

Through autonomy to agency: Giving power to language learners

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ABSTRACT

Within the social matrix of language and learning, language learning involves necessary dependencies and interdependencies, which, in the interaction of the learner with the social world, both enable and constrain agency. This paper extends the notion of *autonomy* by exploring the term *agency*, which is defined as *the ability to act with initiative and effect in a socially constructed world*; it also suggests a possible profile for language courses.

Interpreting autonomy

Teachers read their own assumptions into a term such as *autonomy*, as Chan (2003: 47–8) reports in a research study that cites teacher definitions of the expression. These definitions include *the ability of a learner to work independently, taking responsibilities for all aspects of the learning experience and making learners more self-reliant*. Chan goes on to record how different teachers describe activities they use to motivate students: *I encourage them to read, watch TV in English, visit self-access centres and the library; I asked them to do web-based study; I asked my students to watch films*.

Many of Chan's respondents report urging learners to use self-access centres, self-study of a kind that is very familiar in language learning. In such activities, learners grapple, in their own time, with different worthy self-study experiences of the target language, that do however, appear as solitary and isolating events. The idea of individual language learners engaging with media such as television, websites, film or study centre materials invites Pennycook's (1997: 41) comment on 'the psychology of the language learner [is] in cognitive isolation'.

Discussions of autonomy in the literature generally carry notions of *acting independently*. For example, Cotterall (2004: 1) sees autonomy as developing learner 'confidence in their own ability to learn independently'. There is also a focus on the *individual*, with learner autonomy 'growing out of the individual's acceptance of his or her own responsibility for learning'

(Chan 2003: 33). This focus on the individual is linked to concepts of *flexible learning* and *student-centred learning* (Macaro 1997: 167).

The following language learner observed by one of the authors of this paper provides a contrast to this sense of individuals operating in 'cognitive isolation':

On the train to Pompeii, Thomas turned to the Italian beside him and asked the time. Then he asked where the train was heading and what there was to see at Pompeii. He actually knew the answers to all these questions but there was a hidden agenda to the interaction – to use his travelling companion as a language learning experience.

This example of language learning *autonomy* in an Italian social context is only partly encompassed by familiar definitions of the term, which include 'the capacity to take control of one's own learning' (Benson 2001: 47), 'learner willingness and ability to manage their learning for themselves' (Cotterall 2004: 1) and 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec 1981: 3). Macaro (1997: 169) sees autonomy as a concept that puts emphasis on '*developing potential* in the learner, on how s/he can use it to operate more effectively' (emphasis in the original).

The concept of autonomy has been problematised in certain domains, with nuanced and reflective analyses of autonomy and independence in the literature; for example, in probing contributions to edited volumes such as Benson and Voller (1997), Cotterall and Crabbe (1999) and Sinclair, McGrath and Lamb (2000). Pennycook (1997: 44) offers a trenchant critique of autonomy, including a frontal attack on a psychologised and individualised concept of the term that is independent of cultural, political, social and economic constraints. One might add certain other limitations in using the term autonomy, with suggestions of individualism, isolating and/or introverted behaviour, a lack of social interaction, an inclination to ignore the socio-cultural world, an apparent absence of a cultural matrix in which to locate autonomy and an assumption of being able to operate without dependencies.

However, some writers argue against the notion that autonomy is monolithic. One such writer is Sinclair (2000), who develops an extended definition of the term by listing certain key aspects that she holds are broadly accepted, including social and political dimensions. In particular, Sinclair (2000: 11–12) notes that autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom and has a social as well as an individual dimension, and that the promotion of learner autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension.

In the same volume, Lamb (2000: 125) expands on the political and psychological dimensions and calls for critical awareness and agency, along

with an ongoing deconstruction of power relations. Toohey and Norton (2003: 58) illustrate part of Sinclair's thesis in their case study of two language learners when they note the 'social turn' in second language learning literature, emphasising 'the ways in which sociocultural factors and larger societal processes are involved in the construction of individuals and their learning' (see also Norton and Toohey 2001). In a rather different discussion on autonomy, Riley (1999: 32) also looks at ways in which discourse constructs and maintains social representations of the learner and argues that 'social identity is first and foremost ... constructed and legitimated by and with others'. Little (2000: 16) focuses on learning, arguing that 'individual cognition is embedded in processes of social interaction' and that autonomy is the product of linking social interaction to learner interests and collaborative group work.

