A Narrative Perspective on Past and Future-oriented Learners Agency

Une perspective narrative sur l'agentivité des apprenants orientée vers le passé et l'avenir

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Abstract

This study offers a new understanding of agency based on two theoretical frameworks: Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bakhtin's (1983) dialogism. Drawing on both theories, the study is conducted with second year Bachelor students of English, in Tlemcen University, Algeria. This study argues that previous research on agency overlooked EFL students' learning experiences within which how narratives of the past can construct present and future self-images. The concept of agency is presented in holistic accounts of five students' learning narratives. A narrative inquiry has been used as methodology, and as a method to collect the data. The findings revealed narratives of the past constructed students' agency as an outcome of interaction between the self and the other, which is engendered with the theme mentors' support. Agency in relation to the present can be reconstructed through and during dialogue highlighting marks, another theme that emerged when students self-evaluated their narratives.

Keywords: Agency, dialogues, marks, mentors, narratives, EFL, reflection

Résumé: Cette étude propose une nouvelle compréhension de l'*agentivité* 'la capacité d'agir' basée sur deux structures théoriques: la théorie socioculturelle de Vygotsky et le dialogisme de Bakhtine (1983). S'appuyant sur les deux théories, l'étude est menée auprès d'étudiants en deuxième année de licence d'anglais, à l'Université de Tlemcen, en Algérie. Cette étude soutient que les recherches antérieures sur la 'capacité d'agir' ont négligé les expériences d'apprentissage des étudiants de langues étrangères (EFL) dans lesquelles les récits du passé peuvent construire des images de soi présentes et futures. Le concept d'*agentivité* 'la capacité d'agir' est présenté dans des récits holistiques de récits d'apprentissage de cinq élèves. Une enquête narrative a été utilisée comme méthodologie et comme méthode de collecte des données. Les résultats ont révélé des récits d'*agentivité* des étudiants construits par le passé comme résultat de l'interaction entre soi et l'autre, qui est engendrée avec le soutien des mentors thématiques. L'*agentivité* par rapport au présent peut être reconstruite à travers et pendant le dialogue en soulignant les marques, un autre thème qui a émergé lorsque les élèves ont autoévalué leurs récits.

Mots clés: Agentivité 'la capacité d'agir', dialogues, notes, mentors, récits, EFL, réflexion

Research on narrative has challenged Labov's (1972) oral narratives, as they excluded the sense of interactive dialogues in the storytelling. Labov's interviews lacked reflection and self-evaluation of the tellers' events within time and space of the storytelling. In this paper, I focused on events through dialogues in their interactive written formats to find out how the self and the other interact to construct 'agency' in learning. I showed through this study how the dialogue can be a central and a mediation of the construction of the self, as once the event is told, it will affect what will be told. I introduced students to narrative writing and engaged them in a specific time 'past', used scaffolding activities to elaborate on events of the past from a 'present' perspective, and then created a space for imagined selves from a 'future' lens. A narrative inquiry is conducted as a methodology to present experiences of five women learners. The key premise of this work

is to illustrate the inter-relationship between social and individual agency, adapting two narrative themes, which are mentors and marks to discuss further how the social constructs the individual, and how the individual reconstructs itself. To achieve this, the study uses a complex conceptual framing that brings together Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), Bakhtin's dialogism theory (1983), and Duff's agency (2003). Norton's (2000) critique on motivation as psychological and individual challenged the view that language learners are recipients of learning, and defined agency as social and collective, i.e., learners are active agents of change. This paper looks at language and identity as social, relying on Vygotsky and Bakhtin, and it addresses agency as collective and mediated by language. Though both have not included the meaning of agency in relation to EFL learning, the concept of agency has been recontextualised in SLA and EFL contexts. This research responds to Ushioda's (2012) call for a holistic approach, rather than individualistic approaches, such as Gardner's (1985) model of motivation, which drives learners' motivation out of its social environment. It also offers valuable contributions to existing discussions of agency through comprehensive presentations of 'who the learners are; what their events are; how they responded to them; and what do they want to become'. By these questions, this paper addresses how a the five EFL students develop their agency in the past and present, focusing on both social and personal dimensions in three periods of their learning narratives: the past, the present, and the future.

