

Learner agency and academic achievements in learning speaking at the tertiary level.

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Abstract

Learner agency, which is defined as “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 4) is argued to lay foundation for autonomy’s development and also self-regulation learning or strategic learning. This study which employed qualitative case study method is an insightful investigation into the exercise of learner agency of four second-year English majors who are classified as successful and less successful learners. This understanding has elucidated how those learners exercise their agency differently to take ownership of their learning. Findings revealed that the exercise of successful learners’ agency experienced continual development and adaptation to changes in the social context whereas that of less successful ones’ agency tended to be fluid and changeable. The study is valuable in shedding light on learners’ inner voice and contributing to the call of considering a learner as a holistic human being with learning histories, unique goals and ambitions, who is in interaction with the social context. This understanding can guide teachers and educators to effectively facilitate the strong exercise of learner agency in order to foster learner autonomy and strategic learning.

Introduction

The socio-cognitive perspective of SLA attributes differences between good learners and poorer learner to some variables such as motivation, attitude, aptitude, learning strategies but falls short of recognizing learners as complete human beings who have their social origins and histories, experiences and hopes as well as desires (Hamid & Baldauf, 2011). Recent developments in SLA including socio-cultural and socialization perspectives as well as educational, sociological and humanistic views of education call for a change in our understanding of language learners, language learning and learning success and failure. These views call for more socially and socio-culturally oriented investigations into learners and their language learning experiences and outcomes. This study’s aim is not to argue for the replacement of socio-cognitive perspective in second language acquisition but rather providing a different perspective in order to further illuminate the research phenomenon under investigation. This purpose is also in line with the argument advocated in Zuengler and Miller (2006) about the coexistence of socio-cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives on SLA.

In this case the concept of social agency is utilized to explain these differences from the social-cultural perspective. Learner agency is understood as individuals’ will and capacity to act (Gao, 2010) or “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn,

2001, p. 4). This concept can powerfully explain language learning outcomes for several reasons. First of all, it treats learners as social agents which have their own will and willingness to learn the language. Second, it takes the reciprocal relationship between individual and contextual factors into account in explaining language learning outcomes.

Agency and language learner agency

The increasing popularity of the concept can be attributed to many reasons in which the emergent interest in the “social turn” is clearly important (Block, 2003). From socio-cultural perspective, I will use the “provisional definition” suggested by Ahearn (2001) who argues that “agency refers to the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (p.112) as the fundamental definition to further adapt and make the concept of agency fine-tuned to the purpose of my research which focuses on language learner agency and speaking learning success and failure. This definition is also in agreement with argument of Lantolf and Thorne (2006) that “agency is never a property of a particular individual; rather it is a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large” (p. 238).

In a study by Mercer (2011), agency was reconceptualized in the light of complex theory. The research’s finding is that agency is “conceived of as the complex dynamic system with constituent components, motivation, affect and self-regulation as the controlling components of this learner’s agentic system” (p. 427). Regarding the question of when and how learner agency is exercised, Mercer (2011) affirmed that it depends on “learner’s sense of agency” or the “power” which can capture the capacity of human, the power to make choices of activities and to be determined to act upon it (Miller, 2010; Palfreyman & Smith, 2005). Obviously, human efforts and activities are more or less constrained by many external factors which can collectively or individually affect plans of action. However, it is the human power or human agency of controlling emotion, motivation and of struggling and overcoming any hurdles that leads one on the path to success (Miller, 2010). The energy source of power or “learner’s sense of agency” originates from the efficacy belief system (Bandura, 2001; Bown, 2009; Mercer, 2011). Bandura (2001) argued that the efficacy belief system is “the foundation of human agency”. Strong belief in one’s own ability can result in patience and endeavor to act in the hope that they can produce desired outcomes.

Agency and socio-cultural perspective

Zone of proximal development

From a socio-cultural perspective, key features of language learning are mediated learning and social interaction. Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995) argued that the language development of learners is accelerated thanks to “the transformation of innate capacities once they intertwine with socio- culturally - constructed mediational means” (p.109) but not the innate ability itself. This process is simply called mediated learning. Mediational means can come from teachers, peers and other more competent adults and/or material and symbolic artifacts such as books, technology and language.

This has been shown in the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) developed by Vygotskii & Cole (1978). Concerning second language acquisition, the definition of ZPD adopted by Ohta (1995) provides an assessment of the importance of social factors in scaffolding language learners and facilitating the activation of learner agency. This concept is redefined as:

".....the difference between the L2 learner's developmental level as determined by independent language use, and the higher level of potential development as determined by how language is used in collaboration with a more capable interlocutor" (Ohta, 1995, p. 96)

In this definition, the importance of social interaction or collaboration in language development is accentuated. The learner is not seen as a passive recipient of knowledge but a "participant in learning activities" (Kinginger, 2002, p. 242). The development of L2 level is "initiated and shaped by social interaction" (Villamil, 2000, p. 52). In that sense, context is seen as "the relationship between learners and more capable others" and agency is, the power to control learning and self-regulation" (Oxford, 2003).

Agency and activity theory

Activity theory explains the process of human activity formation. According to Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), activity theory emphasizes the roles of both the individual and the social context in which notions of subject and object are central in the activity formation process. In activity theory "the mind emerges as a special component of human interaction with the environment" (J. P. Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 237). In that sense, agency and activity theory bear a close interdependent relation.

