FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS' IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN THE ECOLOGY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. The paper explores the ways how language learners' identities and agency interact within the dynamic ecology of higher education. It examines how learners' identities, influenced by their relationships and environments, and their agency in language acquisition, impact their learning processes, cultural capital, and social power. The research is aimed at demonstrating how learners assert their identities, negotiate symbolic capital, and challenge normative discourses in educational contexts. Using a literature review of prior academic contributions, the study acquires an ecolinguistic perspective, viewing language within a sociocultural ecology, and employs dynamic systems theory to integrate language learners within the context of higher education. The author underscores the negotiated nature of identity in language acquisition, revealing that learners' motivations and agency enable them to navigate and resist unfavourable identities. The findings accentuate the significance of understanding language acquisition as a sociocultural practice, where learners actively shape their linguistic and social realities. The author suggests that educational strategies should foster learner autonomy and cultural awareness, recognizing the interconnectedness of identity, agency, and the sociocultural context of higher education.

Key words: foreign language acquisition, learner's identity, learner's agency, sociocultural ecology, dynamic systems theory, ecolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition, especially in the context of higher education, is a multifaceted process shaped by numerous factors, including learners' identities and their agency in navigating linguistic and sociocultural landscapes. Evidence suggests that in the ever-evolving contemporary educational contexts, language acquisition extends far beyond mere linguistic competence. Language learners' experiences are deeply intertwined with their identities, agency, and the ecology of their educational settings. As noted by Huang (2013: 313), examining students' overall developmental patterns and traits in higher education is intrinsically linked to exploring concepts of identity and agency. Thus, drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives, this paper is dedicated to exploring the manifold connection between learner's identity and agency within the ecology of higher education.

Central to this investigation is the conceptualization of language learner's identity in foreign language acquisition. Accordingly, theoretical frameworks provided by Darvin and Norton (2015) offer a lens through which to understand identity as a multifaceted construct shaped by individuals' relationships with the world across temporal and spatial dimensions. Norton and McKinney's (2010) approach to identity, on the other hand, provides further insights into how language learners navigate their identities within the educational milieu, negotiating symbolic capital and challenging normative discourses. Meanwhile, valuable empirical insights are provided by Huang's (2013) study of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and TEFL (the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language) learners' autonomy, agency and identity development, which has been studied in a Chinese teacher-education university.

Agency, another pivotal aspect of language learning, is explored primarily through the perspectives of Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), Duff (2012), and Darvin and Norton (2015). Their work illuminates the motivations that drive learners to invest in language acquisition and how learners' agency is exercised to position learners' selves within various sociocultural ecologies, including educational settings, whereas Huang's (2013) study elucidates how the context, particularly the institutional culture and discourses, influenced EFL and TEFL learners' self-identity formation and directed their creation of personally relevant agendas, allowing them to selectively exercise personal agency in pursuing their ultimate goals for learning English and personal development.

The study also incorporates the perspective of ecolinguistics, drawing on Kramsch and Steffensen (2008), as well as Steffensen and Fill (2014) to comprehend language acquisition as existing within a broader sociocultural ecology and connecting it to the previously examined concepts of learners' identity and agency. Through this framework, language is understood not merely as a linguistic system but as intricately intertwined with sociocultural aspects affecting the context of language users and the communities they belong to or aspire to associate with. This approach enables a more thorough comprehension of the multifaceted dynamics involved in foreign language acquisition environments.

To provide further understanding about the elaborate and evolving nature of foreign language acquisition and identity formation within the larger social world, this study employs dynamic systems theory, as elucidated by de Bot, Lowie and Verspoor (2007), as well as Ellis (2007) and Van Geert (2008). In concordance with identity approach to language acquisition (Norton and McKinney, 2010), this theoretical perspective challenges conventional notions of language learners as passive recipients of linguistic input and emphasizes the ever-changing and negotiated nature of identity in the language acquisition process.

