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New Trends in Methodology

Agency in Language Learning

(3)

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Introduction

This chapter we should answer some questions such as :

1-What is agency?

Q2-What did language learners consider in the mainstream SLA literature?

Q3-Why language learners in the mainstream SLA literature were considered as "processing devices"?

Q4-What are the core features of human agency?

Q5-How does self-efficacy affect learner agency?

Q6-What causes language learners to be driven to act on learning and how one can sustain such drive?

Q7-Define motivation.

Q8- Where is the source of such motivation comes from?

Q9- Why intrinsic motivation is important for classroom teachers?

Q10-What could language teachers do to help students feel self-confident and autonomous in daily classroom routines?

Q11-What does the notion of embodiment tell us about the relationship between cognitive development and social environment?

Q12-What can we learn from neurobiological research on emotion regarding how our brain works in decision-making process?

Q13-How the complex relationship among agency, emotion and decision-making in language use and language learning may manifest itself in the real world?

Q14-Why is it important to understand learner agency in the sociopolitical process of L2 learning?

Q15-How can teachers foster agency in language learners?

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.

1-What is agency?

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.

Q2-What did language learners consider in the mainstream SLA literature?

language learners in the mainstream SLA literature were considered as "processing devices."

Q3-Why language learners in the mainstream SLA literature were considered as "processing devices"?

Because (1) they influenced by the behaviorist tradition in which humans are treated as passive beings and (2) they 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

Q4-What are the core features of human agency?

Q5-How does self-efficacy affect learner agency?

(A) 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.

(B) 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.

(C) 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.

(D) 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.

(E) **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.

(F) Self-efficacy has been investigated as a pre director of successful academic achievement .Higher self-efficacy correlates to individuals' greater persistence when facing difficulties , leading them to exert more

effort and make better use of learning strategies. On the other hand , students with low self-efficacy may choose not to participate in a learning activity because they perceive themselves to be lacking in the ability to succeed in it.

Agency, Rewards, and Motivation

Q6-What causes language learners to be driven to act on learning and how one can sustain such drive?

Q7-Define motivation.

Q8- Where is the source of such motivation comes from?

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 learning.

From a behavioral perspective **motivation** can be defined as "the anticipation of reinforcement". Successful learners are conscious of potential rewards for taking a certain action, and decide to go for it expecting to gain those rewards.

Classroom teachers often use motivation as a catch-all term to make sense of why some students succeed and why others do not. Gardner and Lambert (1972) explain that 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. Gardner in his socio-educational model emphasized the importance of (1) **integrative orientation**, which refers to learners' interests in getting to know about the people and culture of the target language. (2) **An instrumental motive**, on the other hand, is driven by more practical value and advantages gained from learning the target language .

Q9- Why intrinsic motivation is important for classroom teachers?

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.

Q10-What could language teachers do to help students feel self-confident and autonomous in daily classroom routines?

Dornyei (2005) 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. The assumption is that if becoming fluent in a target language is essential to one's ideal or ought-to self, students will be greatly motivated to learn the language because they want to reduce the discrepancy between current- and future-self stats.

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

Q11-What does the notion of embodiment tell us about the relationship between cognitive development and social environment?

Many seasoned teachers may believe that for their students "learning by doing is the best way to learn", and therefore plan their lessons to enable students to engage in a variety of activities. To consider a rationale

behind such a belief, it may be useful to look at the connection between cognition, body, and human action.

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. Agency can manifest in the active process of *perceptual learning*, that is, learning to perceive particular features and meanings (i.e., affordances) in the environment. 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. It involves a whole-person, body and mind socially situated process.

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.

Human beings' capacity to process information by touch may be superior to the visual and auditory sensory systems. Many science educators believe that simulations and virtual models involving haptic feedback are powerful tools for advancing and applying science knowledge.

Cognition, Emotion, and Agency

Q12-What can we learn from neurobiological research on emotion regarding how our brain works in decision-making process?

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 neuroscience, especially brain studies using functional Magnetic Resonance, Imaging (fMRI) and related methods has increasingly been influential and has provided multiple levels of analysis and a deeper understanding of the human mind as a complex organic system. Cognitive processes 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.

Antonio Damasio (1994, 2003) reported intriguing results from his research on the neuroscience of emotions. His neurological patients, whose frontal lobe and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex were damaged, show compromised social behaviors such as being insensitive to others' emotion, unable to learn from their mistakes, having difficulty in making appropriate decisions, and not feeling embarrassed after violating social and ethical rules. On the other hand, these patients displayed no less of knowledge and were able to cogently explain social and logical rules that guide one's future plans and behaviors.

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. To ignore the importance of students' emotions is to fail to appreciate a critical force in students' learning, which in turn, is to fail to appreciate the very reason that students learn at all.

Neurobiological findings help us understand how beliefs and emotions have a major impact on the success or failures of learning process, and how emotions and learning are influenced by the process of the biological brain interacting with our senses and the physical world.

Agency and Sociopolitical Context

Q13-How the complex relationship among agency, emotion and decision-making in language use and language learning may manifest itself in the real world?

Q14-Why is it important to understand learner agency in the sociopolitical process of L2 learning?

Q15-How can teachers foster agency in language learners? 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?

Learner agency in a sociopolitical context and its importance in language education are strongly connected with how language learners have traditionally been viewed in mainstream SLA research. SLA researchers sometimes have been preoccupied with the internal mechanisms of interlanguage rather than language learners themselves for their main research focus. The participants in SLA research often have been described as interlanguage speakers, fossilized L2 users, immigrants, limited English proficient speakers, refugees, non-native speakers, heritage- language learners, or generation 1.5 learners. The language learners' multiple social roles, identities, unique characteristics, and agency were considered to be of less importance to our understanding of SLA.

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.

Understanding learner agency within the identity approach to SLA is useful for explaining how some seemingly intelligent and highly motivated students would not want to speak /write or cannot speak /write in a classroom or a particular community 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.