Literature review

Sociocultural theory and practice

Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) has been introduced by Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) in areas of second language (L2) research and applied linguistics. They explained that the self, social interaction, and dialogue enable individuals' transformation and change in L2 contexts. Socio-cultural theory research has equally overlapped with research on agency and social identities (Norton, 2000). It provides an understanding about the relationship between the individual practices and the social context (Norton 2000), as Swain and Deters (2007) stated that the social context is the source of mental development. Vygotsky argues that children can use their 'silent inner speech', which can be in function when they are not in interaction with their surroundings. He proposed Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) as an environment for children to develop cognitive skills through social interaction.

The ZDP is used with scaffolding approach. Bruner (1983) used scaffolding as an outcome of Vygotsky's work. Scaffolding stands for different forms of assistance (Amerian and Mehri, 2014). Assistance can occur between teachers and learners, or learners to learners. Scaffolding aims to enable learners solve their learning problems (Aubrey and Riley, 2016), and in a later stage, less assistance is cooperated so that learners become more responsible on their learning. In this study, I rely on the definition of agency by Wood et al (1976) as a process that enables learners to carry out a task, and scaffolding as a practice to engage learners to interact with other aspects in the composition of their narratives.

In the area of foreign language learning, learning is considered as a contextualised activity in a social sphere (Wilkinson, 2001) because the human mind is mediated by language, as Lantolf and Beckett (2009) argue "All mental activity is symbolically mediated" (p. 459). Scaffolding is a way to find how learners' agency is mediated and formed by the interconnectedness of the self and the other. I suggested, in this study the concept of 'mentors' (defined in the sections below), to address how mentors mediated

learners' behaviour, action, and attitudes in early learning experiences, and supported their continuity and changes, which are congruent with Vygotsky's notion of transformations in learning.

Vygotsky provided a genuine theory to mind; however, Wretsch (1991) argued that Vygotsky did not explain how historical and cultural environments are linked with the different forms of individual actions. While researching EFL learners' agency in Algeria, I observed that learners' narratives present social environments that are exclusively a manifestation of personal and emotional dimensions. The aim of this study is rather to look at how learners can attribute their narrative experiences to make their future learning decisions.

Dialogism theory

Bakhtin's (1984) theory of dialogism is used as a theoretical basis in conjunction with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory. Bakhtin's framework of dialogism and the concept of ideological becoming (discussed below) are used in this study to analyse how the individual/social relationships are penetrated through dialogues. The social and individual relationship is defined by Bakhtin (1984) as "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another…" (p. 284) The self in a complex dialogic interaction with the other creates individuals' consciousness. According to Bakhtin this complexity is realised through language, discourse and utterances. Bakhtin focused on the utterance; the subject is the author who creates their owns utterances. The utterance is defined as a voice which responds to a previous utterance. Bakhtin's (1984) dialogism concerns multiplicity of voices in texts, written or spoken (Wretsch, 1991).

Utterances are associated with multiple voices. Both utterance and voice in Bakhtin's work invoked the term dialogicality. It is crucial to define the meaning of utterance and how it emerges consciousness within it. Bakhtin (1981) defines the utterance as "The specific response to a specific moment, produced by a concrete addresser and oriented towards a concrete addressee, both of whom are located in a particular time and space within broader social relationships" (pp. 293-294) It is evident that an utterance is not an authority of an individual act before it can be an outcome of others' utterances. The utterance is active, it enables problem-solving complexities; it helps in evaluating, and constructing conclusions for the present, or extends action for the future (Holquist, 1990). This suggests that agency can be shaped, and reshaped around utterances and action along time and space.

Moving to discuss the relationship between an utterance and consciousness, both Voloshinov and Bakhtin (1986) agree that consciousness is social and shared through a constant dynamic communication between the self and others. Such consciousness enables learners develop responsibility over their thoughts, words and actions (Bakhtin, 1990). The concept of consciousness relatively engages individuals' agency. Therefore, I have deliberately assisted dialogue through narrative writing to find about how the students discuss their social relations, as a reflection of influencing factors: mentors and marks which might have developed both their learning in the past and new identities through language learning in the present.