While previous academic contributions have acknowledged the importance of considering both identity and agency in foreign language acquisition contexts, there is still a lack of clarity regarding the interaction of these factors within

the specific ecology of higher education. By synthesizing the aforementioned pertinent theoretical frameworks, this paper seeks to extend previous knowledge and aid in achieving a greater insight into foreign language acquisition as a socio-cultural practice, wherein language learners' identities and agency are shaped by and shape its sociocultural context, defined by Oxford (2003: 80) as the entire situation, background, setting, or environment pertinent to foreign language acquisition. Likewise, by emphasizing the pivotal roles of language learners' identity and agency, the study endeavours to raise awareness of the dynamics at play within the process of foreign language acquisition in the ecology of higher education, aiming to provide insights that have implications for both theoretical approaches and practical approaches in foreign language education.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The author employs a theoretical literature review, aiming to explore how foreign language learner's identity and agency function within the context of foreign language acquisition in higher education. Research design synthesizes academic contributions to provide insights into the interplay between foreign language learner's identity, agency and the process of foreign language acquisition as a sociocultural practice in the institutional context of higher education. This investigation is conducted through the perspective of ecolinguistics and dynamic systems theory, which view language, identity, and education as inter-connected and constantly evolving systems.

The paper begins by conceptualizing identity as a fluid and multifaceted construct influenced by learners' relationships with the foreign language acqui-sition process and the environment that it takes place in, with primary focus on the social structures present in higher education institutions. Language learners' ability to make choices, exert control, and pursue their language acquisition goals align with the concept of agency, which allows the learners to shape their posi-tioning within the language acquisition environment. Accordingly, by reviewing relevant academic perspectives, the author examines how learners' motiva-tions drive their investment in language acquisition, anticipating benefits such as enhanced cultural capital and social power.

Ecolinguistics presents the perspective of language not only as a system of communication but as deeply embedded in the cultural and social contexts of the language learners, as well as communities and subcultures they engage with, which, for the purposes of this article, is attributed to and analysed in the context of higher education. The integration of dynamic systems theory, on the other hand, offers a broader framework for understanding foreign language acquisition, identity, and education as interconnected and evolving systems, wherein language acquisition is presented as a process of constant negotiation

with learners' identities and agency being influenced by and having themselves the potential to influence the broader sociocultural context that they operate in.

IDENTITY APPROACH TO LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Druviete (2021: 28) suggests that a person can have a sense of a language as both a communication tool and a value that shapes their identity. For many individuals, their connections to a language as a part of their personal identity are established as early as childhood through learning of their first language (Druviete and Požarnova, 2021: 31). According to Block (2007), identity can be understood as the unique traits, beliefs, and methods of communication that distinguish an individual or group from others, representing how they see and present themselves. Block (2007: 14, 26) argues, however, that identity is formed through discourse, meaning that people do not build their identities in isolation or purely based on external factors. Instead, their identity is shaped through their interactions with their environment, which both restricts and influences these interactions, leading to ongoing changes and adjustments (ibid.).

In line with that, identity approach (Norton and MacKinney, 2010) connects language learners with the broader social environment. It challenges the simplistic binary classifications of learners as either motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited. Instead, it suggests that such characteristics are often socially shaped within unequal power dynamics, evolving through time and across contexts and coexisting in often conflicting ways within an individual (ibid.: 73).

Norton (2000: 5) conceptualizes identity as an individual's perception of their connection to the world, and the ways how this relationship continually evolves across different contexts and their perceived future possibilities. Accordingly, each time learners engage in communication, they are constantly negotiating and redefining their sense of self through regarding the broader social world, realigning this interaction across various aspects of their lives (Norton and McKinney, 2010:73). In Stibbe's (2015: 106) words, 'identities are primarily or at least partially forged and resisted in language'. Hawkins (2005: 61) describes this process of identity formation as a continuous negotiation between the individual and their social environment, emphasizing the influence of cultural and power dynamics, which aligns with the frameworks of dynamic systems theory and ecolinguistics, discussed later in this article. Individuals bring their personal histories to activities and events in specific contexts, and through interactions with others, they negotiate and co-create their perceptions of themselves and the world. However, these activities and contexts are embedded in particular values and ideologies, which prioritize certain practices, influencing the nature of these interactions.

