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Learner agency in students' EFL learning narratives

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Abstract

The article focuses on the phenomenon of learner agency in the English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) context. Agency has recently attracted the attention of educational researchers because of the need of our times where the rapid development and social changes require from individuals to take responsibility for their own lives, to make meaning of their experience and learn from that. I will define the phenomenon of agency, as well as briefly introduce a chordal triad model of agency proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). The researchers assume an ecological perspective on human agency and see value in the analysis of one's life stories. The benefit of such an approach is not only for researchers who can grasp an interplay of various factors also from outside the formal education context which are often ignored by EFL teachers as the ones that have had a real impact on the learners' competences and their learning process; it is also useful for the learners themselves, as in a way they need to distance themselves from their experience, reflect upon and evaluate it, thus in consequence they will understand themselves better. In the article two Polish student-narratives on their way to English competence were selected and analysed to understand what drives individuals to achieve their EFL goals, what means they apply and what meaning they make of their experiences and reflections. Such an analysis allows identifying different tones of EFL learner agency, which may give us a broader insight into the language learning process itself.

Keywords: agency; chordal triad model; learner narratives

1. Introduction

Recently the phenomenon of agency in the educational context has attracted the attention of researchers (e.g., Van Lier 2010, Biesta & Tedder, 2007). It gives a different dimension to understanding learner autonomy, a phenomenon studied since at least the 1970s when Holec (1979, p. 3) defined it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. Agency is a broader construct which incorporates the former one. I will briefly define the phenomenon of agency, as well as characterise a chordal triad model of agency introduced by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). Because there seems to be a dearth of research on learner agency in the foreign language education context this article presents a qualitative research which aimed at identifying English language learning related agency of students in a BA programme in an English Faculty of a university in Poland. With this goal in mind selected two students’ narratives on their way to English competence were analysed. The chordal triad model served as a framework for the analysis.

2. On defining agency

Agency being important for one’s life phenomenon is a concern of Emirbayer and Mische (1998). The researchers define agency as:

a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and ‘acted out’ in the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment) (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963).

Referring to concepts of agency in philosophy, sociological and psychological theories, and criticising them for their one-sidedness, that is concentration on purpose, routine or judgment, the authors claim that agency encompasses the dynamic interplay between these three dimensions (1998, p. 963). They have identified three elements of agency which can be found in varying degrees in each action, what they named a chordal triad of agency:

1. The iterational element of agency (i.e., referring selectively to one’s past);
2. The projective element of agency (i.e., future in both the short and long term); and
3. The practical-evaluative element by which they understand present individual’s “capacity to make practical and normative judgements among alternative trajectories of action” in response to a concrete situation (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 971).

The authors further claim that each of the three dimensions has its own internal chordal structure. However, it is not a simple relation to past, present and future as consecutive stages of an action, but for each aspect of agency one temporal orientation is dominant and influencing individual's relating to the other dimensions. What is important is how people understand their own relationship to their past, present and future.

Van Lier (2010) refers to agency as movement (i.e., a change of state or direction) or even lack of movement when a person makes a conscious decision not to act. He believes that "autonomy, motivation and investment are in a sense products (or manifestations) of a person's agency" (2010, p. 4).

Biesta and Tedder (2007) posit that agency is an empirical matter and assume an ecological perspective on studying it, that is, taking into consideration the entire context in which one functions. They postulate, following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), for "agency to be conceived as something that is *achieved*, rather than possessed, through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their contexts-for-action" (2016, p. 132). Such an approach emphasises a particular kind of learning that may help individuals to gain (more) control over one's life, as well as give (more) direction to it, namely learning from one's biography, learning that has to do with "understanding and evaluating the composition, history and 'ecology' of one's agentic orientations" (2016, p. 139). The researchers applied the model for studying life-narratives (autobiographies) in the form of interviews over a couple of years with two social agents. This led them to posit that individuals may display different agentic orientations in different contexts and the composition of their agentic orientations may shift over time. They are also of the opinion that some individuals display a similar orientation across a range of different contexts and events showing little change over time; while others may show substantial variation in the composition of their agentic orientations in a different situation and/or may display changes over time. That is why they recommend a contextualised approach to the study of agency and assuming a life course perspective.