Concerning the social context, in activity theory, the transformation of individual thoughts and mental concepts into behavior is mediated by symbolic artifacts and social relationships. This social relationship constitutes the community of practice, a group of individuals who come together for a shared purpose and who hold beliefs, values, and ways of talking in common (Wenger, 1998). According to Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), this community of practice can be "an entity as broad as a society or a culture" (p.148) or a language classroom. When they argue that "learning is mediated participation" (p.148), this idea is closely connected to the notion of ZPD in which assistance from others can bring about higher achievement than "independent language use". Participation into community of practice is considered to be significant for learner language development. This argument is in line with the assertion that L2 learning "is situated in the context of our lived experience of participation" (p. 104) in a community of practice (Block, 2003). Norton (2000) also emphasized that the level of participation can predict the level of success in L2 learning. The participation metaphor is argued to supplement traditional acquisition metaphor in viewing language development (Block, 2003, Norton & Toohey, 2001, Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001).

The level of participation, which is generally divided into peripheral and full participation, therefore, is decided by learner agency in negotiation with the social context. Full participation is the choice when learners fully engage into the community

of practice whereas peripheral participation is when learners choose to stand on the periphery or the margin (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Each learner's unique investment in the target language and the contextual conditions where they practice the language are important factors to investigate reasons for learners' choice in terms of the level of participation. Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) claimed that each human activity is goal-directed since "each learner has their own goals or motives for learning in the class" (p.148). These goals are directed by learners' history and learning experience as a second language learner. In other words, "learners may choose marginal participation in the target community because their histories do not justify an investment" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p.152).

However, full participation can be gained gradually. This process is called legitimate peripheral participation developed in situated learning by Wenger & Lave (1991). This movement can be traced back to the concepts of collaboration and co-construction included in ZDP in which the interaction between the newcomer and the more experienced community members is believed to be helpful. The investigation into the concept of imagined community can illuminate the exercise of learner agency in seeking and realizing that community or negotiating their identities to become a legal member of the real community. Kanno and Norton (2003) defined imagined community of practice as "groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination" (p. 241). The imagined community can be called a desirable community, a possible world or only the intangible one, the future dream which learners may not access to or still remain outsiders. This imagined community is constructed from learners' past experiences and from their expectations and hope for the future (Arkoudis & Davison, 2008; Norton, 2001). Therefore, the imagined community of learners is argued to impact the level of learners' investment into the real community of practice and their identity construction and the imagined community (Norton, 2001). In case there is a contradiction between learners/ imagined community of practice and the real one, learner may experience resistance. Katrina in Norton (2001) is one case in point. She refused to attend the ESL class because her teacher considered her as a deficient proficient English learner, an immigrant whereas she expected to belong to a professional community which she had access to when she was in her home country. In other situations, students may "increase their symbolic and material resources" (p. 113) or construct the "imagined identity" in order to gain access to the imagined community (Norton & Gao, 2008). As Kanno & Norton (2003) stated "they invest time and energy to strive for the realization of alternative visions of the future" (p.248). Therefore, in order to understand current mode of participation in a community, it is important to address their past lives and their expected future (Haneda, 2006). More importantly, this investigation can shed light on certain aspects of the exercise of learner agency.

The analysis of activity theory, central of which is the participation metaphor, shows that learner agency is one essential element, a launch pad for learner's investment into learning the target language and participation in the community of practice (the real or the imagined community). In that sense, learner agency is "shaped by

participation in specific communities of practice” (J. P. Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 239). Both of these factors are believed to constitute language learning success.

Agency and learner-centered approach

English language teaching in the past decades has witnessed a gradual movement in teaching pedagogy from teacher-centered approach to learner-centered approach (Tudor, 1996). Research into personal learning strategies, self-directions and learner autonomy are attempts to promote this approach or the active roles of learners in the learning- teaching aspect (Tudor, 1992). In a learner-centered approach, learners are supposed to be active participant who hold more responsible for their own learning and teachers are only facilitators of knowledge. It also accentuates the importance of the awareness of learners’ own goal which can lead to better learning (Baldauf & Moni, 2006). In that case when learners stand on the central role and autonomy is key component, learner agency should be taken into account since it is agency that enables learners to take initiatives and act upon their choices (Hunter & Cooke, 2007).

The study by Hunter & Cooke (2007) ignited the need to examine the complex relation between autonomy and agency with a view to fostering learner agency and developing autonomous learning in language learning. Hunter & Cooke (2007) sketched out a possible language course which is believed to give students power to “harness their agency” (p.78). Basic principles of this course were generated from a detailed and insightful exploration into learner agency in which students’ awareness and contact with the social factors are put more emphasis. The study by Huang (2011) also explored the role of agency and identity in autonomy development of Chinese students at tertiary level. Results indicated different levels of autonomy development among students who were in the same course and taught by the same teachers in a relatively homogeneous learning context in terms of linguistic, racial and cultural background. Data revealed that this difference in autonomy development originates from individual differences. It is their goals and histories of learning that produce the basic material for this capacity. It can be seen that “exercise of agency might lead to greater autonomy in the long term” (p. 242). Similarly, focusing on students’ use of self-regulatory strategies in self-instructed learning program, the study by Bown (2009) revealed that the awareness of learner’s own agency and the belief in themselves effectively exercising that agency can empower learners to effectively manage their own learning. The importance of learner agency in learner autonomy is confirmed in studies by Oxford (2003) and Toohey & Norton (2003). In Gao (2010), learners’ strategy use is mediated by both agency and context.