The notion of identity as a multifaceted phenomenon is especially significant, since learners struggling to communicate from one identity position

can reorganize their interactions and adopt alternative, more powerful identities (Norton and McKinney, 2010: 74). This carries substantial implications for foreign language acquisition, which can empower the foreign language learners' identity through such identity-constructing aspects as personal aspirations and/or sense of achievement and 'personal fulfilment' (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000: 38-39). This supports the idea of Kramsch and Steffensen (2008: 27) that language education functions across various timescales, such as those of human and personal development, the institution, and the job market.

Identity approach to language learning (Norton and McKinney, 2010: 75; Darvin and Norton, 2015: 37) presumes that when learners invest in the acquisition of a foreign language, they do so because they expect to gain a greater variety of symbolic and material resources, thereby enriching their cultural capital. Consequently, investment in the target language also contributes to the learner's continuously evolving identity. To this end, learners' identities are influenced by their social positioning based on their capital's volume, composition, and trajectory (Darvin and Norton, 2015: 44). As learners navigate transnational contexts and online and offline spaces, they bring their own resources, abilities, and connections, having to additionally acquire new ones to succeed in these new environments (ibid.: 45).

In language acquisition theory, learners' investment is crucial to demonstrate the socially and historically constructed connection between language learners' identity and their commitment to learning (ibid.: 37). This involves raising the question of not only whether students have an incentive to learn a language but also if both students and language educators are committed to the target language and literacy practices of their classroom and community (ibid.: 37). As asserted by Darvin and Norton (2015: 39), learners' aspirations for the future are a key part of their identity. Hence, higher education, career opportunities, international studies, and other goals become part of learners' imagined futures and identities. Although these aspirations might not always be socially available, developing valued skills, such as digital proficiency, can increase learners' cultural capital and social power (ibid.: 39).

A broadened focus on identity and language learners' investment involves the envisioned communities that language learners aim to become a part of through their language acquisition efforts (Norton and McKinney, 2010: 76). However, belonging to a community is not limited to direct participation in community activities and tangible relationships, since imagination also plays a critical role (Wenger, 1998). As claimed by Norton and McKinney (2010: 76); these imagined communities, although not physically present, can have a stronger influence on learners' actions and investments than their immediate environments.

In line with that, identity approach views foreign language acquisition as a sociocultural process (Norton and McKinney, 2010: 79). Participation and non-participation in communities of practice shape learners' identities through

their interplay (ibid.: 80). Consequently, language acquisition is not merely an individual process assimilating neutral rules, frameworks and lexicon; instead, learners attempt to integrate the voices of others, capture the interest of their listeners, and navigate language both as a system and a social practice.

On a more practical level, it is worth referring to Huang's (2013: 64) research, exploring the ways how EFL learners, which were also TEFL students, in a Chinese teacher-education university perceived themselves both as students and as individuals during their time at university, as well as how they envisioned the type of person they would become after graduation, while also examining how these perceptions of their current and 'imagined' selves influenced their university experience and progress in EFL acquisition (ibid.). Having observed the EFL learners' development over the course of 4 years, Huang (201365) concluded that foreign language acquisition can extend beyond merely acquiring practical language skills and play an integral role in the development of students' self-identity. Besides, the significantly higher investment of students in preparation for examinations, as well as their stronger motivation in TEFL learning compared to EFL learning, was rooted in the construction of their self-identity (ibid.: 304). On a similar note, the findings and topics discussed in Huang's study suggested that students' goals and varied attitudes toward different areas of learning were closely tied to how they conceptualized and constructed their self-identity, particularly in relation to their future aspirations, including career paths (ibid.: 164).

