Autonomy, Agency and Identity in Foreign and Second Language Education

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Abstract

This paper reviews key constructs explored in this special issue of *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, including autonomy, agency and identity in foreign/second language education. We first explore and compare, in relatively greater depth, the complex meanings of the two similar concepts of autonomy and agency. In discussing autonomy, we start with an analysis of the meaning of *capacity* and *control* in Benson's (2011) broad definition of autonomy as a *capacity* to take *control* of one's own learning, and briefly look at related issues of learner agendas and affordances. Based on a close scrutiny of the concept of agency, we propose that autonomy and agency are best treated as distinct concepts in terms of the degree of effective control over the learning-teaching process. Following a close examination of the two similar concepts of autonomy and agency, we discuss the concept of identity and finally the interrelatedness among these major concepts of autonomy, agency, and identity in language education.

Key words: autonomy; agency; identity; affordances; learner agendas

1. Introduction

Although autonomy is now regarded as a desirable educational goal in many parts of the world, it is a complex idea in both research and practice. Meanwhile, discussion of autonomy has often associated it with concepts of agency, identity, affordance and learner-teacher agendas (Benson, 2007a, 2010, 2011; Cotterall & Murray, 2009; Gao, 2010; Huang, 2006a, 2009, 2010, 2011; Murray, Gao & Lamb, 2011; van Lier, 2008). Among all

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these autonomy-related concepts, agency is perhaps the most difficult one to define and some researchers simply use the two terms interchangeably (Toohey, 2007; Toohey & Norton, 2003). In this article, we first explore and compare the meanings of the notions of autonomy and agency. We then discuss identity in foreign and second language education and its links with autonomy and agency.

2. Autonomy

This section is largely based on ideas developed in Benson (2011) which discusses the theory and practice of autonomy in language teaching and learning at length; it also incorporates points made in Benson (2013) which tackles the frequently-asked question in different parts of the world of how we can make the theory of autonomy work "here" ("here" being wherever you and I live and work).

2.1 What is autonomy?

Autonomy is first of all a philosophical concept concerned with the relationship of the individual to society. Its origins lie in an ancient Greek word that referred to the right of conquered cities to maintain their own laws, which has been extended to refer to the rights of individuals. The idea of autonomy in learning has deep roots in both Western and Eastern thought, as the quotations from Zhu Xi and Galileo below suggest:

> *If you are in doubt, think it out by yourself. Do not depend on others for explanations. Suppose there was no one you could ask, should you stop learning?* Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200)
> You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)

Building upon Holec's (1981) definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3), Benson (2011, p. 58) proposes that autonomy can be best defined as a capacity to control one's own learning. The difference between the two definitions lies in the use of "capacity" rather than "ability (which reflects Holec's usage in other contexts), and the use of "control", rather than "take charge". "Control" is preferred largely because it links the theory of autonomy to other areas of language learning theory that deal with control. Little (1991) states that autonomy "can take numerous different forms" and "manifest itself in very different ways" (p. 4). This means that different definitions of autonomy often turn out to be different descriptions of autonomy, in which particular ways of being autonomous take over the definition of the broader concept. The approach to addressing the problem of definition/description, therefore, is to try to identify *potential* components and dimensions of autonomy in language learning, which involves interrogating and breaking down the two key concepts in the definition: "capacity" and "control".

2.2 What is a capacity?

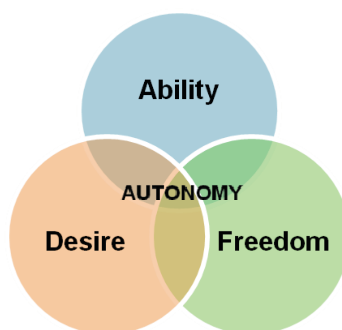

Figure 1. What is a capacity?

A capacity specifies what a person has the potential to do, rather than what they actually do. When we say that autonomy is a capacity, therefore, we are saying that it describes a potential within individuals, and not a set of learning behaviours (for which we might use the term "autonomous learning"—i.e., learning in which a capacity to control learning is displayed or required).

Holec (1988, p. 8) explains this in the following way:

> …the autonomous learner is not automatically obliged to self-direct his learning either totally or even partially. The learner will make use of his ability to do this only if he so wishes and if he is permitted to do so by the material, social and psychological constraints to which he is subjected.

We can identify from this quotation three main components of a capacity to control learning, which are represented in Figure 1 as overlapping circles of *ability, desire* and *freedom*.

In regard to autonomy in language learning, *ability*, in Figure 1, refers to skills and knowledge in two broad domains: study and language. A capacity to control language learning implies the possession of certain study skills (which are usually represented as being concerned with planning, monitoring and evaluation—Holec, 1981) and knowledge of the target language that is adequate to control the learning task in hand. The component of ability is often represented in terms of the more technical categories of "metacognitive" and "metalinguistic" knowledge and skills (Huang, 2005; Little, 1997; Wenden, 1998). *Desire* refers here to the intensity of the learner's intention to learn a language or carry out a particular learning task and it is assumed to be informed by particular purposes. *Freedom* consists in the degree to which learners are "permitted" to control their learning, either by specific agents in the learning process or, more generally, by the learning situations in which they find themselves.