Dialogical and sociocultural approaches agreed on their tenets regarding the individual and the social relationship. However, the sociocultural theory is not suitable for understanding personal narratives (Hicks, 2000). Bakhtin's theorisation of dialogism presented human agency, as the self in interaction with the other brings notions of feeling,

emotions, and values (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Thibault, 2011). Aligning with this understanding, Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) argue that through dialogues, individuals' emotions are better exposed, and interpreted by individuals themselves, which enable agency comes into play.

Bakhtin's dialogical approach recalls for agency and experience, as both help in underlying the feelings resulted as a responsivity of the self and the other relations. In this study, agency is examined as dialogical. The dialogical view can help in understanding emotions and feelings that supports motivation, identity, and language learning (Pavlenko, 2006). I addressed students' emotions within narratives, as Wretsch (1998) argues "Of course this is not to say that action does not have an individual psychological dimension. It clearly does. The point is to think of this as a moment of action rather than as a separate process or entity that exists somehow in isolation" (p. 23). In the same vein, Vitanova (2010) stated that all of anthropology, psychology, and sociology rejected that agency can be solely individual. As an alternative, it can be a product of individuals' own desires, discourse and social interaction.

Mentors and Marks: Bakhtin's Ideological Becoming

'Mentors' and 'marks' are two concepts which are fundamentally discussed in this study, representing the role of domains: schools and family that influenced students' agency within their learning experiences. As Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) say that the individual constituted of multi-layered sense, as both personal and cultural. These two concepts are contributing themes within the narrative designed for this study. It is worth defining 'mentors' as the people (teachers, parents, and peers) who had impacts (positive/negative) on the students' learning experiences. 'Marks' refer to the events that maintained impacts on students, and there are certain events that perhaps relate to those 'mentors' (Author, 2020).

Ideological becoming in this study is presented as a framework for agency. Ideological becoming is inextricably bound with ideological environments (family, classroom, and workplace). For this reason, as a concept ideological becoming is employed to discuss the emergence of students' agency in relation to their 'mentors' and 'marks'. Dialogues from teachers in formal contexts are represented as authoritative words. Authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse are two types of dialogues proposed by Bakhtin. Authoritative discourse is a tradition of world's views, it represents specific forms of words, and a unification of ideologies, for instance in an age group, or at work. Holquist (1981) notes an "Undialogised language is authoritative or absolute" (pp. 246-247). It is often unquestioned discourse of the past; it can come from teachers, parents, a religion, or a doctrine. However, au authoritative discourse does not necessarily disempower individual's agency, as Miller (2014) states "being positioned as disempowered is not the same as having no agency" (p. 9). As in Norton's (1995) in Eva account who was challenged by her teacher, but she could reject how others at work attempted to position her. Internally persuasive discourse is a combination of our own words and other's words. It leads up to productivity and creativity of new words, materials, conditions, and meanings.

Freedman and Ball (2004, p. 5) define ideological becoming as "how we develop our way of viewing the world, our system of ideas…" This development springs from words borrowed from others, as Bakhtin (1981) says "When they are populated with our intentions, they become appropriated" (pp. 293-294). Our ideologies can be taken from our parents, teachers, and friends, called in this study as 'mentors'. We feel agentive, as these ideologies become populated with our intentions (Hicks, 2000), intentions, in this

study (See next section) are presented, equally with the emergence of students' agency in their early learning.

Individuals' Agency and Learning

Agency has been studied by the sociocultural theory, and while the dialogic approach is consistent with the sociocultural, both added to the understanding of agency. However, I argued that individuals' agency is blurry within the intense description of the power structures from a sociocultural perspective. Martin (2004) notes that agency is concerned with individuals free will, which can make them act upon their decisions and choices. However, there is an opponent view that regards agency is "influenced by the past, engage[d] with the present, and orient[ed] to the future" (Larsen-Freeman, 2019, p. 66). Similarly, Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) state that individuals construct their own participation in relation to their past experiences, and to the potential actions for the future. The shift from the sociocultural system to the individual experience can explain that learners' experiences are unique, but they also relate to their historical upbringings and stories. Bakhtin pointed out that human agency is situated in dialogic relationships, and it is not entirely individual, rather it is transindividual. Also, Dufva and Aro (2014) argue that is the social factors which influence the learner are intertwined with their cognitive abilities, i.e., agency is both individual and collective.

