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Advanced EFL Students' Practices in Formal and Informal Language Learning Settings: An Exploratory Study of Learner Agency

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issue of agency that could be traced in the performance of advanced Polish learners of EFL, students of English philology. The study presented in the paper set to investigate the students' self-reports on learning goals, behaviours and strategies typical of their language-based practices. The students were instructed to describe and reflect on all the learning activities they were involved in in both formal and informal settings by writing their reflective learning journals throughout a week's time. The examination of the data has provided a picture of the students' engagement in an interplay of academic and self-directed practices, which helped them meet different goals and ultimately contributed to the improvement of their language proficiency. The students demonstrated an awareness of language learning processes and an ability to reflect on aspects of their agency, referring, among others, to their intentions and motivations in pursuing their objectives.

KEYWORDS

EFL learners, agency, learning strategies, learner goals, formal vs. informal settings, awareness of language learning

1. Introduction

Over the recent years, language specialists have shown an increased interest in theorizing on the construct of agency as well as learners' enactments of agency in L2 learning and teaching contexts (cf. Larsen-Freeman, 2019). An assumption that has got support nowadays is that L2 learning "can enhance learners' overall agentive capacity and is a potentially critical, transformative social practice" (Mick, 2015, p. 105). It is also of importance that learners' educational behaviours are looked at in terms of their efforts and choices driven by their beliefs, thoughts and feelings (Mercer, 2012). However, as participants of social practices, language learners have to comply with the requirements of the school system or a status of a foreign language learner who develops the command of a new language in a society deficient in the use of that language. That is why what needs clarification

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is how social practices situate individual learners and how learners act and invest in contexts they find themselves in (Vitanova et al., 2015).

In order to better explain agency of the L2 learner its connection to general human experience has to be drawn. Hewson (2010, p. 12) differentiates between two fundamental forms of agency, that is “acting, doing things, making things happen, exerting power, being a subject of events, or controlling things” vs. the case when one is “to be acted upon, to be the object of events, to have things happen to oneself or in oneself, to be constrained or controlled”. This makes it clear that though representing an individual’s activity, agency requires due consideration of other people’s influence on the individual. Of significance are also properties of agency such as its purposeful nature and goal-directedness, as well as people’s intentionality and varying amounts of power in the use of different resources and capabilities (Hewson, 2010).

From the perspective of educational settings it is worth considering a distinction between being a subject vs. an object of agency, which points to an interdependence between learners’ cognition and their experience gained in the context in which their agency is situated (Vitanova et al., 2015). Recent views of language education, influenced by sociocultural approaches, have offered an interpretation of how individuals’ cognition is interrelated with their socially generated and maintained relationships. In addition to this, a critical perspective on agency has underscored the social determinants of learner motivation and communicative competence as and both the impact of ideologies of language-learning contexts on the development of learner identities (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2018).

2. Understanding L2 learners’ performance – conceptualizing agency and some other related concepts in SLA

In an attempt to better understand the concept of agency, it worth noticing that recent advances in SLA studies have confirmed that in order to adequately account for the acquisition of an additional language in instructed and natural learning contexts both formal, functional and psycholinguistic approaches as well as sociocultural ones have to be followed (Gass et al., 2013). Taking a similar standpoint, Ushioda and Dörnyei (2009) advocate that in order to strengthen the potential of cognitively oriented views of language acquisition a greater synergy between mainstream SLA, sociolinguistics and L2 motivation theory is needed. By linking the assumptions of sociocultural learning theories and a learner-centered approach in L2/FL teaching, a range of concepts have been pointed out as related to learner agency in the sense of being involved in the language acquisition and use processes. While Gkonou (2015), for example, defines learner agency as individual’s capacity to act, associated with one’s will to act influenced by their cognition and motivation, Vitanova et al., (2015) associate it with learner identity, L2 self, self-regulation and learner autonomy.

Norton (2000, 2010, 2014) is another researcher who explains learners' agency with reference to their sociocultural settings. She proposes that the relationship between the language learner and the language learning context be interpreted in terms of close interconnections among three key constructs, that is motivation, learner identity and investment. Learner **identity**, that is the learner's relationship to the real and future world and **motivation** change over time and space affected by power relations. The learner's desire to learn and practice a second or foreign language changes due to their **investment** into the language learning process, which means their participation in classroom interaction. The sociological concept of investment and a psychological concept of motivation show "meaningful connections between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language and their changing identities" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 420). Hence L2 learners' progress is determined to a large extent by their investment in classroom practices and other community language-based events that are available to them (Norton & Toohey, 2011). However, learner agency and their social interaction can be limited when highly motivated learners do not experience fully effective language practices in the classroom or within the community. It may even happen so that L2 learners may resist some of those practices (Norton, 2014).