2.3 What is control?

Control means having the power to make choices and decisions and acting on them,

but what exactly do learners control when they control their learning? Benson (2011) tackles this question by discussing three dimensions of control over learning—*learning management, cognitive processes* and *learning content*—which are again represented as overlapping circles in Figure 2. The following are examples of control along each dimension (for more detailed discussion, see Benson, 2011, pp. 92-118).

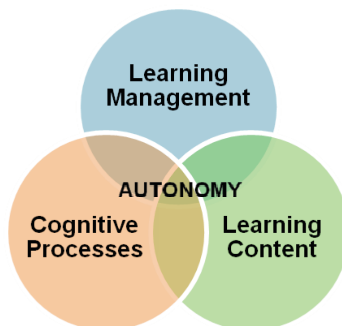

Figure 2. Control over learning

Learning management, in Figure 2, refers to the day-to-day practices that make up language—learning the "where", "when" and "how" of learning. Making a study plan is a relatively straightforward example of control over learning management; students who do not plan may manage their learning in other ways, for example by incorporating language study into their daily routines or regularly putting themselves in situations where they need to use the target language. These are all examples of learners controlling how, when and where they learn. *Cognitive processing* is probably the least well-understood dimension of autonomy in language learning. It also involves control over the "how" of language learning, but in a cognitive, rather than behavioural, sense. Second language acquisition research, for example, uses the term "control" in relation to noticing and attending to language input: attentional processes must be controlled in order for features of input to be noticed, processed and learned. Other aspects of control over cognition in language learning involve the exercise of megacognition and reflection. *Learning content* is concerned with "what" and "how much" of a language is learned, which is linked to the "why" of language learning. As a foreign language is not a pre-defined or fixed body of knowledge, decisions have to be made about what to learn. Control over learning content, therefore, implies a match between what is learned and the learners' purposes.

2.4 Personal relevance

A capacity to control learning also implies a capacity to make learning personally relevant, to bring it into line with needs and purposes that the learners have themselves identified or, through some process of negotiation, have voluntarily agreed to identify with. The *ability* that is in question in autonomy is, primarily, an ability to make informed choices and act upon them so that learning becomes personally relevant, and the *desire* and *freedom* are the desire and freedom to learn something that has this personal relevance.

Control of learning management, cognitive processing and learning content, can also be seen as different ways of bringing the processes of language learning into line with personal needs and purposes.

This emphasis on personal relevance is echoed by Huang (2006b) who argues that "autonomy is concerned with the expression and exploration of learners' own meanings and purposes, facilitated by a process of negotiation and mediation in an atmosphere of genuine dialogue and collegiality" (p. 39; see also Kenny, 1993a, 1993b). Personal relevance can also be linked to two important issues in autonomy research and practice—learner agendas and affordances—which are further connected to the ideas of agency and identity.

Learner agendas are concerned with "learners' goal-setting and action-planning to manage their own learning" (Huang, 2006a, p. 100). Being able to establish personal agendas for learning is regarded as a defining characteristic of an autonomous learner (Little, 1994; Little & Dam, 1998; Littlewood, 1999). According to Benson (2011, pp. 79-81; see also Nunan, 1995), the fact that learners receiving formal instruction tend to follow their own learning agendas, rather than those of their teachers, is evidence for learner control as a natural attribute of learning. When learners follow their own agendas rather than their teachers', they must find personal relevance (personal meanings) in executing their own agendas. That is why Littlewood (1999) connects the capacity to establish personal learning agendas to the idea of proactive rather than reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy is the form of autonomy in which learners determine learning objectives, select learning methods and techniques, and evaluate what they have learned. It is therefore the kind of autonomy "which affirms their individuality and sets up directions in a world which they themselves have partially created" (Littlewood, 1999, p. 75). Reactive autonomy is "the kind of autonomy which does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal" (ibid.).

Affordances are possibilities for action within an environment as perceived by the observer (Gibson, 1979). Learners who find personal relevance in their study are more likely to perceive affordances in their learning contexts. Different individual students will perceive different opportunities and possibilities for learning within a particular learning structure. For example, Cotterall and Murray (2009) and Murray (2011) investigated the experiences of the students enrolled in a self-directed language learning course and found that the course offered students' various opportunities to personalize their learning, to engage directly in the learning process, to experiment with learning goals, materials and strategies, to reflect on their experiences, and to seek from the learning environment various forms of support they required.

3. Agency

3.1 Agency beyond the field of language education

Like autonomy, agency is a much-debated concept with diverse theoretical framings informing it. Citing Fuchs (2001), Priestley, Edwards, Priestley and Miller (2012) point

out that there has been a tendency in social research to either focus on an over-socialized, macro view of agency (thus ignoring the local and specific, seeking to supplant agency with structure, a form of social determinism) or to concentrate on overly individualized notions of agency (agency is often conflated with the concept of autonomy as a form of freedom from constraints). However, in recent years, systematic attempts have been made to find a middle ground on this position.