Bandura (2001) notes that agency can also refer to an act done with intention. Intentions are leading ways to plans of action. Davidson (1971) explains that these plans of action can serve to achieving particular goals. I yielded on Duff's (2012) definition of agency as it is relevant to the data-driven activities and analysis, "People's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation" (p. 414). In this study, agency is viewed as a result of social interaction and dialogues, however, it can be individually extended through personal choices, goals, and meaning constructed. I outlined Ahearen's (2001) proposition that researchers need to be cautious about using one definition of agency, rather they need to consider the multi-layered forms this construct can have. Van Lier (2008) presented three main characteristics of agency in language learning: (1) the mediation of sociocultural context, (2) the one's awareness of action and responsibility, and (3) the one's ability to self-regulated learning.

Materials and methods

This study is part of a PhD project, The study took place between 2018 and 2019, and was approved by the scientific committee at Northampton university. Through a narrative inquiry methodology (Vitanova, 2010), the researcher engaged the participants in narrative writing, as individuals tell about an event, their texts are not passive, but they generate sense of agency and new realities. Webster and Mertova (2007) suggested four features that represent a narrative as a research method. (1) Narrative puts the myriad of themes together that can be studied separately through different research methods. (2) It presents a retrospective information, and this can occur through reflective approaches. (3) It is newly added to qualitative methods. (4) It captures the influencing factors on individuals' actions, and it brings them to the forefront. A qualitative approach is used in this study to discuss the research questions, and to present the complexity of agency in an individual/social relationships from a narrative lens.

Narratives offer analysis of learners' reflection and learning (Barkhuizen 2016), this study builds on this understanding as I employed scaffolding to assist learners with reflective activities as a research praxis. In this regard, Lantolf and Beckett (2009) define

praxis in the meaning of integrating "theory and practical activity…for the purpose of promoting development through direct instruction" (p. 460). In addition, Vitanova (2010) notes that the use of narrative method epistemologically insists on experience not only as an aspect of inquiry, but as a means of assistance and reflection. In this study, reflection activities were conducted through a questioning approach, which aimed to enable learners engage in reflection (Woolfolk 2013), and write their narratives. The activities undertaken combined both family and education, as two institutional/social aspects, which can influence and shape learners' self-images (Warriner, 2010; Norton, 2006). Participants engaged in both retrospective and introspective narrative writing. In retrospective narrative writing, participants reflected on different phases of their learning experiences: First, reflection on the past included students' experiences in three school stages: primary school, middle school, and secondary school. Second, reflection on the present reflected time of narration. In introspective narrative writing, participants evaluated their learning in the present and projected 10 years of their future learning.

Research questions

The current discussion among researchers is puzzled whether agency is an individual act, or socially embedded. Toohey and Norton (2003) point that sociocultural theories such as Vygotsky's scaffolding and Bakhtin's dialogism can be used to explore agency in L2 contexts. I posit, in this study, the construction and reconstruction of agency through dialogues presented in the narratives with the focus on sociocultural and dialogism theoretical frameworks. The researcher attempted through this study to address these views to offer possible discussions for two main questions: (1) what are learners' experiences of the past, which influenced their agency in learning? (2) How learners' experiences shaped their agency?

Researcher positionality

The author conducted this study as a PhD student. She met the students in her former university. Students were introduced to her, and were eager to participate in the study. During the mini-course, the students were hopeful to learn how to write about the self, as they regarded it as their first opportunity of knowing about the self.

Student participants

This research is conducted with ten women students. The author read through all the ten students' narratives, then selected five narratives based on the richness of the participants' dialogues, ability to share their experience in different time frames, and evaluate their feelings and changes in their narratives. Five students' written narratives have been reported, data from dialogues were sufficient to serve the author's purpose. The sample was purposive (Merriam, 2009); that is the criteria for the selection of participants were determined on the basis of the participants' level, as second year bachelor students in Tlemcen University, Algeria. Narrative was as essay writing in one of their course subjects, however, its instruction was form-based rather content-based; that is agency was not reflected by any means. Participants are of age 18 and 20 years old. They were all Algerians, and studied in one class. As there were more women than men students in the grammar class, only women students (Janah, Fatima, Bahia, Djamila, Hana) voluntarily took part in the mini-course designed for this study.