Learner agency has been exploited to challenge deficit views of second language learners which downplay their multiple identities, their complexity as social agents, their origins and impacts of social context (Huang, 2011; Lamb, 2007; McKay & Wong, 1996; Miller, 2010; Morita, 2004; Norton & Gao, 2008; Peirce, 1995). Research subjects are immigrant learners at work or in school context and of international students in English speaking countries

The close relation between learner agency and social structures was investigated among students in school context (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008; Wassell, LaVan, & Fernández Hawrylak, 2010). Flowerdew and Miller (2008) examined three life histories of engineering graduates in Hong Kong. The finding indicated the important role of social structures and learner agency in second language education and emphasized the significance of creative discursive agency which should be nurtured in order to encourage more investment from learners. The research urged for the changes in pedagogy such as the curricular material, assessment and so on. The study by Wassell, et al., (2010) has identified a number of classroom structures which can promote or limit individual agency of students in an ESL program at an urban high school in the U.S.A. Resources including space, and time, and a schema of caring created by teachers' practice should be encouraged whereas poor instructional practices can discouraged student's exercise of agency.

Regarding research into students in EFL context, there are very few studies which investigate learner agency, identity and language development. Some examples are studies into Chinese learners in mainland China and in Hong Kong reviewed in Norton & Gao (2008) or the study by Lamb (2007) into Indonesian junior high school students in Indonesia. There is a need to further explore this concept and examine its usefulness in facilitating language learning among EFL language learners. This study is expected to elucidate the relationship between the exercise of learner agency and success and failure of language learning and to contribute to explicating how language learners in EFL context exercise their agency under specific social conditions.

This research is grounded on socio-cultural perspective in which activity theory and the notion of ZPD are central. Palfreyman (2006) stated that learning not only takes place in an individual but rather in the connection with "a family, a class or another social grouping" (p.353). Drawing on the previously analyzed theories and concepts, the theoretical framework for this study includes three main constructs. The first one is learner agency which can be understood as the power to initiate activity, the belief to win challenges, the determination to seize opportunities to learn speaking in a deficient English speaking environment. In order to fully understand learner agency and how it is constructed, social biography which refers to learners' life histories with particular focus on family backgrounds and learning experience related to English learning needs to be investigated (Gillette, 1994; J. P. Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; McKay & Wong, 1996). The second construct is English speaking outcomes which are measured by students' grades in speaking skills. The third one is the social context in which social structures, i.e. human mediational tools like teachers, peers, and social relationships, influence the exercise of agency.

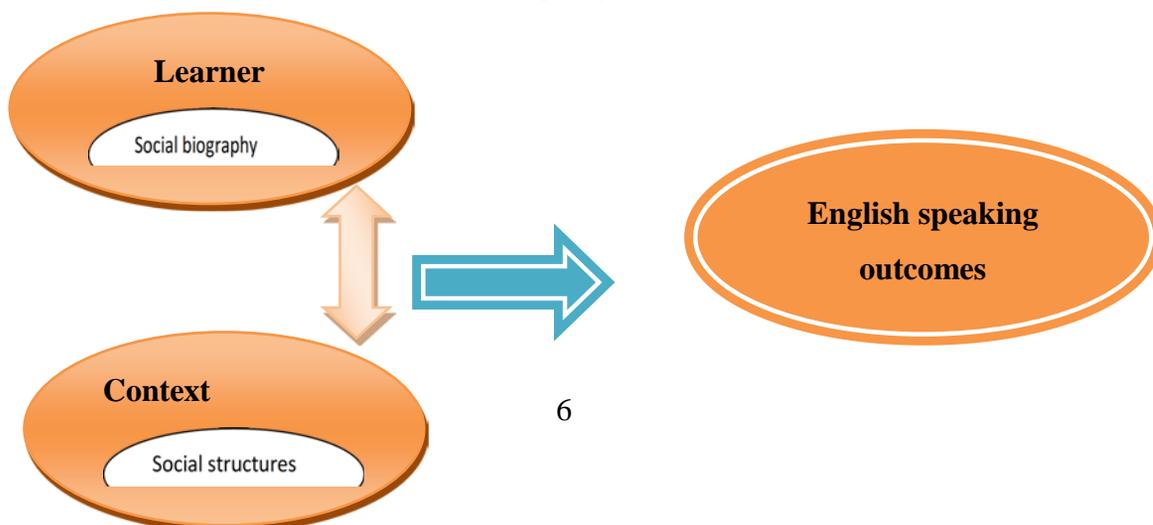


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

The present study is an attempt to address the relationship between agency and speaking learning outcomes and social structures. The *research questions* guiding the exploration of the relationships are as follows:

1. How do successful learners exercise their agency in learning speaking English at the tertiary level?
2. How do less successful learners exercise their agency in learning speaking English at the tertiary level?