Another relevant contribution to note in this regard is the study of Gao, Y. Li and W. Li (2002: 115) of the foreign language learning experience within the Chinese EFL context, which examines how learners perceive and construct their identities, including the foreign language learners' discourse preferences, the social roles they assume (e.g., as writers, readers, or speakers), their career aspirations, self-assessments of talents and competencies, personalities, values, beliefs, cultural affiliations, external images, and personal ambitions. Accordingly, they found that the research participants exhibited a 'core identity', indicating that learners generally maintained a consistent and unified approach toward both English acquisition and personal growth. This core or unified identity influenced the learners' choices, such as selecting specific courses in university, determining their roles within those settings, and deciding whether to fully commit to or disengage from the learning process, which closely aligns with the concept of learners' agency, discussed in the next section of the article.

The priorly discussed findings support Lave and Wenger's (1991) claim that learning as such – supposedly, foreign language learning included – is inherently intertwined with social practice, since learning naturally involves identity formation, which is understood as the development of enduring and evolving relationships between individuals and their participation and roles within communities of practice (ibid.: 53). They describe a community of practice as 'a network of relationships among people, activities, and the broader world, developing

over time and in connection with other intersecting communities of practice' (ibid.: 98), which in the case of the subject of this paper would entail both the community of English language users and the community of higher education institution as the setting of English language acquisition.

In terms of translating these theoretical insights into practical implications for language instruction in the context of higher education, supporting learners' investment in language learning involves connecting their language acquisition goals with personal interests and aspirations, thereby enhancing learners' commitment and engagement. The reviewed contributions may help language educators understand the importance of aligning language acquisition activities with learners' interests and aspirations, fostering a sense of purpose and motivation in language learning. This can be accomplished by creating opportunities for learners to pursue topics of personal relevance, set meaningful language acquisition goals, and receive constructive feedback on their progress.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AGENCY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Agency is another central concept in foreign language acquisition, encompassing learners' capacity to make decisions, manage their circumstances and work towards their goals (Duff, 2012: 417). Similar to the concept of learners' identity, Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001: 148) suggest that agency is not a fixed trait of any individual; instead, it is a dynamic relationship that is continuously co-created and renegotiated with others and within the broader societal context. Thus, both agency and identity can be understood as socially mediated relationships that involve the exploration of individual purposes and the creation of personal meanings; additionally, both are socially and historically shaped, with their development typically occurring over an extended period (Huang, 2013: 69). In terms of foreign language acquisition, Huang (2013: 327) states that the interaction between learners' identity and agency is 'embedded in a learning context which can be relatively large or small'.

In fact, Benson (2007: 30) posits that agency can be seen as a potential starting point for the development of autonomy – the capacity to manage one's own learning (Smith, 2003: 255), with identity being one of its key outcomes. Huang further elaborates on the idea noting that while agency can contribute to identity construction of an individual on the one hand (Huang, 2013: 72), it can also be activated through the process of identity construction, for example, 'negotiating and resisting positioning, attempting repositioning, and deploying discourses and counter discourses' (ibid.: 71), on the other hand, which clearly illustrates the interconnectedness and significance of both concepts. The latter is explicitly illustrated by Huang's (2013: 165) research of EFL and TEFL university students. He found that the ways how students conceptualized their identity,

as well as their overall views on learning and teaching – particularly regarding the value of specific courses and areas of language knowledge and skills – often lead to the development of corresponding learner goals and self-directed actions, which can attest to the exercise of their agency.

In line with that, Lantolf and Thorne (2006: 143) regard agency as 'the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events', along with having voluntary control over one's actions. This supports Huang's (2013: 60, 66) definition of agency as the degree to which learners actively influence their environment in order to achieve their selected goals, which involves taking actions based on deliberate decision-making and personal choice. Accordingly, in terms of foreign language acquisition, agency also involves the ability of learners to make choices and control their learning process, reflecting their identity as active participants who can shape their learning trajectories (Duff, 2012: 413). As mentioned above, it intersects with identity, power, and social context, shaping the language acquisition experience and outcomes through enabling learners (1) to envision and enact new roles or identities, such as becoming a proficient foreign language speaker, and (2) to take actions towards these goals (ibid.: 417). According to Huang (2013: 73), the concept of agency, along with that of identity, can help clarify why learners take initiative in managing their learning and personal lives. As claimed by Duff (2012: 417), the highest-level achievement in foreign language acquisition hinges on learners' agency, as new identities are chosen, unlike the given nature of first language identities. However, as Oxford (2003: 81) suggests, agency cannot be simply granted to learners; instead, it must be cultivated through the learner's own efforts over time and across various contexts (Benson, 2002: 11).