Recognising dependency

Some learners have their own preferred strategies for approaching language and language learning, and can clearly state their needs; others have not formed any view at all, understandably handing the process of tuition over to teachers and institutions, and thereby becoming dependent on courses of instruction. The language learner lives in a pervasive world of dependencies (Benson 2001) and there are good reasons for this according to Chanock (2004: 1) 'depending on others can be a responsible way to learn'. Students use teachers and other students, as they comply with courses designed by teachers. They work together, in and out of class, on course material and assignments and, where possible, they obtain recent examination papers to prepare for end-of-year exams. In various ways, they try to access the target language in natural settings such as Japanese in Japan, in multilingual settings such as English in India, by face-to-face and electronic means, and through the Internet.

Dependencies such as these are rooted in sociocultural realities and would seem to be inevitable in language learning, with both positive and negative impacts on that learning. Teachers and learners regularly assume the existence of dependencies, and exercise a potentially powerful form of action through the notion of *agency*, a socially co-constructed relationship that broadens and deepens the term *autonomy* by incorporating dependence, interdependence and engagement in a social world. In outlining a model intended to bring rigour to the analysis of autonomy, Oxford (2003) recognises four 'perspectives' on autonomy – technical, psychological, sociocultural and political-critical. This paper focuses on the sociocultural and political-critical, somewhat along the lines of Oxford (2003: 85), who

claims that sociocultural categories ‘can be linked with the political-critical perspective, involving ideologies and access to power, although they can also be understood in a less political light’.

Exploring agency

Dependencies help make up the reality of second language learning, but they do not explain the totality of that learning. Ahearn (2001: 122) sees agency as ‘the socioculturally mediated capacity to act’. Learners, we would add, have to act in numerous mundane and ingenious ways to promote their own learning, displaying *agency* or the capacity to act with initiative and effect (cf Fay 1996; Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001).

Giddens (1984: 9), one of the key sociologists to address the term, refers to people’s ‘capability of doing ... things’, saying that ‘[w]hatever happened would not have happened if [the] individual had not intervened’. Being able to act implies the ability to act differently and we take *agency* to be the ability to act with initiative and effect in a socially constructed world, as seen in the following response from a language learner, Ian, who, a few weeks before boarding a plane to China, announced he’d picked up some tapes of Mandarin and thought he’d give it a whirl. In the first two weeks in China, he was clearly using *Putonghua* with the Chinese around him. When he was asked how he was doing it, he responded, ‘I don’t know what **they’re** doing, I’m doing Lesson Three’.

The concept of *agency* has been developed over the years, with Thorne (2005: 397) arguing that it is both enabled and constrained by material and semiotic tools such as languages and literacies, by pedagogical frameworks and conceptions of learning, by the relevant communities, and by the historical and emergent rules and divisions of labour that structure the on-going agency. Various significant interpretations relate to this analysis. One is the fundamental claim of Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001: 144) that human activity is based in the sociocultural world, where ‘[t]he human mind is formed and functions as a consequence of human interaction with the culturally constructed environment’, with agency itself ‘socially and historically constructed’ (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 146). This view is consistent with the theorising of Firth and Wagner (1997), Block’s (2003) focus on ‘the social turn’ in language learning and Ahearn’s (2001: 110) claim that ‘linguistic anthropologists regard language as a form of social action, a cultural resource, and a set of sociocultural practices’. The interaction of setting and learner is captured in Toohey and Norton’s (2003: 70) conclusion to their case study of two learners: ‘Eva and Julie were able to gain access to the social networks of their particular communities because of practices in

the communities in which they were located and through their own agency/efforts to position themselves as persons worth talking/listening to’.

Agency includes the ability to promote language learning, to use language, to become aware about language, to construct meaning and to engage in what might be called *language contexting* or making the connection between language, text, context and society (cf Widdowson 2004). However, agency in Lantolf and Pavlenko’s (2001: 148) terms is not a property but ‘a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large’.

In this sense, the notion of agency dovetails with van Lier’s construct of affordance in an ecological language-learning framework in which:

knowledge of language for a human ... [parallels] knowledge of the jungle for an animal. The animal does not ‘have’ the jungle; it knows how to use the jungle and how to live in it. Perhaps we can say by analogy that we do not ‘have’ or ‘possess’ language, but that we learn to use it and to ‘live in it’.

van Lier (2000: 253)

For van Lier (2000), affordance is particular properties of the environment that allow, or afford, opportunities for learners to act and engage with the environment, thus providing opportunities for language learning. In the language learning examples described above, Thomas’s agency of interacting with the stranger on the train and Ian’s agency in the practice of Lesson Three can be seen in terms of affordance and engagement with the learning environment. Agency, therefore, is a relationship of interaction with the social world that learners might develop, and one that teachers and programmes might foster in their learners.