Methodology

A qualitative case study method, which can provide “many rich insights into teaching and learning process” (Johnson, 1992, p. 99) was employed to achieve a holistic understanding of students’ exercise of agency under various social constraints in the context of the study in Vietnam. In addition, since the aim was to compare and contrast agency exercise by learners in relation to their learning outcomes, multiple case study method was adopted.

The study was conducted in English Department at Van Ha University in the capital city of Vietnam where English is used as a foreign language. English majors need to attend a two-year English intensive program in which the goal is to achieve upper-intermediate to advanced level in English so as to proceed to the specialized program in translation, interpreting and other English courses such as language theory, English literature and Cross-cultural Studies. The program is divided into five blocks i.e. speaking, listening, reading, writing and vocabulary, and pronunciation. In particular, speaking teaching syllabus follows communicative language teaching and task-based teaching approach. Speaking proficiency entails different aspects of speaking ability in which fluency, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary use, content and idea quality are important.

Participants

The research participants are second-year English majors in their fourth semester at English Department in Van Ha University in the capital city of Vietnam. At the time of the study they were studying in their fourth term in which the goal of speaking classes is to develop discussion and debate skills and to further enhance students’ speaking ability.

After a recruitment process, nine students were selected and divided into three groups. Two students are male and seven students are female. The first group (n=3) was labeled “high- proficiency” group who had scored 9 or above out of 10 in speaking skill in the previous semesters. The second group had “average-proficiency” who had achieved 7 or 8 out of 10. The last “low-proficiency” group had scored 5 or 6 out of 10. This classification of students into three groups based on their achievement was supposed to help elucidate the relationship between learner agency and levels of academic outcome.

Instruments

Data were collected during a three-week period in February 2012 by the researcher on campus of the university using three main instruments. First, semi-structured interviews, which lasted for roughly one hour, provided data about socio-biographies (related to their learning experiences and their family background). Second, the participants were observed in one or two 90-minute formal speaking lessons. This observation gave the researcher information about how students participated in class activities and interacted with their peers and their teachers. Third, focus group discussion lasting one and a half hour focused on their learning experience in university, their concerns about their study, and their relationships with peers and teachers.

The deductive content analysis was utilized, in which coded labels in initial coding were grouped into categories identified in the literature review (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). At the initial coding stage, key words and key features in interview transcripts were labeled line-by-line. Aspects of learner agency were then identified. These aspects were matched with categories identified in the literature review which are (1) students' family backgrounds and English learning experience at school, (2) students learning experience at university in relation to their self-study, community of practice, their goals or ambitions, their experience with teachers, peers and other people, and some other emerged issues in individual interviews and focus group discussion. Regarding field notes of classroom observation, students' behaviors in the class (i.e. their interactions with their teacher and peers) were used to further verify students' responses in interviews and focus group discussion.

Due to the scope of this article, I am going to report on only two case studies from four case studies in my master thesis. Three lines of evidences from the process of triangulation were converged in order to generate each case study (Yin, 2009, p. 116).

Findings

Successful student: Hoa

Hoa achieved high grades in speaking in the previous three semesters, i.e. 8.5/9/9 out of 10. Initial informal meeting with this student left the feeling that she is really an active and confident student with rather good speaking ability. She is classified as a high-achieving student.

Social background and previous learning experience

Hoa was born in a middle-class family in a province of the North-West mountainous area of Vietnam, which is far away from the capital city, where the average living standard is still very low. Her father is well-educated. Her sister is a fourth-year student who is an English major at a university in the capital city. Her parents always encourage her to study well in general. Since she was 15 years old, she has lived on her own in the dormitory of her high school and then the university which are very far away from home. Particularly, in the capital city, she shared her dormitory room with other five roommates in a quite small space of about 15 m². She has her own laptop and internet connection in the dormitory.

In addition, she had good education background. She went to a high school for high-performing students from all districts of the mountainous province. Hoa studied in an English specialized class where teaching followed grammar-translation method with no

listening and speaking component. It is her sister who encouraged her to learn English and then the love for English from English songs that made her decide to choose English as her major. She called it “the destiny of my life”.

Hoa has both advantages and disadvantages to pursue her university education in the capital city. First, her family is supportive. She had a good education background. However, her social origin which is from a mountainous province and her life conditions may pose some certain challenges for her life and study in a new and big city.

Aspects of learner agency

Initial difficulties and inspiration to learn English well

Her desire to learn English originated from love for English song and her sister’s encouragement. She is especially interested in speaking skill which she was not taught at high school. Her motivation came from her desire to be on top. If she ranked behind someone in learning results, she would feel miserable and unacceptable. Her dad is her model, a big motivation for her.

My dad is very good learner, he studied very well. I admired him very much. He is my model. I want to learn as best as possible....and I don’t want him to disappoint at me.

I was shocked, coz the way to learn thing...it’s hard to change our habit. I was very shocked. realized that my pronunciation was very bad... Some students in my class spoke very good...very well. I feel that I can’t...I don’t want to be lagged behind, I just want to pass the challenge and become a good speaker.

(Individual interview)

In the focus group discussion, she emphasized the importance of students in learning success such as their own motivation and their determination though in her opinion, teachers’ encouragement and supports are essential.

I think that teachers have made effort to create more speaking opportunities and learning activities for students..... the important role comes from students themselves. It is hard if students don’t have their own motivation, and don’t want to join the community. It is due to the self of each student.