Having elucidated the significant role of learners' agency in foreign language acquisition, the article proceeds with discussing the studied notions in the educational context, particularly higher education. Allison and Huang (2005) note that agency entails the presence of agenda, which they refer to as 'things to do', while agency accordingly pertains to the 'doing' of those things (discussed in Huang, 2013: 326). As observed by Huang (2013: 61) in the context of higher education, language learners often 'follow their own agendas' in their studies. The findings of the scholar's (Huang, 2013) research of EFL learners indicates that a personally relevant and meaningful agenda can foster the exercise of agency, which may ultimately give learners more control over their education and personal lives in the long run. She also notes that learner agendas and agency are likely deeply intertwined with their self-identity and views on future development, including career aspirations, as well as their overall perceptions of EFL learning (ibid.: 326) and should therefore be considered key factors influencing learners' development their long-term learning outcomes (ibid.: 330).

Nevertheless, it is suggested that learner agendas should be analysed alongside educator agendas and institutional agendas (ibid.: 326). While Ollerhead

(2010) claims that discrepancies among those agendas can create opportunities or affordances (Steffensen and Fill, 2014: 7) for learners' agency, Huang (2013: 61) concludes that it can just as well lead to learner dissatisfaction and resistance. Ahearn (2001: 115) claims that such resistance can be regarded as a form of 'oppositional agency', which allows us to question educational practices and critically analyse the power dynamics in foreign language classrooms, along with learners' choices and rights. As for now, however, there is limited knowledge about how learners establish their goals over the long term (ibid.), making it important to address this issue in order to better understand learners' agency and identity, since, according to Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), agency connects motivation to action and shapes the various paths learners take.

According to Darvin and Norton (2015: 36), structure and agency, functioning across different temporal and spatial contexts, can grant or deny learners the power to speak. Thus, recognizing their agency to affirm their identities, learners are able to negotiate symbolic capital, challenge power dynamics, and question standardized thinking to assert their right to express themselves (ibid.: 47). Similarly, by questioning the status quo, learners can engage in reflexivity and dissent, participating in and transforming the multiple spaces of their lives. Resistance to certain behaviours or practices enabled by agency may lead to new identities such as rebellious or diffident students. It is linked to power and social context, since those with greater control over their lives typically possess the capital and ability to succeed (Duff, 2012: 417).

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011: 16) argue that fundamental to human agency are efficacy beliefs – learners' confidence that they can produce desired results and prevent adverse outcomes through their actions. Regardless of other guiding and motivating factors, the core belief that one can influence outcomes through their actions is essential (ibid.: 16). In this regard, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011: 109) duly note that language educators have the power to influence student motivation through interactions that shape their beliefs about their abilities, attitudes toward subjects, goals, and reasons for language acquisition. Likewise, providing opportunities for all students to play significant roles can enhance learners' self-esteem and motivation (ibid.: 121), which Ehrman (1996: 137) defines as the learners' perception of the benefits gained from investing their time, energy, and effort.

In terms of other practical implications of the aforementioned theoretical contributions in regard to fostering language learners' agency, Ushioda (1996: 2) suggests that in the current era of learner-centred education, language instructors may need to shift their focus towards helping students develop self-motivation. It is also worthwhile to consider adding reflective practices that encourage learners to monitor their development, identify areas for growth, and engage vigorously in their language acquisition journey. By incorporating regular reflection activities, language instructors can promote metacognitive awareness and

self-regulation skills, empowering learners to take ownership of their language acquisition process.