3. The study

3.1. Background to the study

In an earlier study (Siek-Piskozub & Jankowska, 2018) of second and third year English philology students in their BA programme who volunteered to take part in it, nine narratives on the students' way to English competence were collected and analysed following a grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Initially (i.e., in the axial coding stage) individual narratives were plotted on the PERMA model of the well-being theory (Seligman, 2011) and in the final coding stage

we selected EFL teachers for the analysis of the impact they had had on the EFL learners' competence. However, another factor which then attracted our attention was learners' own efforts to acquire the language (an issue which will be analysed in a different article). For the present study I decided to collect narratives from a more homogenous group (my students in a diploma seminar) and concentrate on their EFL learning experience to verify applicability of the chordal triad model for studying EFL learning agency.

3.2. Research objectives

The present research aimed to contribute to the study of the importance of learner agency for their EFL development. More specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Is the chordal triad model of agency applicable to EFL learning?
2. Are learners aware of the impact of their past on their presence and future?
3. What meaning do they make of their EFL experiences?

3.3. Instruments and participants

Students of a BA diploma seminar at the Faculty of English of Adam Mickiewicz University were asked to write an essay entitled *My way to English*. The essays were to be written in their native language to avoid any misinterpretation. The students were instructed to concentrate on what they consider as important for developing their EFL competence in terms of their first contact with the language, goals which they had in mind, influence of people around them, contact with the language in- and out-of-school, etc. The essays were anonymous but the students had to give their age, gender and whether they came from a city/town or village.

Having collected 8 essays from the study cohort I decided to concentrate on the phenomenon of learner agency of two students. The two were chosen because the participants shared some characteristics related to the context of education, namely they:

- had completed primary, middle and secondary schools in Poland where they formally learnt English;
- were students of the third year in the same BA programme with their competence in English at B2/C1 level (CEFR, 2001);
- attended the same diploma seminar devoted to the use of wellbeing theory in the context of foreign language education; and
- wrote the essay entitled "My way to English competence" as a partial requirement for completing the seminar of which they knew it would not be assessed, but would serve the purposes of the research.

What makes them different is their gender and different earlier context of EFL learning which motivated their future actions and influenced the postexperience reflection. To preserve their anonymity their names Anna and Adam were invented by the researcher.

The two students' narratives are analysed with the use of the chordal triad model for agency. If any direct reference is made to the narratives in form of a quotation, it is the present author's translation from Polish to English. The additions in square brackets also come from the present author to clarify the intended meaning.

3.4. Participants' life-stories of their EFL learning

Anna

Anna is 24 and comes from a village, which, as she notes, limited her opportunities for direct contact with English. She began to learn English when she was in the fourth grade of primary school (age 10). She mentions that although her school was poorly equipped (no new technology) and no extra activities like a language club or private courses were available, still she was very much motivated to learn because she saw EFL lessons as interesting and different from other school subjects. The teacher greeted them in English in the first lesson, and from then on, they were memorising useful phrases, doing role-plays. The teacher was generous in evaluating students' performance, but for Anna grades for English were not important, unlike it was with other school subjects. Anna did not have her own computer so online resources were not within her reach, still she tried to do more than was required from the learners in her class to better develop her EFL competence. She explains that she always did extra tasks which the teacher proposed to the willing students. She mentions that this positive early experience with English motivated her to get involved in mastering the language throughout her future life. Although there were moments when she was losing her initial enthusiasm, which was caused by changes in the educational context. For example, the teacher she liked left the school, and the one that replaced her was not appreciated by Anna. She is now aware that her negative attitude might have been motivated by the regret of having lost the first teacher whom every student in her class was fond of, still she also mentions some weak sides of the teaching approach, such as ignoring learners individual language needs, e.g. concentration on weak students and ignoring the motivated ones (not giving them extra assignments and ignoring them if they had done extra tasks on their own), treating students who asked about something connected with English as intruders. Anna notes that the lack of positive feedback lowered her early enthusiasm to learn English.