Research ethics

This study has received ethical approval from the university, all of the head of the English department and the participants had consent forms explaining how the data collected will

be used for research publications. Access to the participants was initially through their grammar teacher. Their teacher announced that the researcher would like to conduct a course on narrative writing, and data from it will be used as research purposes. Pseudonyms are used to identify the participants following the approved ethics process.

Data collection

The mini-course lasted six sessions. In session one, students were introduced to the course aims and activities which they would engage through. In session two, students were engaged in reflective activities which evoked their feelings on past events. In session three, the five students were assisted with questions that triggered reflections on present decisions. In session six, the teacher shared a poster to portray a personal narrative (written text) to increase their motivation to imagine who they can be in ten years. In each session students used the reflective questions to develop their narrative, after session six, participants submitted their written narratives which were used for analysis.

Data analysis

Analysis of narrative data can be thematic, as the object of analysis is content-focus, i.e., what students narrate about through a dialogic performance. This study highlighted through the analysis how agency is constructed through 'dialogues'. Dialogues are used in this study to explain the meaning of two fundamental themes found: Mentors' support and marks. The focus on content and dialogue draws on elements of thematic analysis and interpretive approach (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). Following Clarke and Braun model (2006), I decomposed the data from narratives into themes, employing an inductive approach. The process has undergone through many stages. First, I read the data and jotted notes of key ideas. Second, I generated codes that recursively reviewed the key ideas in the narratives. Third, I categorised codes in relevance to the content, i.e., highlighting quotes that have meaning to these codes. Then, I named themes with meanings mentioned in the related literature. As a final stage of this approach, I analysed the data through a presented category of the main codes used to generate the fundamental themes. Decision on the codes is influenced by a priori framework informed by the different meanings of agency across time and space (Saldaña, 2021). Codes included social structure (family, teachers), Dufva and Aro, 2014), intention (Hicks, 2000), evaluation (Labov,1972) choice, goal, and desire (Duff, 2003), and action Sullivan and McCarthy (2004). Following Bakhtin's dialogue which is represented as central to narratives. Also, following Larsen-Freeman (2019, p. 66) congruent relationship between contexts and agency which they

Findings

Mentors' support in the past

This theme is an 'encompassing theme' which represented the role of individuals in the students' experiences, including parents, teachers, siblings, and peers. Its main meaning has been presented through positive and negative views. Mentors' support is presented as an *umbrella* term, it includes both 'teachers' support' and 'social support'. 'Teachers' were mentioned in the participants' early learning experiences. As a theme, it is a recall of participants interaction with their teachers in primary school, middle school, and secondary school.

> Janah: He was a mentor for me… He used to call me a 'diamond of my class' and … that I will be a successful woman in the future. (1)
> Hana: There was also a guide, a mentor to show me the right path, Middle's school phase … was more memorable. (2)

> Bahia: … my teacher of Math, he was always encouraging me to do all my efforts…at middle school… (3)
> Fatima: …they (teachers) were very harsh with me, may be because I did not elevate to their expectations… I did not even understood the reason why I was mistreated. (4)

All of Janah, Hana and Bahia mentioned their teachers of middle school as sources of help and guidance in learning, only Fatima shared negative attributes, as an outcome of teachers' behaviour and attitudes towards her. Djamila did not include teachers' roles in her narrative, rather she accounted about a relationship with her peer in primary school.

Social mentors in the past

This theme refers to other people who provided support to participants, inside and outside the classroom, including family and peers. Social mentors came in in different forms of verbal support, which participants received either as positive or negative acts.

> Djamila: When I was five years old, my parents explained to me that I had to go to school and study. Suddenly, and out of nowhere a girl named Raghed who was my age… (5)
> Bahia: Father … told me once step by step, never give up…where is the optimist girl I know… (6)
> Janah: My father wanted me to carry on my studies… (7)

All of Djamila, Bahia, Janah narrated that their family, and peers helped them to change their perceptions of learning. However, Fatima did not mention her family or peers' role in changing her perception of learning. This shows that she did not find with whom to share her disruptive emotions in the past.

Mentors' enduring impact

This theme refers to both 'teachers' support' and 'social mentors' abiding effects, which encompass both inside and outside support (teachers, family, and peers).