PERSPECTIVE OF ECOLINGUISTICS AND DYNAMIC SYSTEMS THEORY

Useful insights for understanding foreign language acquisition in higher education are provided by ecolinguistics and dynamic systems theory, both of which consider the interplay between learners' identity and their social environment. Ecolinguistics highlights the crucial role of environmental factors in creating and shaping systems such as language and language acquisition, which aligns with Hammersley's (1999: 2) emphasis on the importance of viewing people's perspectives and actions as being socially rooted, both in the immediate environments where people live and work, and within the broader context of global society (Kramsch and Steffensen, 2008; Steffensen and Fill, 2014; Stibbe, 2015). Moreover, regarding foreign language learners, Lemke (2002) contends that an ecological view of foreign language acquisition extends beyond the individual learner's immediate experience or physical boundaries – it encompasses not only their current learning but also memories of past experiences, expectations for the future, personal evaluations, imaginations, and identifications with both past, relived, and potential versions of themselves. Besides, the interdependence of systems' components indicates that the way a linguistic phenomenon exists can alter if other phenomena change or disappear (Kramsch and Steffensen, 2008: 18). Thus, interaction means that no part influences others without also being influenced, therefore there is no one-way interaction, only reciprocity; however, this does not guarantee symmetry, as one part may exert more influence over the others (ibid.). Dynamic systems theory, on the other hand, points to the importance of the internal development of a system as an organism composed of many constituents and their interactions (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008; van Geert, 2008). Both perspectives share similarities and can be regarded as integral to understanding human behaviour.

Based on Fill and Mühlhäusler (2001: 1), as well as Steffensen and Fill (2014), ecolinguistics as the Haugen's (1972) paradigm of the 'the ecology of language' offers a structure for interpreting how language learners' identities and agency are shaped by and contribute to the dynamic interactions between languages and their environments. They note that ecolinguistics as an approach is concerned with the 'study of interactions between any given language and its environment' (Steffensen and Fill, 2014: 7). This approach highlights that languages exist in multiple ecologies: symbolic ecology, which entails the concurrent use of different languages or systems of symbols within a specific field; natural ecology, examining the connection between language and its original as well as ecological setting; sociocultural ecology, which investigates how language both shapes and is shaped by social dynamics; and cognitive ecology, the focus of which is on

the way language is influenced by the interactions among living organisms and their surroundings, emphasizing cognitive abilities (ibid.).

In terms of foreign language acquisition in higher education, the sociocultural ecology of language is particularly relevant. According to Steffensen and Fill (2014: 12), human communication through language both shapes and is shaped by broader social structures, including establishments, economic systems, and sociocultural assets. This means that learners' identities and agency are continuously shaped by their interactions within these structures, which resonates with Hökkä, Eteläpelto and Rasku-Puttonen's (2012: 85) claim that agency and social structure are 'interconnected and mutually shaping'. More specifically, language learners' identities and agency are influenced by the physical, social, and symbolic affordances provided by the environment (Steffensen and Fill, 2014: 7). These affordances represent purposeful means of connecting with the environment through observation and consequent behaviour (ibid.: 13). As learners engage in linguistic activities, they perceive and interact with their environment, thus co-perceiving and constructing their identities (ibid.).

Based on her study of EFL learners' perceptions of the most dominant contextual and socio-psychological factors that shaped the learners' self-identity and agency in their 'immediate environment', Huang (2013: 301-303) lists (1) students' perceptions of educator-student role relationships (students expected educators to take a leading role in their learning, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of self-direction in EFL education); (2) learner motivation; (3) both linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties; and (4) subcultures such as institutional culture, pragmatic discourse, and limited educator autonomy. To elaborate on the notion of subcultures present in higher education, Huang (2013: 251-252) highlights their importance in terms of identifying and understanding the specifics of higher education institutions as the environment wherein foreign language learners interact with the various structures it entails. According to Huang (2013: 252), this can provide valuable insights into the ways how contextual factors may influence the expression of learner agency and the fostering of learner autonomy in foreign language acquisition. Accordingly, the scholar (ibid.: 325) mentions the following subcultures, which are also referred to as common components 'of the immediate context' in higher education: students themselves, educators, administration, discourses, organization of educational processes, the 'overall learning environment'. Later on, when discussing the identified subcultures in the priorly mentioned longitudinal research of EFL and TEFL students in a Chinese university (Huang, 2013: 305), other subcultures are added: examination culture (focus on preparing for high-stakes external exams), pragmatic institutional discourse (prioritizing exam pass rates, post-graduation employment, and student stability, while only superficially promoting learner-centeredness and independence), restricted professional freedom of educators, authoritarian and poorly managed routine teaching

