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New Trends in Methodology

Agency in Language Learning

(4)

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Introduction

Agency fulfills and incorporates several important principles and related constructs in language education such as motivation, self-regulation, autonomy, identity, interaction, and cultural relevance. In this line of thinking, embracing and promoting learner agency is a fundamental principle of language classroom pedagogy. **Agency** is the key to understanding who language learners are and why they think and act the way they do. It is the basis for making sense of the complexity of classroom practices, reflecting on those practices, and organizing them into a coherent system.

The term **agency** is the ability to take action with intention has long appeared in social science but has only recently become part of the main theoretical constructs of applied linguistics and SLA. Influenced by the behaviorist tradition in which humans are treated as passive beings, language learners in the mainstream SLA literature once were considered as "processing devices" that simply receive input and produce predictable output.

Approaches to Understanding Agency

Agency is a complex and multifaceted construct, so it is a daunting task to come up with an operational definition. However, defining agency is crucial since the particular ways in which scholars conceive of agency have implications for understanding of personhood, causality, action and intention.

Agency and self-Efficacy

American psychologist Albert Bandura conducted extensive research on human agency particularly through the examination of self-efficacy. The core of motivation is agency, the act of making choices with self-determination. Human agency has four core features including **intentionality**, **forethought**, **self-regulation**, and **self-reflectiveness**.

Agency is manifested in human actions done **intentionally**. It informs an individual's future course of action and his or her proactive commitment to future actions. **Forethought** of agency can be expressed in numerous ways. (1-people exercise forethought, 2-set goals for

themselves, 3-anticipate the likely consequences of actions, and 4- avoid detrimental effects. Through the exercise of forethought, people motivate themselves and guide their actions in anticipation of future events and outcomes.

Anticipated materials and social outcomes are not the only rewards influencing human behavior. Agency motivates, monitors, and regulates individuals' execution of decisions made and actions planned. People exercise self-direction keeping in mind personal standards and regulate their behaviors by self-evaluative outcomes. Agency also enables individuals to examine their metacognitive capability to reflect on the adequacy of one's thoughts and actions. Self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in the self-regulation of motivation through goal challenges and outcome expectations.

Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as an individual's perceptions of one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments. Individuals construct outcome expectations from observed conditional relations between environmental events in the world around them, and the outcomes produced by their actions.

Agency, Rewards, and Motivation

Motivation, one of the most researched constructs in the field of psychology, has in the context of L2 learning long been regarded as fundamental for successful language leaning.

From a behavioral perspective **motivation** can be defined as "the anticipation of reinforcement".

Classroom teachers often use motivation as a catch-all term to make sense of why some students succeed and why others do not. The empirical evidence indicating that high levels of motivation in L2 learners were correlated with high achievement test results.

The key constructs in the work of Gardner and Lambert, integrative and instrumental motivational orientations, have been used widely for explaining why people learn languages. Gardener emphasized the importance of integrative orientation, which refers to learners' interests in getting to know about the people and culture of the target language.

For classroom teachers, intrinsic motivation is important because it is a crucial element in the cognitive, social, and physical development of humans, and leads to high-quality learning. It is crucial to know what factors do not undermine but enhance intrinsic motivation. More autonomous intrinsic motivation is associated with greater engagement, better performance, less dropping out, higher quality learning, and greater psychological well-being among other outcomes.

Dornyei proposed the "**L2 motivational Self System**" drawing on learners' perspectives about themselves in the future. The ideal self refers to the person one hopes to become, and the ought-to self indicates the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet those expectations.

Another notable development in L2 motivation research is Ushioda's (2009) person-in-context relational view of motivation. He notes that L2 motivation is dynamic and can be mediated socially. It has strong relationship with learner identity and agency because one's sense of identity and agency depends on actions carried out not only on his or her own but also under the control of others (e.g., peers and teachers). External factors and experiences influence L2 learners' engagement, persistence, and success in their learning processes.

Ushioda calls for viewing motivation as a process rather than a measurable cause or product and an integral part of the evolving organic and adaptive system of cognitive, affective, and contextual processes shaping language learning.

Agency and Embodiment

The notion of **embodied cognition** also known as **situated cognition**, to discuss the relationship between the mind and action and how this relationship can be relevant to human agency.

According to Gibbs (2006), **perception** is the ability to derive meaning from sensory experience to guide adaptive behavior. Individuals' perception of affordances is relative to the perceiving object. Cultural connection also comes into play in this learning process because individuals' may perceive the affordances differently depending on their

prior language culture. This type of learning goes beyond the cognitive development through information processing.

In other word, agency is a prerequisite of real learning, involving cognition, emotion, and physical movement in a sociocultural, historically situated context. Language is not simply stored inside the brain rather it is a multi-sensory and multimodal experience involving motor patterns as well as auditory and visual information.

For further support for the benefit of embodied action on cognitive development is from the field of **haptics**, the study of touch and the human interaction with the external environment through touch. This area of research focuses on how human beings interact with the environment through the sense of touch, and eventually how haptic perception might affect student learning and help them gain useful information.

Cognition, Emotion, and Agency

When agency means the ability to take action with intentionality, it is important to understand how the brain works when an individual takes such an action, what roles the brain plays in taking further actions, and what that action does to the brain in response. Cognitive process such as learning, attention, memory and decision making are greatly affected by the processes of emotion. In other words, emotion plays a fundamental role in reasoning and decision making .

Vygotsky (1962) observed the close connection between cognition and emotion and stressed the importance of the affective and volitional tendency of the human mind in the development of the thought process.

Emotion plays a critical role in bringing previously acquired knowledge to inform real-world decision making in social contexts. In other words, emotion is a critical factor for the maximum transfer of acquired knowledge to novel situations and for helping learners decide when and how to apply what they have learned previously.

Emotion is what makes people enable to engage in sound decision making with a repertoire of know-how and actions that would allow people to respond appropriately in different social situations. **Emotion**

should be grounded in every learning setting in order for a learner to exercise agency as a desirable member of a community of practice.

Agency and Sociopolitical Context

Learner agency in sociopolitical context and its importance in language education are strongly connected with how language learners have traditionally been viewed mainstream SLA research.

Agency has been a popular concept for L2 researchers who aim to understand learner autonomy in situated L2 learning and how the learners' roles as social beings shape their learning paths. L2 learning takes place as learners increase their participation in target communities of practice in which their engagement can be facilitated or constrained. In these studies, learner agency refers to learners' ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate and pursue their goals as individuals.

Norton(2000) proposed the notion of investment to complement the conventional notion of **motivation**, which refers to the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. According to Norton , learners invest in learning a target language hoping that they will acquire certain types of symbolic and material resources that will promote their social, political, and economic status in their communities of practice.

According to Norton , **identity** refers to how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future . An investment in learning a new language is not simply obtaining knowledge and a set of skills. It is an investment in one's identity, which often becomes a process of struggle as multiple identities are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated through interaction with others.