(Translation from Vietnamese in focus group discussion)

Some of my classmates often raised questions like “Why am I that bad?” but they don’t put the question ‘what need be done to be as good as others?’. They are just so pessimistic.”

(Translation from Vietnamese in focus group discussion)

Hoa demonstrated her strong desire and motivation to learn English well. She expressed her strong belief in the role of the self of each student in exercising their agency when confronting learning difficulties.

Development of self-study skills

In the interview and focus group discussion, she iterated the importance of practice and emphasized how much she had tried to practice as much as possible.

In the first semester, I practice more at home. I watch some movies and video, how they speak and tried to follow them.

We tried to practice as much as possible before the exam.

Practice many times. Practice many times at homes.

(Individual interview)

At university, students have to study by themselves with more demanding requirement so I try to seize speaking opportunities in the class. And I also spend a lot of time practicing speaking on my own.

(Translation from Vietnamese in focus group discussion)

It can be explained that her full awareness of the role of practice in speaking helped her retain the practicing habit. When Hoa recognized her weak points, she made effort to improve it by more practice.

I think my vocabulary is not good. I tried to practice.

I am not really satisfied with my speaking in term 1. I tried more in term 2.

(Individual interview)

She knows how to balance between learning and entertainment to remain inspired and motivated in learning. She has no certain schedule but only try to practice as much as possible. Hoa exercised her agency in her effort to self-study and maintain balance between her life and her learning so that she can be motivated and inspired to study effectively.

Seeking opportunities in community of practice and support from others.

There is a high consistency between Hoa's sharing in interviews and her participation in the class through observation. The observation field note revealed that she took initiative to speak in group work as well as in whole class activities (see Appendix B for more details). She acknowledged that she always tried to seize every opportunity to speak in the class and get support from teachers and peers. She explained that there were two reasons why she tried to participate actively in the class. First she did not have any opportunities to practice English outside the university since she is quite shy. Second, she did not have sufficient time for studying English since she did the second major for a dual bachelor degree.

I'm quite shy so I can't talk to foreigner, I go out with my friends to Sword Lake where there are a lot of foreigners but I can't talk with them. I just only study at home. I usually learn by myself. I only come to the class and talked with my friends

(Individual interview)

It should be noted that the second major also brought her a chance to practice speaking more in a different community of practice and she was willing to take it.

I don't have much time to do other things. I just can practice speaking in my second major. My listening is worse. ...But speaking has improved. I take any opportunity to speak in the class.

(Individual interview)

She agreed with Dieu (one participant, a successful learner) about the idea of inviting native speakers to English club in order for students to have more opportunities to practice English. One example she gave is one time the native teacher in the department invited some of his friends to her class. She said that she did notice a big gap between native speakers' speaking style and that of our students in speaking and the limit of

speaking English of students in the department. She preferred to have more exposure with native speakers.

Hoa has one group of close classmates, who usually learn and support each other in everyday learning activities, exams or assignments.

In summary, recognizing her own limitation, Hoa herself found solution which was to take full advantage of the available class community of practice despite some time constraints and other obstacles. It can explain for her full participation in class activities both in English Department and Faculty of Banking and Finance. In addition, close friendship that she has established with classmates is truly a small community of practice where she can receive constant scaffolding. Solutions implemented by Hoa are strong evidence for her exercise of agency.

Less successful students: Hai Anh

Hai Anh achieved 6.5/ 6.5 and 8 in speaking skill in the previous three semesters. From class observation, she demonstrated that she is a rather quiet and passive student. Based on her academic achievement, she is classified as a low achieving student.

Social background and school English learning experience

She lives with her parents in a farming family in a suburb near the capital city. It is a two-hour travel by bus from her house to the university. At the end of semester 2 in the university, she got a new laptop and her house had internet and satellite TV installed. Her parents are farmers who do not know much about her study. They advise her to study well and support her financially. She was unhappy with English learning at school because teachers were not qualified and not enthusiastic. She focused on only grammar, reading and vocabulary so as to get good mark in the university entrance exam since she chose English as her major. She did not have any other exposure to authentic English. Moreover, she learned English because she thought it was popular and trendy.

My aim was to pass the university entrance exam. I had no idea or intention of learning English deeply something like listening, speaking, or writing. I didn't have good condition to learn.

I wanted to study for the entrance exam and English is popular.

(Translation from Vietnamese in individual interview)

She was at some disadvantages which may inhibit her study at the university. One typical disadvantage she emphasized in the interview is about the exhausting journey she had to make from her house to the university every day. Another disadvantage is that she had limited understanding of English learning strategies.

Initial difficulties and solutions

She was frustrated and confused when she started her study in the university where English is the main medium instruction. She indicated that she felt disappointed at her learning outcomes and got discouraged. She also expressed that self-study was important to learning at tertiary level. However, her practice, in her opinion, is still limited.

I felt tired and bored. I did not know what to learn and how to learn.

I am not good at vocabulary. I learnt in the class and reviewed them at home. Then I tried to practice but not much and not frequently.

(Translation from Vietnamese in individual interview)

She explained that the discouraged feeling and limited practice were caused by some contextual constraints. First, in term 1 and 2, she said that she was affected by personal family problems. The observation revealed that she was rather quiet and passive in class activities. Besides that, she also shared she does not have any close friends or group in the class who constantly support each other in learning. Outside the classroom, she does not have any opportunities to practice whereas self-study at home was already restricted.