> Bahia: He could instil confidence and the courage to never give up into my soul. I will never forget his help. These words… were secret of my inspiration and motivation. (8)
> Janah: I can't find words to express how much he influenced me and got that amazing impact on my life…I can't get enough of thinking about that person…Now he is gone, and I can never see him again. (9)
> Janah: I can never forget him simply because he made himself unforgettable… (10)
> Fatima: My innocence and shyness … made my life as a nightmare. I could not improve my level during this stage and I could not even learn in the right way (11)
> Djamila: We gained a long-life friendship since primary school. I hope we will stay forever this way… (12)
> Hana: …yet middle school phase outstandingly wasn't as others, it will be memorised and attached to my mind and soul till my last day as a living person. It's odd how omnipotent and powerful words can be, their influence, eternally stays… (13)

Mentors' enduring impact is showed as a long-term influence on participants continuity. The impact is negotiated in an interaction with the other and constructed meaning of learning, motivation, changing attitudes, and gaining friendship through bounded-contexts interconnected by time and space.

Marks

Marks are events with turning points effects on participants' becoming. They took place

in the past, therefore their effects are of a long-term, as they are reflected, evaluated, and interpreted from a present lens. As Bryman (2015) states that individuals experience as a process of change refers to "A sequence of events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context" (p. 395). Marks are coded in this study as events narrated through dialogues between participants and their mentors.

> Dialogue 1: Hana
> Teacher: You were never like that, Hana, imagine you not passing the exam, imagine yourself at the same classroom, studying the same lessons again, and going through the same routine for a second time. Take a minute and think about your self seeing all your happy and joyful friends with their success, while you'll spend your summer vacation waiting for another year to pass while you can be like everyone else, glad and proud of yourself! (15)

> Dialogue 2: Janah
> Janah: Dady! Do you feel okay now? How do you feel? How was your surgery?!
> Father: Hamdoullah! (Thanks God) I am totally fine…no pain at all. How studies are going?
> Janah: Really Dad! Is that the right time to talk about it?
> Father: Yes! There is always time to talk about studies. Studies always comes first…
> Janah: I figured out how much my learning was important to my father, and this short discussion pushes me to work whenever I lose hope and think to give up. (16)

> Dialogue 3: Bahia
> Teacher: Are you ok?
> Bahia: I replied with sad vibration in my voice. Yes Sir, I am fine. Just…, I could not catch my tears…
> Teacher: Yes, Bahia I am here if you need help just tell me!
> Bahia: I told him that I am afraid to get bad marks and I am not ready for my Baccalaureate exam. My teacher's reaction was so great… he smiled and said…
> Teacher: Come on! Where is the optimist girl I know! (17)

> Dialogue 4: Djamila
> Ghada: Yeah, me too, it is all going to be alright trust me, do you want to be a friend with me?
> Djamila: why not! sure nice to meet you Ghada.
> Ghada: nice to meet you too. (18)

> Fatima: The teachers' methods were very helpful as well as the way they treated me… (19)

Their responses within the dialogue enabled a deeper understanding of social relationships (teachers, family, and peers) in constructing the self; they enacted their recognisance of needs which enabled their desired identities. Fatima's marks did not disempower her agency (Miller, 2014), it rather demonstrated changed her from a vulnerable primary school kid to an eloquent participant in the narrative, acting agency through evaluation of teachers' practices and behaviour in the secondary school.

English Choice

This theme refers at this stage to an introspective reflection that showed learners' reasons of learning English as a course of study at university. This theme was coded as: personal choice and self-evaluation.

> Bahia: I have said that I loved English, and it sparks my interest from the beginning. I choose it because I like it. (20)

> Hana: It was a decision made upon my own interest and desire, no one had helped me or encouraged me to choose it. I love this language. I find it very beautiful…I find it very easy to learn… (21)
> Djamila: …since middle school I wanted to study English… (22)
> Fatima: I am grateful that my brother … changed my mind to choose English… (23)

Like Bahia and Hana, studying English was a personal choice, and a choice pre-arranged in a particular period as in example (22). Fatima rather said her brother's point of view changed her perception of studying English. Concerning their self-evaluation of their language skills, they described it as a challenge, citing their language difficulties.