Agency offers a potential for action that is rooted in time, history, space and culture (Scollon 2005), opening up dimensions that might complement but go beyond the concept of autonomy. In particular, agency can be thought of as operating in and through a multi-layered social setting. In focusing on agency, we emphasise the scope for social interaction in language learning, for relating to context in learning, for accessing a range of language resources, and for taking into account political factors and power relations in language development and use.

In light of Thorne’s (2005: 397) categories outlined above, both Thomas and Ian consciously used the social environment to try out developing second languages. Within their ‘semiotic tools’, their ‘conceptions of learning’ clearly involved risk-taking with native speakers of the target language. They insisted on engaging with the ‘relevant community’ of language users, and in their two different settings they fitted into the ‘rules ... that structure the ongoing agency’. On train trips, strangers do talk to each other, so

Thomas seizes the opportunity, and in southern China, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, foreigners and locals shared equal fascination with each other, so there was acceptance and encouragement for visitors to try out their Chinese.

The items in Thorne's (2005: 397) categories may have enabled the agency of Thomas and Ian, but, by the same token, might equally well have constrained them. The language abilities of the two learners might not have matched their 'conceptions of learning' and they might not have been up to engaging systematically with native speakers, which is often disconcertingly the case for many language learners. For Thomas, his Italian seemed adequate for an extended train conversation, but for Ian the fluent Chinese he encountered was apparently beyond his level. However, by his own account, he still gave Lesson Three a sound workout, to his own benefit. For other language learners, contact with the language community might be difficult or denied, as not all native speakers have the patience to help fledgling language learners. That situation might equally well describe the divisions of labour that structure the ongoing agency (Thorne 2005: 397). The learner might be a willing buyer, but the native speaker might not be a willing seller. In some settings, migrants trying to extend their second language development find it hard to connect with the local citizenry, with their agency restricted as a result. The fragility of a learner's situation is illustrated by Toohey and Norton (2003: 71) when they hold that in different settings the two learners in their case study may not have achieved well, as 'there was nothing inherently good about them as language learners' and in other locations they may have remained marginalised.

There is a question to resolve in the relationship between autonomy and agency. Teachers in Chan's (2003) study would advocate that students exercise their individual autonomy by consulting the Internet, but this leaves the question of whether the students would be exercising agency. We argue that they would be, if two processes applied. The first process is recognising the Web as a social artefact, constructed by people with differing values, cultures and viewpoints. The second process is locating the language experience in a social setting and thereby exploring the interaction of language, context and the sociocultural matrix of language use.

Interaction of elements is a key concept in this regard. For Ahearn (2001: 110), '[w]hen scholars treat language, culture, and society as mutually constituted, one of their main responsibilities then becomes to study how discourse both shapes and is shaped by sociocultural factors and power dynamics'. Recognising the interaction of elements is an incentive for teachers to explore, with their students, how language operates within social contexts

to help learners exercise their agency in rich and meaningful ways. In using film clips in a language course, for instance, there is reason for teachers to go beyond the issue of how language is used, to ask how Hollywood shapes discourses as it builds values, cultural beliefs and ideologies in films such as *Gone with the wind*, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Apocalypse now* and *Superman returns*.

Agency includes the notion of simply taking the opportunity to use language, which many people claim they will do when learning a language, saying they will definitely seize every chance offered, abandon shyness, disregard errors, initiate conversations with strangers and generally learn aggressively. The claim of Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001: 147) that '[a]s agents, learners actively engage in constructing terms and conditions of their own learning' is neatly illustrated by a class member in a beginner crash course in Lisbon. This student methodically took children's books out of the library because she found she could follow them, and she quietly went off to plays because she could experience reasonably accessible Portuguese and make sense of it through the dramatic action. Her actions support the claims of several theorists of social behaviour who claim that agents act with intention, with meaning and with ongoing reflection (Giddens 1984; Fay 1996; Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001). Hunter (2004) gives various examples of the creative agency in workplace literacy and work functioning in a hotel, where most back-of-house employees were immigrants. Here workers designed efficient record-keeping formats, found paper and pencil ways to circumvent the shortcomings of hotel software, and invented schemes for improving room-cleaning schedules, often outflanking the *official* procedures of management.