I worked in group only when being assigned by teachers for practice before exams. I intended to attend English club of English department but I couldn't come. My friends also joined that English club several times and then quit because they felt unconfident when their senior students are so excellent.

(Translation from Vietnamese in individual interview)

It can be seen that Hai Anh did not seek any kind of support from more capable persons like teachers or peers. She did not seek any community of practice. She herself was often depressed and did not take any initiative though she did have the intention and want to learn English well. She did not exercise her agency under those contextual constraints.

Interviewer: Did you know about any English clubs? Voice of Hanu?

Student: no, I didn't know that. I didn't go. My class is not exciting about that. If I have better conditions, I will go. If I did not live in the suburb, I would go out and get chance to talk. The reality is that I don't know street directions and don't have any companions." *Interviewer:* why don't you rent a room near the university?

Student: my parents don't allow me to move out though I did try to ask them. It takes me 2 hours to travel by bus. When arriving home, I always feel exhausted because the bus is always crowded and the traffic is always stuck at rush hour.

(Translation from Vietnamese in individual interview)

Term 3 witnessed some certain improvements in her study. In presentation class, students are required to give group presentation almost every week and work in one group during the entire 20 week semester so she had a small group of practice.

I practice speaking a lot in group because I want to improve and also I have to present in the class. ...This group work practice encouraged me to practice more at home. I tried to improve my fluency and pronunciation. I practiced a lot even until my throat got dry since I had to present it in the class.

(Translation from Vietnamese in individual interview)

She wanted to make improvement after having low grades in the previous two terms.

After term 2, I thought I had to make much more effort. I really want to improve since my marks were quite low compared to other classmates.

(Translation from Vietnamese in individual interview)

It should be noted that she followed her friends' advice about how to deal with family problems and did not let it affect her study. Additionally, her listening practice also increased remarkably since she really wanted to speak English like famous persons to

give good presentations. In term 3, she was more motivated to study. She expressed her will to make more improvement and achieved higher academic results

In term 3, I watched English program a lot. I also listened a lot.

I think that though I made some improvements, they are not remarkable.

I am not satisfied though my grade of term 3 is not low. I want to get higher grades.

(Translation from Vietnamese in individual interview)

In term 3, she was also inspired by *her teacher* who has exerted great effort to overcome life difficulties and become a great English speaker.

In summary, it can be seen that social constraints have impacted Hai Anh's agency, at least the way she perceived it. When confronting initial challenges of learning at university like other freshmen, Hai Anh did not exercise her agency to overcome them. The fact is that she did not exert herself to seek any solutions to her problems. However, Hai Anh experienced positive changes in Term 3. She started to exercise her agency by making efforts to control her emotional problems and do more practice. This exercise of agency is promoted thanks to changes in class teaching approach and that she got used to learning and teaching method in the university.

Discussion

Analysis of two cases revealed a number of significant findings related to how learners exercised their agency and how social structures influenced on learner agency from learners' voice. First, regarding social background and learning histories, students who have good social background are more successful in language learning. The successful learner has positive learning experience as good learners at high school for high-performing students. On the other hand, the less successful student has a number of disadvantages regarding their social background. Second, a number of patterns or aspects of learner agency of successful language learners have been identified, which are closely related to learners' self-study, strategies use, seeking community of practice, seeking support from peers and teachers and desire and inspirations to learn language. Whereas the successful learner can seek community of practice and fully participate in those communities, the less successful learner encountered some difficulties in joining the available communities in the class and the university and did not look for other community. Successful learners can actively seek support from peers, teachers and others with a view to improving their English. By ways of contrasts, less successful learners seem to be isolated and passive. Concerning the influence of social structures on learner agency, successful learners emphasized the central role of the self over impacts of social structures, while less successful learners perceived that their learning was negatively affected by some social structures.

Hoa's past learning experience in which speaking and listening learning were absent can explain for the feeling of frustration and confusion she experienced in the first semester in the university. On the contrary, instead of choosing the marginal participation like Hai Anh, her agency was expressed in her active participation and investment in her learning. One possible reason for this difference is their strikingly different goals and motives. While Hai Anh did not have clear career goals, Hoa showed her determination to achieve a high level of English and pursue a career of an interpreter. This has been demonstrated in activity theory in which "each learner has

their own goals or motives for learning in the class”(J. P. Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148), thereby developing different levels of participation and investment.

The exercise of agency of less successful learners revealed that the learner’s sense of agency was fluid and changeable over time, dependent of “belief system, and the control parameters of motivation, affect” and “actual ability” in specific contexts (Mercer, 2011, p. 435). In case of Hai Anh, the sense of her agency has increased in Term 3, which was demonstrated in her initial movement from peripheral participation to full participation in the CoP of her class. For another successful learner, her agency experienced continual development and adaptation to changes in the social context. This result has further supported the finding of Mercer (2011) about the complex and dynamic nature of learner agency.

