) *Sociocultural Theory and the Teaching of Second Languages*. London: London: Equinox, pp. 163-186.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author (s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open - access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).