Independent language learning is a powerful notion, since it gives respect to the power of learners to harness agency. However, it does not exist in a vacuum and requires engagement with a set of potentially interacting players such as speakers of the target language, teachers, peers, the mass media and the output of those who make a vast array of resources available from such things as language courses and databanks. It is more than an individual act, even though it calls for personal initiative to engage in different forms of agency and it includes the notion of *interdependence* (Kohonen 1992: 19). White (2004: 3) similarly reports on adult immigrants in Australia engaging in 'personally meaningful activities in the context of social interaction', a position that she also relates to Little's (2001) discussion of 'tandem language learning' – 'Because we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence' (Little 2000: 16, quoting his own conclusion from an earlier publication). Agency, then, is co-constructed through interaction

with a number of social forces that include education, language, community and resources, and thereby raises the question of the context in which it can operate.

Interacting with the sociocultural world

Agents exist within an environment of some kind and within a set of conditions that can be variously enabling and constraining. A student can access languages very easily nowadays by means of a range of 'material and semiotic tools' (Thorne 2005: 397) such as telecommunications, the Internet, databanks, articles, documents, international television, video, radio, print journalism and movies, in addition to conventional resources such as dictionaries, grammars and textbooks. While such resources might seem neutral, it is important to note that they are all instances of social construction and, thereby, in various ways, are constituted of values, viewpoints and ideologies.

Three elements of the conditions of learning, or affordances in van Lier's (2000) terms, illustrate the nuanced nature of the learner's environment: the language environment, the learner's previous and current orientation to language learning, and language instruction, including teachers and courses. Living in a country where the target language is the main medium of communication is obviously a potential benefit, although not an infallible resource, and sometimes it can be richly available but elusive. In New Zealand, for example, many immigrants report that English is often not very accessible to them, as they find New Zealand accents strange, that people speak quickly and indistinctly, and that it can be hard to make more than passing contact with Kiwis (Cooke 2001). If, in addition, the mass media turn out to be somewhat impenetrable (for example, television does not make sense), a whole series of avenues to learning become more apparent than real. In this somewhat depressing picture, Thorne's 'material and semiotic tools' and 'the relevant community' work to constrain learner agency.

The learner's previous and current orientation to language learning may strongly influence agency. Agents act in and on society (Fay 1996) but are also moulded and shaped by society. Hence, as suggested early in this discussion, learners may be formed by the models of previous study in their home countries – for example, as tends to happen in China, studying long lists of vocabulary items, concentrating on correctness, undertaking intensive reading, and alertly monitoring and noting down the expressions encountered in discussions with fluent speakers. Chanock (2004: 5) cites Higgs (1988) on the 'institutional context of student work', noting that

individual goals and criteria for learning 'are surrounded by the powerful goals and criteria of the institution'.

For some learners, if they are lost over how to approach language learning, a language course may be just what they need, with the course in effect substituting for student agency. Similarly, certain methodologies may be very compatible for learners. For example, the Grammar-Translation approach may be the right sort of analytical approach for certain settings – for instance, where the target language has a low profile. By the same token, other methodologies may be harmful or limiting. For example, Audio-Lingualism, even though capable of various forms, often stringently restricts interactions and encounters with the target language (for example, audio without writing). Whatever the methodology, language teaching can run the risk of tying students into particular courses and limiting the opportunities for agency to operate. A case in point, according to (White 2004: 3), would be a model of distance education in which 'the overall course structure is deliberately *very rigid*' (emphasis in original). Such a course structure is part of a model of 'self-sufficiency', which White contrasts unfavourably with one of 'collaborative control'.

Some courses lock learners into sets of activities, which meet the requirements of the programme without necessarily advancing their language learning. For example, setting large amounts of busy work from textbooks or the Internet, doing copious quantities of grammar and spelling exercises, answering mundane and relatively trivial questions about a reading passage, learning long lists of vocabulary out of context and writing formulaic essays do little in developing independence or resourcefulness in language learning. One questionable approach to comprehension can be to insist on right or correct answers to questions about a text, rather than using a text to explore meaning (cf Cooke 2004).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) may also prove more problematic than we would want it to be. It suits fluent speakers of a target language because they have instant, easy and totally competent access to it, but to frame language learning within this model often requires learners to operate within an overwhelming flood of language. Examples include the complications of telephone procedures and teaching students to ask for directions or to pose questions when they are often incapable of understanding complex, unexpected answers. CLT assumes a reasonable goal but through a debatable *pedagogy* because it places enormous demands on learners, who have to try to function in a highly competent world when they are only partially competent. It calls on learners to integrate different levels of language performance when they might only be capable of tackling small