The situation became even worse when Anna entered middle school. The teacher who taught them English was not competent in the language (she was a maths teacher), but still insisted on her poor English to be the model for her students. The teacher followed the course book and, according to Anna, would unjustly evaluate learners' performance (favouring weak but obedient students). She writes: "(...) it's difficult to attend classes when you do not trust [your] teacher". What she saw as good fortune for her was that in the nearby town a Callan Method school was opened, and she enrolled on the course run by it. She eagerly memorized and practiced asking questions and giving answers, used graded readers offered by the school library, developed her vocabulary in context – this has given her confidence in using English. One can see that for Anna knowing English meant being able to use it and the state school did not guarantee that. She also seems to be a person who needs to be given positive feedback.

Luckily, on completing middle school, she enrolled on an extended programme of English language in secondary school and had a very competent teacher there. Despite the fact that there were many contact hours in English in school, she reports always doing some extra activities, such as, for example, joining an English club in her school, watching films with subtitles, competing in language quizzes, and for a year continuing to attend the Callan course. However, this was not enough for her as she was dissatisfied with her own progress. She was disappointed that she still could not fully understand English films and that due to the obligation to prepare for the final exam (Matura) she had less time for extra-curricular activities. Particularly she felt unhappy because of the lack of genuine communication in English as the classes were focused on exam-type tasks from their course-books where communication skills were evaluated, however, the context and the roles for communication were prescribed (e.g., describing a picture). Anna is also somewhat critical about the teacher whom she liked but was disappointed with her reluctance to prepare extra-curricular activities for her students, which she justifies to some extent as the teacher having problems at home, which prevented her (the teacher) from more involvement in teaching. Still, Anna appreciated when the teacher responded to her request for additional English course books so that she could prepare herself for studying English at university after she had successfully passed her final exam in English. When, after getting enrolled to the Faculty of English, Anna visited her teacher to return the books, the teacher expressed high expectations about Anna's achievements in English and encouraged her not to doubt herself. Anna found this latter comment particularly helpful in her future learning when initially she saw that her level of English was lower than that of other students, which caused her inhibition in speaking for fear of making errors (particularly in pronunciation which was important at the university and was not paid any

attention to in her earlier studies). Because of that she even failed to get a passing grade in her practical English class in the first semester and had doubts if she would ever be good at English. What is more, she remembered then what her mentor-teacher had said to her mother on learning about Anna's plans for studying English that even the best village-student could not succeed at a prestigious English Faculty. However, she quickly overcame her doubts and confronted them with the positive opinion of her English teacher. She comments:

Paradoxically, what would clip wings of the majority of people motivated me more because I wanted to prove to my mentor-teacher that she was wrong, that even such a nobody leaving in a village could become someone (emph. mine TSP). And thanks to that after each failure in pronunciation classes I could collect my thoughts and practice again, and finally I managed to pass.

Still, Anna failed the final exam in English for the first year. Yet, again she motivated herself to work hard during the summer and was successful in the retake exam. This made her happy and also taught her to work harder during the following year not to risk failures any more. She got engaged in interactions with students from the "Erasmus plus" programme, initiated conversations with native speakers, read more books and watched films in English. Anna is aware of her weaknesses in English, and knows she has to work hard to overcome difficulties, but she also notes her little successes, as e.g. scoring in the practical English exam with 90% accuracy. When reflecting on why she has chosen English studies she explains:

It's difficult for me to tell why I have chosen English. Perhaps partly because my first teacher encouraged me to [learn] the language, has shown English from its best side. However, I would rather say that this is a matter of destiny. No one asks us why we like, for example, chocolate – this is how it is and that's all. For me the same is with English – simply I have become fond of it from my first class and it stays like that.