Likewise, Ushioda in her later publications (2011, 2014) argues for the recognition of context in defining learner agency and a motivational dimension as part of it. In her opinion, learners should be looked at in terms of their individual thinking processes, emotional systems, identities, personalities, unique histories but also intentions and goals to reach. By promoting the so-called '**person in-context relational view**' of motivation, she puts forward a claim that both educationists and researchers have to take into account a range of micro and macro contexts that constitute a complex changing network of social relationships learners interact within. This means that what needs proper concern, apart from teachers' control over language learners' motivations and behaviours by means of selected classroom techniques, is the role of the individuality of learners, their intentionality and reflexivity (Ushioda, 2011). Ushioda (2014, p. 9) expounds a view that one's motivation is internalized and self-regulated in a particular environmental context when three psychological needs of the self, that is person's **sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness** are met.

When addressing **personal agency**, Ushioda (2014) equals it with learners' achievements in educational environments, which give learners a sense of competence and autonomy. What is more, when learners take up some actions not feeling competent, they develop neither intrinsic motivation nor interest in the learning activity. Personal agency is claimed to be preceded by **cognitive agency**, which means that learners can control their motivation and learning processes on the basis of their thoughts, beliefs and expectations. The process of regulation

of motivation at the highest level is connected with activating the learners' metacognitive self. Hence teachers scaffolding learners with adequate classroom activities can foster learners' metacognition and self-regulation and help them think strategically (Ushioda, 2014).

It is illuminating to look at the way how a relationship between the concepts of learner agency and autonomy has been explained. Ushioda (2014) claims that although the two concepts are not synonymous they can be found to be in close relationship in the conceptualization of L2 strategic behaviour. Gao and Zhang (2011), on the other hand, argue that personal agency impacts the development of L2 learner autonomy. They advocate that agency be treated as a fundamental factor which gives impetus to the development of learners' autonomous behaviour, characterized by the adoption of a range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The researchers believe that learners "optimize their cognitive and metacognitive processes" so as "to utilize any resources within the immediate settings and broad sociocultural contexts" (p. 39). Agency can thus be associated with the process of fostering strategic and autonomous learners' behaviours.

Gao (2013, p. 227) reiterates that agency is an attribute of agents who "can think, desire and act" and that it is related to the concept of power which directs the agent in implementing their will and intentions in particular environmental conditions, ultimately taking responsibility for their language learning. The best conditions for learners' agency are created then when learners have an opportunity to make their own decisions, negotiate, share their ideas and experiences. That is the reason why classrooms can play a substantial role in the development of learners' autonomy only when learners are able to express their values and identities.

As far as examining learners' agency is concerned, Gao (2013) recommends using learners' reflective thinking in order to help depict their concerns and desires in taking up their actions autonomously in particular contextual conditions with responsibility for their language learning process and outcomes. Since second language learners tend to control their learning process to a large extent, accounts of reports of their reflection on the role of agency in language skills improvement have led to some enlightening insights into aspects of self-regulated learning, including autonomous learning tasks initiated by L2 learners (Gao, 2013).

3. The study

This paper reports a small-scale exploratory study which aimed at a qualitative analysis of the data compiled by a group of advanced EFL learners, English philology students, in their reflective learning journals. Its primary goal was to investigate how the study participants approached their English language learning experience with a view to their self-development when immersed in a variety of language-based practices. To that end, the students' agency was treated as a crucial concept in

interpreting their decisions to perform particular types of activities as part of their academic courses vs. those initiated informally beyond academic settings.

The analysis of the data obtained from the study participants' journals was carried out in order to answer two research questions:

- 1) What kinds of language learning activities did the students perform in formal settings and how did they express their agency in reflecting on them?
- 2) What kinds of language learning activities did the students perform in informal settings and how did they express their agency in reflecting on them?

3.1. Setting and participants

A group of 10 second year graduate Polish students of the Department of English, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, specializing in linguistics participated in the study. They were an intact group following the same curriculum and timetable. As philology students, they had accomplished literature, linguistics, culture and methodology courses. Their language proficiency was at the CPE level and they had already developed some initial skills of teaching English as a foreign language.