> Fatima: I am facing…many obstacles. My current learning seems to be a challenge…it is a mixture of hardness and enjoyment. (24)
> Janah: I can say that my level in English is intermediate to advance…writing sometimes is a hard task. (25)
> Bahia: My less likely skills are speaking and listening…I don't understand what is said by other…because pronunciation is my 'big problem'. I should pay attention to my speaking skill that I found a weakness on. (26)
> Hana: My learning is going fine…, but my speaking is bad. (27)
> Djamila: …is going too slow…not that bad… (28)

Agency to improve the self

The theme related to the future represent the meaning of agentive self in relation to the forthcoming desires, needs, efforts, and achievements. This theme is coded in the meaning of intention, hope, wish, aim, plan, goal, seek, purpose, and model verbs: will, would and should.

> Bahia: …I should improve myself to be a great person and have a strong personality.
> I want to be a teacher of English at University (29)
> Djamila: I will study abroad or travel to new places for the sake of meeting new people… (30)
> Fatima: …my purpose from studying English is to be a perfect, famous teacher and a person who deserves estimation from all people in work, home or in the roadway… to realize all these… (31)
> Hana: …we all have goals and aims to achieve, and I want to accomplish my desire… (32)
> Janah: …I want to teach people of young age… (33)

All students developed a sense of investment towards their desires of becoming teachers. Quotes from students' narratives demonstrated that they are developing a learning identity with the believe that they have abilities to learn.

Future self-image

It is the final theme which presents the participants' thinking beyond the past and the present; it presents agency in the future, anticipated in ten years of achievable careers. It covers codes which relate to change and future desired positions given at their disposals.

> Djamila: I never had a permanent or a solid dream job. In ten years' time, I see myself in several positions…someday I dream of being a flight attendant, and other days I see myself a successful reporter. I always dream of writing other peoples' emotions, stories and journeys. I wish that I will be a famous writer who is known internationally. (34)
> Fatima: I will go in a journey … to discover and learn more. I will come back to practice what I learnt with the rosebuds of my country… (35)
> Janah: I believe that we must start from the bottom, kids are the future, children are the cradle of prosperity and success, they need to be well-educated, given enough

attention and care so that once they are grown-ups, and they will be efficiently productive and reflect positively on our society. (36)

Bahia: …I put in my mind that this is the way for my future. If you can dream it, you can do it. (37)

Hana: …yet only Allah knows what the future really holds… (38)

The participants pre-located themselves in different positions, and they used an instrumental language to express their needs, attitudes and feelings for future actions. They articulated their awareness of improving both their language learning and personal skills for a continuous time frame.

Discussion

In the introduction, I set out to discuss the main research questions. RQ1 aimed to identify the past learners' experiences which influenced their agency in learning. Knowing about the importance of learning is developed through and during dialogues with the other, mainly teachers or parents, which played a role in shaping perceptions in the five narratives. Mentors' support represented teachers' verbal support such as giving advice. Bakhtin's (1990) authoritative discourse (See example 16) and internal persuasive discourse (See example 15) conjoined with students' words through dialogues which led up to productivity of new meanings, and perceptions of learning. The meaning of agency in the students' early learning (past) is presented as social embodiment – mentors' support (Bakhtin, 1986; Dufva & Aro, 2014), not as an individual effort. The meaning of agency in relation to mentors' support refers to action that emerged in light of time (past) and contexts (school and home). I propose that the emergence of agency at this stage reflected on social structures as mediators that formed learners' agency (their teachers, family and peers). This finding is in line with Van Lier (2008) who characterised agency in its mediation in the sociocultural context.

RQ 2 aimed to find how learners' experiences shaped their agency in relevant two-time frames: the present and the future. The past in the narrative was enabled through reflective activities to smoothly make a transition into students' present choices (Zekri, 2020). Students' self-evaluation is reported in interactional negotiation on the other 'Mentors' support' with the self 'students through the dialogue (De Fina & Geogokopolou, 2012). Relying on Holquist's (1990) definition of dialogue as an event, students' evaluation of their marks 'events' told in forms of a dialogue increased awareness of oneself to deliberately make a change (Kelso, 2016). Awareness of the self creates an ability for self-evaluation denotes their responsibility to assess their needs, and make choices towards *English choice* (See example 22). This agrees with Chambon et. al (2014) that individuals' selection of their action before its use contributes to their sense of agency. Therefore, Harvey (2014) states that an intense dialogue with the other creates a responsible self (See example 15 and 16). I argue that agency is multi-layered, i.e., mediated, intense, and can emerge as a result of self-evaluation which can contribute to the development of self-regulated learners. This finding comes in line with Ahearen's (2001) proposition of perceiving agency as a consequence of mediation, and as an increase sense of self-regulation.

