



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

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# Outline

1. Rationale
2. Research questions
3. Literature review
4. Methodology
5. Data analysis and findings
6. Discussion & conclusion

# Rationale (1): Context

1. Context: EFL environment.
2. English department, Hanoi University.  
Language skill program's goal:  
Students get level C1 ( CEFR)
3. Speaking skill development is one big concern.

# Rationale (2) Motivation

## 1. Situation:

- English majors: Grammar-based entrance exam test (no speaking assessment)
- Speaking level: mixed-level

## 2. Explanation: SLA

- Socio- cognitive traditional view: individual differences (Dornyei, 2006)
- Socio-cultural and social view: a complete human being with different experience, background, goals and social relationships. (Mercer, 2011, Block, 2003)

The coexistence of socio-cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives on SLA ???



# Research questions

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?

# Literature review

1. Agency & language learner agency

2. Agency & socio-cultural perspective

3. Agency & activities theory

4. Agency & learner-centered approach

# Literature review (1): language learner agency

- Being an individual's will and capacity to act (Gao, 2010)
- “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 4).
- “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” (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006, p. 238).

# Literature review (1): language learner agency

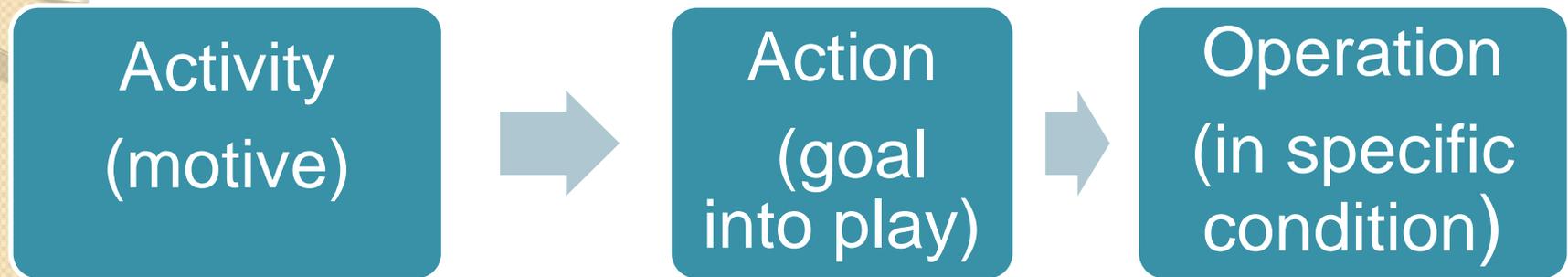
The exercise of agency depends on “Learner’s sense of agency” or the “power” to act upon it. (Mercer, 2011, Miller, 2010; Palfreyman & Smith, 2005)

Efficacy belief system is considered to be the foundation of human agency or the energy source of power. ([Bandura, 2001](#), [Mercer, 2011](#))

## Literature review (2): *Agency and socio-cultural perspective*

- Zone of proximal development (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.
- The development of L2 level is “initiated and shaped by social interaction” (Villamil, 2000, p. 52).
- 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)

# Literature review (3): Agency & Second language activity theory



(Block, 2003 p. 101)

“the history of human beings, either as individuals, societies, cultures or as a species, and of the activities” explain mental concept of activities or development of different agencies .

(Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001: p144, Gillette 1994 as cited in Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001, McKay and Wong, 1996)

# Literature review (3): Agency & Second language activity theory

- **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).
- **The imagined community** is constructed from learners' past experiences and from their expectations and hope for the future (Arkoudis & Davison, 2008; Norton, 2001).

# Literature review (3): Agency & Second language activity theory

- “learners may choose **marginal participation** in the target community because their **histories** do not justify an investment” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p.152).
- **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).
- **the level of participation** can predict the level of success in L2 learning (Norton, 2000).

# Literature review (4): Agency & Second language activity theory

- Agency “is socially and historically constructed”.

(Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001. p.146)

(Hunter & Cooke, 2007)

- Agency “is shaped by participation in specific communities of practice”.

(Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p.239)

## Literature review (3) *Agency and learner-centered approach*

- It also accentuates the importance of the awareness of learners' own goal which can lead to better learning (Baldauf & Moni, 2006).
- 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).

## Literature review (4): *Agency & learner-centered approach*

- Agency is argued to lay foundation for autonomy's development and also self-regulation learning or strategic learning. (Benson, 2007; Huang, 2011; Oxford, 2003; Toohey & Norton, 2003; Bown, 2009)
- Fostering autonomy or self-regulated learning requires more investigation into agency. (Mercer, 2011)

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The present study is an attempt to address the relationship between agency and speaking learning outcomes and social structures.

# Research methodology (1)

## Participants

- 9 second-year English majors in their fourth semester at English Department, Hanoi University.
- Age: 19-20
- Proficiency: classified in three groups based on academic results in final-term speaking tests.
  - High English proficiency (get high-distinction)
  - Average English proficiency (get distinction)
  - Low English proficiency: speaking (get credit)

# Research methodology (2)

## Data collection instruments

Data collected: 3 weeks' time.

1. Semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews (roughly 1 hour)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learning experience (at school and at university related to social agents....)</li><li>• Family background</li></ul>
2. Observation notes: (1-2 90 minute speaking lessons)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students participation in class.</li></ul>
3. Focus group interview (1hour and a half)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Deeper insights into learner agency and social structures impact through interaction among students.</li></ul>

# Research methodology (3)

## Data analysis:

### Qualitative content analysis:

1. Narrative enquiry: 4 case studies
  - Family background
  - Learning experience
2. Textual data transcription: social structures impact
  - Coding: put answers under different impact categories.

# Data analysis and findings (1)

## *Successful student: Hoa*

Although her family is supportive, and she had a good education background, 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.

- Hoa demonstrated her strong desire and motivation to learn English well.
- Hoa exercised her agency in her effort to self-study and maintain balance between her life and her learning so she can be inspired to study.
- Hoa took full advantage of the available class community of practice despite some problems she encountered.

# Data analysis and findings (2)

*Less successful students: Hai Anh*

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

- 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 started to exercise her agency by making efforts to control her emotional problems and do more practice after one year in the university.

# Discussion & conclusion

1. Less successful students proved to have fluid and changeable learner' sense of agency. For successful learner, her agency experienced continual development and adaptation to changes in the social context.
2. Successful learners emphasized the central role of the self over impacts of social structures, while less successful learners tended to blame social structures for their negative learning experience.
3. 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*.

# Implications

1. Provide teachers and institutions pedagogical changes to promote learner agency.
2. Facilitate the development of self-regulated learning or autonomous learning.

# Limitations & Future research

## *Limitations:*

- Case study: data collected over a short period of time.
- Proficiency classification's validity is low due to the mismatch between real proficiency and academic achievements.

## *Future research:*

- Agency investigation into non-English majors.
- Agency investigation in the virtual community of practice.

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Thanks for your attention