Data analysis indicated that self-study skills and learning responsibility are important aspects in learner agency of these student participants. Their presence in aspects of learner agency, to some extent, affirmed the close connection between *autonomous learning and learner agency*. The result of this study proved the potential of learner agency in developing autonomous learning and learner-centered approach in the learning curriculum of English Department in this university. Nonetheless, since the issue of whether learner agency facilitates and promotes autonomous learning and vice versa elucidated in other research such as Bown (2009), Gao (2010), Huang (2011), Oxford (2003), and Toohey & Norton (2003) is still inconclusive, it is important to further examine this reciprocal relationship.

The data revealed a popular *concern of both groups of students about the lack of an English community of practice* where they can communicate with other learners and with native speakers. This concern has been heard elsewhere in studies conducted in EFL context where practice in target language community is limited (Norton & Gao, 2008). However, van, Lier (2004) argued that this participation in CoP of target language can be “facilitated or hindered in both a foreign language and a second language setting” (p. 122). Many studies discussed earlier in the literature showed that living in one English-speaking countries did not guarantee access and participation to the target language CoP (McKay & Wong, 1996; J. Miller, 1999; Peirce, 1995). He added that the technology advancement such as internet, media can give learners access to this community of practice.

Implications

The study provided an account of how successful learners and less successful learners exercised their agency in learning speaking during the first three semesters at tertiary level. These insights can provide teachers and educators a number of pedagogical implications. These changes are hoped to effectively promote learner agency and thereby enhancing students’ speaking proficiency.

First, it can be seen that learners have different speaking levels and past learning experiences and social background although they study in the one community with the same teachers and curriculum. First and foremost, teachers need to have a better understanding of different aspects of students such as their learning styles, past learning experience, their goals and motives. Therefore, students’ investment and participation in

the class CoP especially in mixed-level classes can be properly grasped by teachers. In particular, teachers may be more sympathetic with students about their difficulties and their limitation in class participation so as to be more supportive. As Flowerdew and Miller (2008) recommended, this understanding will support teachers to nurture learner agency and encourage them to exercise their agency.

Second, teachers should apply teaching approaches which can give students equal access to the curriculum as well as equal participation in the class community (Morita, 2004). The question is what kind of teaching approach and what kind of community of practice can fulfill that requirement (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). For the case studies in this research, with less successful students whose background knowledge is quite limited, more direct support from teachers and other more capable peers would be expected to be helpful. The goal is to encourage students to participate in their community of practice and make them feel comfortable and safe since this practice is promising to help learners study effectively.

Other important implication is that the learner-centered approach should be applied to give learner opportunities to exercise their agency and give them more power to make their learning decision (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008). This, in turn, “might lead to greater autonomy in the long term” (Huang, 2011, p. 242). This approach mentioned in data analysis was highly appreciated by the successful students.

Last but not least, extra practice activities beyond the classroom border should be advocated to support learners in further practice their skills. One possible way is that teachers may organize group extra-curricular activities by scaffolding students to use English in some specific contexts. The other way is that teachers can give students recommendations or instructions about how to create or seize opportunities for social relationship with other English learners and native speakers. Teachers’ encouragement and extra supports are of significant value for learners to go and seek those opportunities and community of practice. Social activities in English clubs and non-profit organizations are some examples.

Limitations and direction for future research

The study has two major limitations which pertain to the research methodology. First, due to time constraints, data were not collected over a long period of time to have a comprehensive understanding of learner agency. Relying on one individual interview and one focus group discussion to have data about learners’ social-biographies and their speaking learning experience during three semesters learning speaking in the university seems to be overambitious. Therefore, further study into learner agency should be conducted using longitudinal method. Second, admittedly, findings in the study utilizing the case study qualitative method cannot be generalized.

This study investigated agency of one specific group learners of English majors who generally have good competence of English. Therefore, it is important to do research in other groups of non-English majors, who may bear more disadvantages in language learning. In addition, further research need to be conducted in the area of the exercise of learner agency in the virtual community of practice utilized cyberspace such as Facebook, Twitter.

Appendix A
Focus group discussion (2nd, March, 2012)

I. Introduction: before we begin our discussion, it will be helpful for us to get acquainted with each other. Let's begin with some comments about ourselves.

Some notes before our discussion:

- You should know that we are tape recording the session so that I can refer back to the discussion.
- Do speak up and let's try to have just one person speak at a time. When one finishes, you can take your chance to speak or challenge your friends. I will try to assure that everyone gets a turn. Each time, please briefly express your opinions.
- Say exactly what you think, don't worry about what I think or what your friends think. We are here to exchange our opinions and have fun while we do it.

II. Questions:

1. Can you recall the biggest problem that you have encountered while you're learning speaking in English department? Do you have any experience of feeling that you have solved such big problems? How did you feel at that time?
2. Do you think of planning and monitoring your learning progress? How important is it? Do you think that your English learning is well-organized? What would you do differently if you could turn back time?
3. What do you think of learning environment in English department in terms of speaking? What kind of changes do you expect from your teachers or the lessons, which hopefully support you more in learning to speaking English? Why do you think so?
4. Do you frequently seek help from your friends when you're in trouble in learning? Do you think that your peers can help you considerably in improving your speaking ability? Why (not) ? Do have any intention of strengthening your friendship and work out any learning plan?
5. In your individual interview, I realized a positive correlation between exam and practice. How does exam affect your learning? (time, strategies, efforts)? Voluntary learning is learning with little coercion and more with external encouragement. What is more important in boosting your English speaking level? Why?
6. What are characteristics of a good language learner?