I argue that students' agency is deeply dialogical; the social gets into the self and creates their responsivity with changes of perspectives on learning and self-becoming. Students' consciousness can lead them to position themselves in discursive practices, and to plan for the unpredictable world, and life and career after university. For the need which Badwan (2017) highlighted educators should empower their students through training their consciousness of learning, which would lead them to decide on what they can do

next. In this context, students' internally persuasive discourse which they brought from the past created their ideological becoming as they engaged with new - contact zone - in the present. Their development of ideological becoming is mentioned through their plans to take action (29). The intention of making change is in line with Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) who stated that taking action or selecting actions refers to the development of agency in the self. In this study, students claimed and reassured their agency, when their plans entailed skills they need to improve. As language learners, their agency became decentralised from external structures.

The five students showed new images representing the self in different positions. Their desires in teaching and travelling abroad are manifestations of a future-oriented agency. In examples (30), agency is marked through a sense of social mobility and international membership, this finding aligns with Matthew Sung's finds of his (2019) that second language investment is driven by imagined international membership community.

It is also reported in a sense of pride, and willingness and achievement (See examples 31 and 32). There is synergy and hope in the students' quotes of the past and future self-images, attaining feelings of security and care created opportunities of imagined becoming. Also, their desires for teaching are inspired by their willingness of becoming mentors for their students, as in example (36). The future projection of ten years - becoming- potentially presents meaning for the concept of imagined identity. However, this study discussed the concept of agency through mentors' support and marks through EFL narratives. The dialogue in narratives played a discursive role, which highlighted interaction between not the self per se, but also the self and the other. These themes also contribute to the meaning of agency as social embodiment and as personal emergence and development due to events and their effects. Further research on agency and dialogue is needed to discuss how agency can lead students to develop their imagined identities, in connection with different periods of their life events.

The two theoretical frameworks are merged in this study whereby I analysed the narratives. They foregrounded similar perspectives on agency as a result of a social structure, however, with the dialogue agency is enacted in relation to narrative periods, events, and positions. This study could embody the students' agency in a holistic and a congruent way of who they are as learners. The contribution lies on the themes mentors' support and marks raised through dialogues. I suggest further research is needed on agency through narratives performed-dialogues to retrieve themes that can possibly extend discussions on agency through learning.

Implications

There are different ways which can help researchers apply findings of this study. Pedagogically, this study showed that reflective activities assisted students in the writing of the narratives, including three periods: the past experiences, the present choices, and the future aspirations. Teachers can engage students in a self-evaluative activity to raises their voice, and address their needs.

Methodologically, the use of narrative as a research method facilitated access not only to social interaction between social members and the self, but also put the self in a process of self-evaluation and self-interpretation of past events, defined as marks, and evaluation of their social relationships, defined as mentors. These themes can be further explored to bring meaning about agency in different research contexts, as far can be employed to enable students develop a learning identity, rather a fixed identity based on

setting goals. For this, I suggest that further research can be done with students' native languages to be able to interpret how different languages might have influence on students' expressions of their agency in learning.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that agency is interacted, and developed through time, space, and embodiment. It can also shift from intentions to outcomes. It has presented the students' reflection of who they are and discussed the concept of 'learner agency' from an EFL learning perspective. The mini-course I conducted enabled the students to articulate their experiences with their social environment, focusing on the past which I observed that it is missing from L2 studies. The past in the narrative showed that the students were not motivated in learning prior to a social interaction with the other. Dialogues enabled them to become responsible on their own choices, to access their new imagined positions through efforts making and future determinations.

Note

The themes 'mentors' and 'marks' are initially adapted from Christian Jensen (2015), which I added to their narrative research as main themes investigated to find about social and individual complex relationship between the self and the other, that can develop agency in learning.

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