We can thus observe Anna's agency orientation, wanting to master the language for communication and judging language activities on the criterion of usefulness for genuine communication. Anna eagerly gets engaged in the activities that lead to this goal even if these are extra-curricular activities. School grades, although important for continuing education, initially seem to her to be of less importance, for she evaluated her competence as higher than that of other students. However, when she failed at the university, it motivated her even more to practice skills that she noticed she was behind with in comparison to the students coming from what she calls "better secondary schools from town".

While analysing Anna's story, we can notice an interplay between an anticipated future, that is, developing an ability to freely communicate in English, and

later also to become successful in her studying English at the university (projective element of agency) and the activities she gets engaged in to achieve these goals (practical evaluative element of agency). At a different time the iterative element of agency can be observed, for example when she reflects on the opinions of her teachers on the possibility of succeeding at a prestigious university or explains the reasons for her weaknesses in some aspect of English competence. However, these reflections motivate her to work even harder, to practice skills that she considers important or which inhibit her learning.

Adam

Adam is also 24 but unlike Anna lives in one of the big cities in Poland, which gives him more opportunities for contact with English. His formal English classes began when he was in the third year of primary school (age 9). However, Adam does not make any comment as to the teaching approach or his attitude to English then, although in his final reflections he criticizes school teaching in general as not aiming at developing communication skills and concentration on many "useless grammar exercises". What he finds as having a truly important impact on his further involvement in learning English, what he calls "real contact" with the language, was of a negative nature. He explains:

When I was 11, I and my family went to New Zealand for summer holidays. We stayed in a hotel and there was some misunderstanding. A hotel employee came to me and asked if there was any problem, and I blushed deeply and could not say a word. The hotel guests began to laugh at me and I promised myself that I will learn English and will not allow another humiliation. Thus, the negative emotions were the vehicle which pushed me to [further] action and to attempt to communicate in English fluently.

We can see that Adam attaches importance to his past experiences, which, taking into consideration his age and cultural differences, may well be over exaggerated. Young adolescents are usually oversensitive to how one treats them (e.g., looking at them may be considered to be an attack), and what Adam calls laughing might well be smiling at him, as Poles typically smile less than the English do. His minimal competence, after learning English for only two years with low intensity, and too high expectations as to his EFL competence, may have also contributed to his emotional reaction resulting in blocking. Also, the hotel employee may have asked a routine question "Is there any problem?" with the intention of offering help and not of criticising Adam. Yet, this negative experience motivated Adam for future commitment to English, and his present belief that one should know what would be good for one and one should be demanding of oneself. His further life confirms that. At the age of 15 he succeeded in a city contest for knowing English and was awarded with a free English course in the International

House which had opened in his city, which he values very much. He notes that thanks to this he got to know British people and that his native-speaker-teacher did not criticise or laugh at him despite the fact that his English was not perfect. The teacher praised his students often and this motivated Adam to work hard. He also remembers his daily learning from the podcasts "6-minute English from the British Council", reading English graded readers and making notes and learning the vocabulary from there. He remarks that he still keeps these notes. He owes to the International House also getting to know another native-speaker who for some time lived in Adam's native town and who still is his friend. Adam writes that his friend was more critical about his English, however, he provided Adam with feedback in a subtle way. This did not demotivate Adam but on the contrary motivated him to practice even more and learn from this feedback.