administration (which students perceived as a lack of respect for their rights as learners), as well as increased political awareness and action of students (in response to perceived poor teaching and administration) (ibid.).

Huang (2013: 325) notes that such subcultures can have 'different configuration[s]' in different institutions and therefore the nature of the interaction is not universal in all institutions of higher education and can be subject to continuous change. Nevertheless, it is added that the environment of higher education more often than not entails the presence of and a conflict between the institutional pragmatic discourse – the values, assumptions, and expectations driving the institution's focus on external exams, graduate employment rates as well as rigorous university evaluations, and the more learner-centred pro-autonomy discourse (ibid.: 88, 90), which promotes the exercise of learners' identity, agency and their learner agendas.

Discourses are established methods by which specific groups in society utilize language, imagery, and other forms of representation to communicate their narratives through the selection of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and other linguistic characteristics commonly employed by that group (Stibbe, 2015: 22-23). However, Huang (2013: 90) claims that even when certain educational institutions advocate for the pro-autonomy discourse, most often it is done so only 'at the level of lip service in the particular institutional context' (ibid.: 90). Interestingly, the institutional pragmatic discourse does not necessarily always evoke resistance from learners; instead, this discourse appears to unify the administration, teachers, and students around a shared objective (ibid.: 88). In fact, in the case of Huang's (2013) study of the EFL and TEFL learners, the success of student agency was heavily influenced by the pragmatic discourse valued by both the students and educators as well as the administration (ibid.: 311). As a result, the acquisition of EFL in the university context involved a complex interplay between the agendas and agency of all the involved parties over time.

Huang (2013: 312) refers to (1) learners; (2) educators; and (3) institution as the 'multiple concerned agents' in the ecology of higher education. Accordingly, the power dynamics between the administration, educators, and students entail shared control over the overall educational process (including assessment), with each party acting as an external control agent for the others (ibid.: 251), which exemplifies the posited ideas of dynamic systems theory (Ellis, 2007; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008; van Geert, 2008). As illustrated by Huang's (2013: 211-212) study of EFL and TEFL learners in university context, student control or self-control over learning may rely on a certain level of educator control or external control, which students generally view as both legitimate and necessary. Consequently, this raises the issue of educator and institutional readiness for fostering learner identity and agency in language education, as both play key roles as external controlling agents (ibid.: 212).

Learners' perceptions of their roles and capabilities are also influenced by the dynamic interaction between language and its functions, which Steffensen and Fill (2014: 16) refer to as the underlying structure of natural language. It can be best explained by the social functions that language has evolved to serve. Thus, language in higher education is shaped by what it needs to do to facilitate learning and communication (ibid.), and language learners as the participants of this interaction can themselves be regarded as dynamic subsystems within broader social systems (de Bot et al., 2007: 14, van Geert, 2008). Accordingly, learners possess cognitive ecosystems comprising various attributes like intentionality, cognition, intelligence, motivation, and linguistic abilities. These ecosystems, in turn, interact with external factors such as exposure to language, maturity, and education, forming a social ecosystem that influences and is influenced by the individual (ibid.). This continuous interaction highlights the constant flux that the internal and external subsystems shaping language learner's development are in (Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011: 38). This premise aligns with the perspective of dynamic systems theory (Ellis, 2007), which perceives language and language acquisition as an intricate and evolving system, wherein cognitive, social, and environmental elements are in constant interplay, leading to the emergence of creative communicative behaviours through socially coordinated interactions (ibid.: 23).