Appendix B

Observation notes

Case 4. Hai Anh. Speaking lesson: role play In general, she acted quite passively in the class.

1. Interaction with teachers: not much
 - Just listen
 - Teacher gave feedback, gave more instructions.
 - T prolonged the discussion
2. Interaction with peers:
 - She did try to speak.
 - She sometimes misunderstood her partner and vice versa. However, she did make effort to explain.
 - Other activity: slow

Case 2. Hoa. Speaking lesson: focus on team work development.

1. **Activity 1:** discussion to prepare game activities.
 - Interaction with members: leader, always contribute ideas, ask for further details from members' ideas, critic other ideas.
 - Interaction with teachers: take initiatives in answering T's questions, try to understand T's requirements for the task.
2. **Act 2:** whole class contest crossword.
 - She quickly guessed correctly the word in vertical line.
 - She was very excited to be the winner.
 - She was willing to support her mates and fast react to questions.
3. **Act 3:** her team's turn to instruct the class.
 - She actively explained to her mates and instructed them to play.
 - She moved around and show great confidence in her body language and manner.
4. **Act 4:** evaluation teamwork.
 - She started first and led the discussion.
5. **Act 5:** cross-cultural communication:
 - She read situations silently and individually for a while.
 - She seemed not interested in the topic and kept silent while others were discussing.
6. **After class:** she gathered her team members and assigned tasks and deadline to each member.

Appendix C

Individual Interview questions

In-depth interview: you will be asked questions about your learning experience

a. Background: learning history before university time

1. When and how did you start learning English? How about speaking?
2. Why do you want to learn English? Do you have any specific motivation? Does anyone influence your study? How? Any memorable people or event?
3. Tell me more about your family background, your learning environment

b. Goals: do you have any dreams or goals, short-term or long-term? Would u mind sharing it with me? What do you do to remind you pursuing that dream?

c. University study: Let's recall your learning experience in the first four terms .

1. What are very first difficulties you encountered in learning speaking ? How did you overcome it? Can you describe that period of time? what did you do? How did you feel? Did any one around help you to work out solutions? (teachers or friends)

At the end of term 1, how do you evaluate your speaking proficiency?

2. What about Term 2, Term 3 & 4: presentation skills?

3. Do you think how useful speaking lessons in the uni in helping you improve your English speaking? Can you give me more details? What do you think about teachers' role? What do you think about your group work and group members?

4. Generally, how did you arrange time to practice speaking skills? How long and how often?

5. How do you learn speaking English outside the class? Do you practice with any peer? What material do you often use?

6. Do you have any opportunities to practice speaking outside the class? What are they? How did you get them?

7. Do you consider yourself a good language learner? Why or why not?

8. Can you share any techniques, strategies or material?

9. Have you ever felt bored with learning speaking? If yes, why? What do you do to overcome that feeling?

10. How best to learn to speak a language?

Appendix D: Samples of coding data on interview transcript

<p>Can you tell me about your family and learning environment at home?</p>		
<p>I live with my parents and my younger brother who is 3 years younger than me. I am very luck to have well-educated family. My grand parent can speak 3 languages. My parents really care about my education. They help me to have good learning environment. I have my own room with quiet environment. My room is well- equipped with TV with cable channels, computer, radio.</p>		
<p>Do your parents support your study?</p>		
<p>Since I went to my secondary school, my parents haven't helped me study but I always self-study. When I know good teachers or classes, I would ask them permission to attend that class. In my cousin's family, his mother always look for good extra-learning classes.</p>	<p>Self-study. Be responsible for her study.</p>	<p>1</p>
<p>When and how did you start learning English?</p>		
<p>I learn alphabet, English for fun at kindergarten. I did not learn much at primary school with low marks. I started learning seriously at grade 6. At the very beginning, my English was very bad. I was shy and always turned my head down. I don't know how to express my feeling and thought though I really want to but I don't have enough vocabulary. My marks were very low compared to those of other subjects. That's why I want to make progress or some changes for my English. At grade 7th, I borrowed English grammar in use from my cousin, a very good English learner who had a lot of books. I set half an hour at night to study English every day. Until a time that I realize that my pronunciation is better, I feel very happy. I practice more and more. At high school, I can speak in English though I sometimes felt shy and blushed.</p>	<p>Desire to express herself Desire to get high marks. Self-study and discipline. Initial success lead to more motivation/ more practice.</p>	<p>2 1 2 (success and motivation)</p>
<p>How did you have exposure to English speaking?</p>		
<p>Because when I was at high school, I noticed a very famous talk show by oprah whinfrey. That's my favourite talk show forever and I watched them every single days. I tried to watch it twice a day. I really fall in love with Oprah show. That's how I live in English environment for 1 hour per day.</p>	<p>Hobby. Love the language.</p>	<p>2(motivation)</p>
<p>How about at school?</p>		
<p>We just focus on grammar. I studied at chu van an school, I specialized in literature. Studying at school is just something for fun. We did grammar test, had limited time for speaking. We had helpful period when we had two teachers from London, who taught us for 3 months, once or twice per week. That is the first time we had exposure to real English from native speaker.</p>	<p>Good background: good at literature. Have exposure to authentic English at high school. <i>It's a big advantage.</i></p>	<p>Social biography</p>

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