3.2. Research method and data collection

As already mentioned, in order to explore a variety of instances of descriptions and reflections on learning tasks undertaken by the study participants, the ways in which they described aspects of their agency were sought. For the purpose of the study, the construct of agency was operationalized as an individual's realization of their own goals, motives and intentions in the course of their own actions, giving them a sense of competence and autonomy (Ushioda, 2009). With the view to the participants' reflections on formal vs. informal language learning activities it was also worth considering two forms of the enactments of agency, namely, making things happen, being the subject of events in contrast to being controlled as the object of events (Hewson, 2010).

Writing a reflective journal by the students was thought to be a suitable tool for keeping a record of their learning activities in a regular and condensed way. Its benefits have been conceptualized as: fostering self-awareness, constructing and expanding personal understanding and developing reflection and reasoning skills (Abednia et al., 2013). Reflective thinking has also been found to be helpful to learners in focusing on their agency as they can look at their "concerns, desires, and visions in the light of contextual and structural conditions" (Gao, 2013, p. 226).

3.3. Procedure and data collection

The study participants agreed to write personalized descriptions of all the

educational events they took part in for the period of seven consecutive days as a contribution to a range of assignments they performed as EFL teacher trainees. The task was voluntary for the students with no grades assigned. Before starting the journal proper, the students were given some general guidance concerning the content and structure of the journal. Having completed their EFL didactics course and teacher training practice the students were familiarized with the concepts of goals, strategies, procedures as well as were able to deliberate on their learning and teaching oriented practices.

The students followed some basic layout in order to keep a record of the types of activities performed each day. They mentioned the time spent on them and provided any observations, reflections and comments they found relevant. As all the journals were accomplished during the same week, from Monday to Sunday, in the final part of the winter term, they included numerous reflections on the same compulsory classes the students attended apart from those on a diversity of English-based activities they embarked on autonomously beyond formal academic instruction. Having completed their learning journals, the students promptly submitted them to the researcher in a printed form.

3.4. Data analysis and discussion

Engaged in a diverse number of language learning tasks during the week's period, the English philology students, participants of the study, spent varied amounts of time on the task. The total amount of time devoted to their language practice ranged from 22.5 to as many as 44.5 hours, not to mention differences between the lengths of their journal entries. Due to the limited scope of this paper, the current author has focused on such samples of the students' journals which gave evidence of their agency and helped answer the two research questions concerning the kinds of activities the students performed in formal and informal settings and the ways in which they expressed their agency in their reflections and comments.

3.4.1. Students' language learning activities implemented in formal settings

The activities offered in formal settings comprised: a lecture, a seminar and meetings with an MA thesis supervisor and classes in linguistics, EFL didactics and practical English. The students were expected not only to participate in them but also respond with varying kinds of feedback. They associated their performance most often with self-study or self-development, including such tasks as: preparation for classes (homework), intensifying language practice in a particular area in order to pass an exam or writing an MA thesis.

Some quotations from the students' journals below demonstrate how they reflected on their active listening to a lecture on SLA following the course objectives:

[...] Familiarised me with aspects of SLA [...], exposed to specific vocabulary [...] While taking down notes I unconsciously acquired the knowledge on the topic and I was exposed to spoken English. (S1)

[...] I was trying to be focused, though it was early in the morning. The topic was engaging, the lecture helped me to systematise my knowledge and also contained a lot of valuable information which may become of some help in the near future. The strategies I used helped me learn much more than just inattentive copying from the slides. Strategies: making notes, highlighting the most important issues, listening to additional information and comments. (S9)

Advanced level of proficiency, specialist language, [...] sometimes it requires effort to understand everything properly [...] I find all of these factors interesting due to the fact that they point to various phenomena which concern me as a teacher-to-be. (S 10)

These short extracts show that the students not only perceived an essential role of an academic lecture as that of organizing the subject/specialist knowledge for future application, but also approved of its contribution to vocabulary expansion and exposure to spoken language. Apart from this, they articulated clear views on the usefulness of different academic listening strategies. They found listening to a lecture to be an effortful activity when they were not sufficiently alert or when strenuous cognitive processing of the material was indispensable.