segments of language, piece by piece. Therein lies the attraction, for learners, of previous familiar models of language teaching, which call for manipulating discrete and manageable items of language, rather than dealing with the complexity of actual language use. This is not to deny that both teachers and learners may see real merit in CLT, but other forms of teaching may offer the learner accessible and preferable avenues to learning. From the point of view of contending with dependencies and promoting agency, the learner may decide that communicative language teaching sets up demands that are more constraining than helpful. This is a real dilemma for present day language teachers, who may genuinely believe that it is their preferred mode of teaching because the CLT approach is undeniably attractive on theoretical grounds, is widely used and teachers feel comfortable with it. This brings the discussion back to one of the working definitions of agency – that is, the capacity to act with initiative and effect (Fay 1996; Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001). However, given the caveats in this analysis, one has to also allow for some initiatives to deliver only limited tangible rewards or simply poor effect.

Agents of the future

What do the stories of Thomas and Ian tell us now? In each case, the learner displayed an effective initiative or agency that depended on interaction within a social setting. In each case, the learner experienced certain built-in dependencies – a travelling companion in Italy and a beginner course and, in China, the compliance of the local population to bear with his experimentation. Each learner constructed events to his own advantage, making use of the resources available in the local structure. Both would seem to have lived out Ahearn's (2001: 110, 112) notions of 'language as a form of social action' and agency as 'socioculturally mediated capacity to act'. Both stories illustrate social construction in language development, embodying some overlapping procedures that indicate generative learning.

Two techniques, which are closely linked, are *learning beyond the classroom* and *learning beyond the course*. Learning beyond the classroom refers to using and learning from the vast range of resources outside the constraints of a class and a room. With the advent of the Internet, this is an ability that some language students display with spectacular zeal and dramatic results. Students bring all kinds of web-based information to their language learning and to their classes. Learning beyond the course relates to breaking out of the mould of institutional courses, drawing on external resources such as social networks and media of different kinds, finding and creating opportunities for productive learning, and continuing to learn and experience the

target language after a course. Both would be suggested by autonomy, but would be enhanced, we believe, by invoking agency, with its focus on the sociocultural setting.

A third process involves learning from experience, often referred to as *learning to learn*, a shorthand expression that assumes maximising the benefit of different learning opportunities, which is a concept explored most interestingly by Crabbe (2003) and Allwright (2005). Of importance here is a notion of learning that goes beyond any given experience or use of language – an example would be developing the ability to see and understand underlying systems in language such as grammar, syntax, lexis and semantics. It should be noted that such systems are themselves social artefacts rather than fixed, unchanging entities. Grammars, for instance, vary markedly from one another and can prompt complex debate over interpretation and representation of different systems and categories. Other examples of learning to learn include using grammatical discourse and sociolinguistic and strategic competencies (Canale and Swain 1980). This can be reflected in realising appropriate use of language according to situation, developing powers of inferring, recognising and employing strategic use of language in different settings, constructing and expressing meaning, and commanding strategies for using language. All of these competencies presume an interaction with the social world and interpretation that takes context into account.

Since knowledge and information are subject to debate, a related concept is *learning to inquire and question*. Doing so is fundamental to Western education and thereby constitutes a key language-based activity, as can be seen in discussions of critical thinking in Siegal and Carey (1989), McPeck (1990) and Brookfield (2005). The agency here is the capacity to query socially constructed knowledge and texts, with the implication for second-language teachers being the need to develop the ability of language learners to use language for exploration of the world. This includes the analysis of political realities in language and society, including ideological positions and power relations (cf Fairclough 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 2003), learning to contend with issues and people, exercising effective agency in stating and defending a position (cf Cooke 2005), analysing and critiquing other viewpoints, dealing with matters of public and private debate, disputing attacks on oneself and advancing one's own interests. A practical example is promoting a critical approach to information taken from the Web.