When reflecting on his learning English, he makes a remark that learning it does not need to be hard, but it needs to be systematic and requires full engagement. He also considers himself lucky that at the age of 15 he could interact with British native speakers and could learn from them. He feels sorry for other Polish students who did not have such opportunities and had to learn English in the same way as they were learning other subjects, i.e. from course-books. He recommends that if we want to learn something, we should know what is good for us, and commit ourselves to achieving our goals even if it means extending the course requirements; and if teachers are not willing to do so, we should try to find our own way, which when we are young, is not at all difficult.

The analysis of Adam's English learning story also shows an interplay of past, present and future. Adam sets his EFL learning goals early (agency orientation – projective element of agency) basing them on the negative past experience (iterational element of agency), and reinforced with good experiences. He gets involved in the activities that help him achieve these goals (practical evaluative element of agency), and in the final reflection on his way to knowing English he also shows that he has developed a life philosophy.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the two students' narratives on their way to EFL competence allows to positively answer two YES/NO research questions. Answering research question one (Is the chordal triad model of agency applicable to EFL learning?) we may conclude that the model is applicable for the analysis of EFL learning. Despite the fact that the participants were not introduced to the concept of agency or the chordal triad model, in their reflection on their way to EFL competence development they referred to their past experiences, past and present actions which motivated them to achieve the projected goals. The analysis also

allows to positively answer research question two ("Are learners aware of the impact of their past on their present and future?"). In the essays one can see an interplay of the past, present and future in participants justifications of their decisions for EFL learning, description of the actions they undertook to achieve their anticipated goals or rationale for ignoring some actions when these were not congruent with their long term goals or the requirements of the present moment (e.g., Anna's suspending extra EFL activities to prepare well for the final Matura exam). They have also awareness of the influence and mutual interplay of their past experiences, present involvement and projective outcomes which they show in their comments and justifications of their decisions.

Answering the open-ended question ("What meaning do learners make of their EFL experiences?") both participants refer to limitations of the school EFL teaching as not adjusted to individual needs, rooted in old approaches to language teaching (e.g., too much focus on the system of language), teachers lacking competence or enthusiasm. But they both also see the importance of getting involved in extra-curricular activities (available language courses, contacts with native speakers).

However, when we compare the two "tones" of agency we can see that in Adam his awareness of agency is stronger than that of Anna. Bad experience does not demotivate him but compels him to work even harder, to seek opportunities to achieve his goals. He does not rely on the formal education system but seeks other opportunities. Anna is better motivated by positive stimuli. She is active when it comes to achieving her own language goals, nevertheless, when the system does not offer the possibility, she withdraws from being very active. Van Lier (2010) sees agency also in such a reaction and calls it making a conscious decision not to act. Her involvement fluctuates depending on what is expected from her, and what is available in the environment (like the Callan method school, EFL club). She limits her meaning making of EFL learning experience only to this context. For Adam the experience of learning English leads him to generalising this experience to approaching life goals; he advocates struggling against the "system" to achieve individual goals, although at the same time he does not find it fair that other students may not have such possibilities as he had.

6. Limitations of the study

The scale of the study is its obvious limitation. Only two narratives were analysed and of specific EFL learners who may be called successful language learners (B2/C1 level) interested in studying English language and culture. This makes them better motivated to get involved in EFL language learning than might be the case with less successful students and/or the ones who treat EFL only as a

useful tool for intercultural interaction and/or vocation. Collecting more samples of a varied kind, for example, from students of vocational colleges who have interest in English for specific purposes and/or who are less successful in language learning might enrich the findings and throw light on, for example, the issue of which environment is conducive to learning and which demotivates learners. It is also worth studying if the experience of learners coming from rural areas is always limited to school teaching and deprived of the possibilities of using internet resources.

7. Conclusions

In summary, this study aimed at investigating learners' agency in the context of acquiring EFL competence. The chordal triad model of agency was found to be useful in the analysis showing an interplay of learners' awareness of their past experience, undertaken actions and projected goals. It also confirmed what other researchers claimed (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) that learners learn from their life experience, also when it comes to language learning. However, due to the limitations of the study further research is recommended.

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