Attending an MA seminar and individual meetings with the supervisor were described by the students as a self-study activity with the aim of writing a thesis. The following ideas have appeared in the students' journals:

[...] Searching for materials, scanning reading chosen materials, trying to find the useful ones. [...] Thoroughly paraphrasing them, highlighting the most important words, taking notes, rewriting the product – 3 pages. (S3)

I learnt how to recognize the most useful materials and select them from a huge library collection; learnt a lot of new vocabulary and concepts; [...] practiced reading and writing. (S6)

I prepared a draft to enquire about the Professor's opinion on my ideas and to ask for any comments on his part. I searched for more sophisticated vocabulary concerning cognitive linguistics. (S1)

Preparing a draft of an MA thesis was found to be a particularly demanding long-term task that needed the adoption of proper strategies in acquiring new knowledge from academic literature and an ability to produce a required genre of the text in English to be verified by the supervisor. The interactive role of the supervisor was defined as that of providing a critical evaluation of students' drafts and feedback about their progress.

The students also spent a large amount of their individual study time preparing for the practical English exam at the CPE level. One of the students (S3) provided a detailed report on improving her reading comprehension strategies through peer

cooperation. Here are three journal extracts illustrating some points made in the student's reflections"

I revised reading comprehension tasks with a friend to get a higher score [...], read aloud parts of texts confirming the answers, managed to remember many collocations; [...] beneficial cooperation. (S3)

I highlighted crucial info in a text, analyzed distracters in multiple choice to reject them; relied on context, read each text twice. (S 3)

could check and enhance my careful reading abilities which concern the skills of interpreting and inferencing. I believe I did well. (S 3)

Another sample of the student's journal (S1) depicted a strategic approach taken by her to prepare a speech on a topic of procrastination, selected out of her interest. It took her three hours to develop relevant background knowledge by reading some articles, watching TED Talks and doing some dictionary work. Below are three interesting and informative extracts from her journal:

I got particularly interested in the subject. Reading various articles was a kind of pleasurable experience to me.[...] A different type of reading than linguistics – broadening our horizons. (S1)

I prepared a final draft of my presentation, wrote down key words to elaborate my discussion. I tried to rehearse, checked the timing. (S1)

In the past I tried to write down everything, I ended up with an essay which I learnt by heart. It was quite difficult to eradicate this bad habit. It is far more motivating and effective to prepare only some crucial words or slogans I want to expand on. (S1)

The student's remarks show that she was aware of the fact that due to a high level of language proficiency she could approach the course task as an intellectually inspiring activity. Moreover, she was motivated to work hard to get a high mark at the exam. She also evidently felt more competent being able to give a speech on the basis of targeted key words or slogans discarding her previous unproductive procedure of writing down an essay and learning it by heart.

3.4.2. Students' language learning activities implemented in informal settings

As for the informal learning activities, also called leisure activities by some students, they comprised: listening to the radio, music, songs, reading, watching films/video clips, playing computer games and surfing the net. The sections to come will be supported with selected examples of the students' views on a combination of relaxing, entertaining and educational properties of their English learning practices.

It is interesting to note, for instance, that one of the students (S1) who described listening to BBC News as a way of obtaining political and cultural information as well as a relaxing experience would still write down “some intriguing words on a scrap of paper” to check in a dictionary. She clarified what were her motivations for language oriented work in the following way: “Sometimes I deliberately look for new expressions and words that will be helpful during my speaking and writing [...] I frequently pick up strangely sounding words and I try to decipher their meaning”. (S1)

Another student (S6) mentioned that listening to BBC4 helped her practise listening skills as well as “was a great way to keep contact with English, especially in the day off from classes” Then she added that it also “exposed [her] to native speaker English and people speaking with different accents” (S 6).

The students’ reflections revealed that even though they often performed self-selected pleasurable language-based activities, all the time they behaved as language learners focused on acquiring new elements of the English language. Moreover, they often felt frustrated when they did not understand some words or phrases.

Similarly, while listening to songs informally, for pleasure, the students persisted in their learner roles. S2, for instance, who mentioned listening to songs by Adema and Haste the Day for pleasure stated: “[...] yet often lyrics are worth checking for new vocabulary or figuring out the deeper sense of it. [...] I was dwelling on one word from lyrics[...] could not work out its metaphorical meaning”. (S2)

Another student (S3), showing preference for songs by Coldplay, mentioned the importance of working out their meaning by checking the song lyrics and their translation into Polish on the internet. Some other students underscored both linguistic and psychological benefits of listening to songs in English, such as learning new vocabulary when memorizing the lyrics (S6) and fostering their self-confidence (S8).