These issues have implications for the awareness and outlook of teachers and for the features of courses. They would suggest that teachers need a social awareness and willingness to engage in social matters – for example,

going beyond text to relate text to context in reflective ways or developing courses that focus on relevant dimensions of society in which items are embedded. The familiar topic of the environment provides an example where students could be encouraged to locate and explore the subject in its social, political and ideological contexts through the controversial and contradictory themes of pollution, conservation and sustainability, the imperatives of huge energy companies and other corporations, competition between countries, the need for clean water and uncontaminated earth, the demand for vigorous growth and production, and safety from toxic neighbourhoods. This kind of social awareness calls for a level of explicitness about society in teaching, a language for talking about society and a readiness to analyse social institutions such as the media, education, business and politics.

Initiative in learners involves self-knowledge – for example, knowing and coming to know what resources are valuable for their own language learning. Such knowledge is likely to be enhanced by increased understanding of the socially constructed environment. Becoming at ease with the media and being able to access it and incorporate it into language development would be one practical example of this. Obviously there is a potential for two-way interaction here, as becoming more fluent in the language can aid access to the media, and becoming familiar with the media and the social context in which it is embedded can aid language use. Initiative can change over time and it might extend or intensify with increasing understanding and access, or it might decline if the learner has difficulty penetrating the society.

The key for both teachers and learners would seem to be insight into the social world, into the interaction of language and society, into language learning and into interdependencies that can be turned to learner advantage. Part of the process of developing insight would be to promote an understanding of language resources integral to a socially constructed world that invites interrogation as well as engagement. Those involved in the industry of language education – including teachers, curriculum and materials developers, and textbook publishers – might scrutinise courses and resources to see how agency is variously limited, ignored or encouraged. One outcome could be developing courses and resources that promote agency and social awareness, even if the components themselves are relatively familiar items. Such courses and resources could promote initiative and adventuring, insight and inquiry into interacting elements, social interaction and reflective learning (cf Vieira 1999). Agency could be developed through a socially informed course design framework such as the following:

Course components	Objectives
Sociocultural knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To promote agency as a conscious policy • To build social awareness and a social orientation • To draw on a language for talking about society • To teach explicitly about society • To analyse social institutions • To focus on social contexts in which topics are embedded
Initiative and adventuring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop a focus on going beyond the given in selected forms, eg promoting aspects of learning to learn, learning beyond the course and the classroom • To encourage risk-taking • To create an atmosphere that allows for ambiguity and error, rather than continual exactness and correctness
Insight and inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop self-knowledge • To develop insight into the social world, the interaction of language and society, language learning, interdependencies • To promote a focus on inquiring, questioning and challenging ideas, eg accessing a wide range of resources with critical awareness
Social interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To engage with speakers of the target language • To recognise and explore the socially constructed base to language artefacts
Reflective learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop a focus on noticing, eg monitoring language in use, related to White's (2004: 2) point on the need for 'awareness' on the part of the distance education learner • To develop a focus on taking advantage of affordances (van Lier 2000): the language environment, the learner's previous and current orientation to language learning, and language instruction, including teachers and courses • To encourage learners to reflect on their language learning and use

Some language educators may object that agency is too demanding of beginning learners, in which case the next story may be a timely reminder of resourcefulness in teaching and learning. Some years ago, a number of teachers were engaged on a professional development programme to encourage learning to learn. On the first night of the language courses, the beginner class was the noisiest. The teacher had given the students a set of question-and-answer expressions to pose to each other, including name, age, occupation, interests, hobbies and favourite colour. These were not earth-shattering items but they were adequate to create an animated class, since all the

students had to talk to everyone else in the class. The result was a great deal of purposeful language use or, to put it another way, they had been gifted access to agency. This anecdote also reminds us that many teachers are constantly promoting agency through classroom activities.

A course built around agency might value hypothesising and inquiring – for example, about the form, function and varieties of language, about meaning, about appropriate language for different settings, about the language of conversation and about the language of written texts. It might encourage students to take risks because of the call to operate with the complexities of the sociocultural world and to tolerate greater ambiguity by freeing them from the need to be *correct* at all times. Learners might be encouraged to create circumlocutions, when exact expressions elude them, and to develop powers of inferring. It might call for learners to search for language use and language encounters, reflecting on their experiences and to some extent analysing and critiquing the language used.

This paper has prompted the following critical questions that might be useful for further inquiry:

- To what extent does language teaching limit or advance agency?
- In what ways could language teaching promote agency?
- To what extent does language teaching promote awareness of the social setting and interaction with it?

It has also presented a framework for investigating the question of agency in language learning, which is now subject to debate and challenge.

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