For new language learners, there are few universal linguistic foundations or clear endpoints. Instead, continual change and individual differences are prevalent. As posited by Stibbe (2015: 2-3), ecolinguistics can be instrumental in revealing and challenging the narratives that shape individuals' lives, while also aiding in the quest for new narratives. Relationships between causes and effects are complex, involving multiple interacting variables. For example, Huang's (2013: 303) study along with the research by Little, Ridley and Ushioda (2002) underscore the critical role of overall target language competence in promoting foreign language learners' agency and long-term autonomy in foreign language acquisition contexts.

As for the practical application of the discussed theoretical contributions, it can be proposed that by integrating the principles of ecolinguistics and dynamic systems theory, foreign language education can positively contribute to the elaborate, evolving nature of foreign language acquisition, fostering more effective and meaningful language acquisition. Language instructors should contemplate adopting flexible and adaptive teaching methods that consider the dynamic nature of language learning. This includes creating opportunities for learners to practice their language with their peers and the broader community, facilitating both cognitive and social development. Similarly, foreign language acquisition curricula can incorporate task-based activities that reflect real-world contextualized social interactions, allowing learners to engage in meaningful communication and thus helping learners develop their identities and agency

within the language learning environment. Evaluation methods should likewise recognize the dynamic and individual nature of language acquisition employing assessments that consider the learners' capacity to use language effectively in different contexts rather than focusing solely on rule-based assessments. Furthermore, as reinforced by Smith (2003: 255), in the long-term process of foreign language acquisition, it is essential to respect and continually address learners' comprehension, voices, concerns, and needs.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study was aimed at determining the roles of identity and agency in language acquisition within higher education. The reviewed prior research has shown that language learners' identities and agency are dynamically constructed and deeply intertwined with the sociocultural context of educational settings. The most significant finding to emerge from this paper is the critical role of these factors in enhancing language acquisition and learner engagement.

Accordingly, the findings suggest that, in addition to gaining a new skill, language acquisition generally entails the negotiation of identity and active agency within sociocultural contexts. The evidence from the cited studies suggests that integrating these insights into language education can result in more fruitful and motivating learning experiences. Thus, this paper extends the knowledge of foreign language acquisition as a sociocultural practice and provides a framework for educators to foster the development of language learners' identity and their sense of agency through the foreign language acquisition process. As worded by Huang (2013: 345), regardless of whether educational practices are weak or strong, educators should adopt an exploratory practice approach to understand learners' learning needs, expectations, goals, perceptions, and behaviours, as well as the overall learning context, before taking action. Moreover, educators should negotiate learning objectives, content, classroom participation, methodologies, and educator-student roles with learners as much as possible to help them 'find a voice' in their learning and empower them (Rowland 2011: 262; Huang, 2013: 345).

The main limitation of this paper, however, is the absence of extensive empirical validation, relying primarily on theoretical frameworks. Additionally, the focus on higher education limits the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings or informal learning environments. Therefore, it might be advisable that future research includes more empirical studies with diverse educational settings and learner populations to validate and extend the theoretical insights presented. Likewise, more longitudinal studies tracking learners' identity and agency over time would provide deeper insights into the dynamic nature of these constructs, while incorporating additional theoretical frameworks

and interdisciplinary approaches could also enhance the comprehensiveness of the research.

Moreover, further research is required to determine the efficacy of specific language teaching strategies that promote identity negotiation and learner agency in language education. More broadly, prospective studies should concentrate on understanding the long-erm effects of these strategies on language acquisition outcomes. Future studies could also investigate the role of technology in supporting identity and agency in language learning.

Last but not least, educational policies should recognize the significance of identity and agency in foreign language acquisition and support educational approaches that foster learner autonomy, inclusivity, and engagement. Greater efforts are needed to ensure that language curricula integrate socio-cultural content and provide professional development for educators to implement these strategies effectively.

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