Reading in English was regarded by the students as an element of their lifestyle with texts being read to broaden their knowledge, satisfy curiosity, out of interest and for enjoyment. Student 1 stated that she read an article before a film premiere both to get some more information on its contents and simultaneously delve in “sophisticated journalist style”. Another student (S9) claimed to choose articles to read on her Facebook out of curiosity.

The students also provided reflections connected with watching TV, video and film clips on You Tube, which they treated mainly as an entertaining pastime, yet ultimately approached as an extension of their English language learning experience. They tackled such vital issues as: the use of subtitles, the strategies of guessing word meanings from context and checking them in a dictionary as well as the difficulty of understanding authentic speech (S3, S6). As shown below, some students underlined a high value of this kind of language learning experience:

Watching TV series House MD, shameless, utterly best due to advanced vocabulary, fast speech, foreign accents; [...] rewinding a couple of seconds, pausing, checking the term in a dictionary. [...] Acquiring language in the most entertaining and pleasurable way. (S10)

Watching British breakfast TV – Good Morning Britain to listen to the marvelous accent. [...] I feel that English is my life-long hobby and passion. (S 4)

One of the students (S2) described playing computer games primarily for pleasure and out of curiosity, yet with some language benefits, such as talking with other gamers in English. Here is one of his comments on watching a game:

Watching AGDQ stream Awesome Games Done Quick – an event during which players try to beat the game and explain how they are doing it; [...] it raised funds for cancer prevention and early detection – for pleasure.[...] watching with curiosity, some words worth checking, interesting (technical – gaming). (S 2)

In summary, the analysis of the advanced students' reflective journals conducted in the current study has revealed different aspects of their agency in learning and using English as a foreign language. The students were able to account for their actions and explain the motives of their behavior in an array of language practices they embarked on. In planning for and taking control of formal and informal learning activities they displayed a high level of strategicness in pursuing their goals. They efficiently undertook a number of self-study tasks to complement institutionally organized educational activities. Their desire to improve their English language proficiency with their personal goals in mind, not only to satisfy their university teachers, was apparent.

As for learning English in formal settings, the students accepted the need for intensive practice and independent work to be done beyond their regular classes. They approached their self-development as a change in the strategy use and a determinant of achieving the desired success in future. Learning tasks were found intellectually satisfying when focus on language learning and knowledge acquisition could be linked.

The choice of particular radio programs, videos, films to watch by the students seemed to be driven mainly by their curiosity, interest or search for the ways of spending time in a pleasurable way. However, the students always remained in the position of language learners and wanted to understand the subtitles in the English language. Exposure to native speakers was treated as an important asset of learning English as a foreign language.

3.5. Concluding remarks

The tentative analysis of the advanced EFL students' journals carried out for this exploratory study has provided some valuable insights into the students' agency, that is their conscious, goal-oriented efforts to employ a range of language learning activities in both formal and informal contexts (Gao, 2013). The participants of this study proved to be strategic and autonomous language learners ready to invest a considerable amount of time and effort in the development of their English language competence (cf. Ushioda, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Gao, 2013). They were highly motivated to work on English intensively and the native-speaker level of proficiency seemed to be a model for them. Even in the case of formally organized academic events they showed an ability to become the subject of numerous learning practices. With the awareness of their learning processes they were able to create many opportunities conducive for language learning for themselves, independently of university requirements. A crucial factor was their interest in different areas of knowledge and forms of literacy.

It has to be mentioned that the study is not without its limitations. As an exploratory and qualitative study it has taken only a fragmentary look at the reflections of a small group of advanced EFL learners and concentrated only on how they described and reflected on language activities performed in formal vs. informal learning contexts for a relatively short period of time. As the study has not made any comparisons across students or worked out student profiles, this seems to be an interesting future direction of study. Some illuminating insights might also come from a longitudinal investigation of students' perceptions of their metacognition and personal self-development.

3.6. Implications of the study

Despite the limitations of this study, some pedagogical implications can be drawn. EFL learners' reflections on the ways which they willingly and efficiently adopt in their language learning process can provide teachers with some guidelines for raising the quality of their formal language instruction. Also, as pointed out by some students, creating conducive grounds for learning English at a high proficiency level requires integrating language goals with some content-area knowledge so that students can be exposed to language materials that are cognitively satisfying to them. Hence they should be given an opportunity to identify points of interest, approach the information critically and consolidate it with the knowledge already acquired.

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