To illustrate how agency is defined in the broader fields, we present some of the definitions and interpretations of the concept below:

- Agency is the capacity to act otherwise, or to select a course of action from a range of options (Giddens, 1976, 1984). Giddens placed emphasis on the transformative potential of agency which he described as "the capability of the individuals to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course or events" (1984, p. 14).
- Agency is the ability of individuals to exercise choice and discretion in their everyday practices (Pickering, 1995, cited in Ollerhead, 2010, p. 609).
- Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2011) define agency as "the capacity to initiate purposeful action that implies will, autonomy, freedom, and choice" (p. 813). According to them, agency is interactive and cannot reside only in the individual because it is a socially constructed experience (p. 814).
- Human agency is an intentional act that results in a particular outcome; or it describes the process through which people intentionally change themselves or their situations through their own actions (Ray, 2009, p.116, citing Bandura, 1989, 1997). Therefore, "people are neither autonomous agents nor mechanical responders to the environment" (Ray, 2009, p. 116).

These views of agency support our observation that autonomy and agency are closely interrelated, which we will discuss in more detail later. They also imply that the person (agent) has the capacity of making choices based on his/her intentions and purposes, which actually shares with autonomy in language learning an emphasis on choice.

Coming from the field of linguistic anthropology, Ahearn (2001, p. 112) offers a concise, provisional definition of agency—"the socioculturally mediated capacity to act"—noting that "all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and in its interpretation" and meanwhile recognizing that this definition "leaves many details unspecified". Her option for a concise definition seems to be well intended and grounded, as she also cites Pickering (1995, p. 245) as saying that "within different cultures human beings and the material world might exhibit capacities for action [meaning agency in this paper] quite different from those we customarily attribute to them" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 113). This is similar to the idea of autonomy in that autonomy may "take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times" (Benson, 2011, p. 58). Ahearn's self-conscious way of defining agency also echoes Benson's option for a broad definition of autonomy, focusing on the construct of "control".

Although we view control as a key construct of autonomy, learners' initiatives in

their learning have also been seen as an important characteristic of autonomous learning (e.g., from earlier work of Holec, 1981 and Little, 1991 to later work by most researchers). This makes the two terms of autonomy and agency more difficult to distinguish in the general social sciences literature because control and self-initiation are also key issues that discussion of agency has to address. To illustrate these key concerns, we present perspectives by Biesta and Tedder (2006, p. 27) as an example.

First, Biesta and Tedder point out that many discussions about agency assume a link between agency and control. There is a very strong link in some cases (e.g., agency as that part of the self which controls the identity-work of the self) while in other situations the link is weaker (e.g., an individual's agency as being dependent upon the re-actions of others). According to Biesta and Tedder, it makes sense to distinguish between situations and conditions that are very difficult to influence through agency (e.g., physical or mental disability), situations and circumstances that might be influenced (e.g., those illnesses for which there is a cure), and situations and circumstances that in principle can be influenced (e.g., economic resources).

Second, there has been a concern about to what extent we should understand agency in terms of taking initiative. According to Biesta and Tedder, agency has to do with the ability to exert control over and give direction to the course of one's life. However, not all instances of agency under this definition follow from the individual's own initiative. That is, agency is not necessarily the same as taking initiative but can also be linked to those situations in which people take control of their life as a result of a perceived calling or sense of duty. In this respect agency can also be understood as a response.

3.2 Agency in applied linguistics and language education

In the field of applied linguistics and language education, agency has seldom been defined very explicitly, though, in recent years, we can see attempts to define the term more explicitly, especially in research related to autonomy. We present below some of the definitions and interpretations of the concept for further analysis.

In the preface to the book "Applied Linguistics as Social Science" by Sealey and Carter (2004), applied linguists Candlin and Sarangi conceptualize agency as "the self-conscious reflexive actions of human beings" (and structure as "the enduring, affording and constraining influences of the social order") (Sealey & Carter, 2004, xiii). One feature of this definition is that it relates agency to actions and foregrounds the reflexive capacities of human beings.

Researchers working on second language learner identity are often concerned with agency (e.g., Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; McKay & Wong, 1996), but the term has never been defined or explained in a very explicit way in their work. In the broad field of applied linguistics and language education, Lantolf and Thorne (2006), Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), and Lantolf (2002) have perhaps provided the most detailed discussion of agency, although they have also never given a working definition of the concept. Lantolf and colleagues' perspectives on agency are known as representing "neo-Vygotskyan" approaches, which emphasize that agency arises out of individuals' engagement in the social world (see Morita, 2004, p. 590):

> […] 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 & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148)

In agreement with Ahearn (2001) regarding the provisional definition of agency presented above, Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 238) propose:

> […] agency is socioculturally mediated and dialectically enacted. In other words, within a given time and space, there are constraints and affordances that make certain actions probable, others possible, and yet others impossible.

This is based on their understanding that there are no uniquely human actions that are not mediated. In some cases, the mediational means are external and visible to an observer (for example, using a hammer to drive a nail) and in other cases they are not.

Citing Taylor (1985) and Leont'ev (2003), Lantolf and Thorne (2006, pp. 142-143) further argue:

> Agency, as we construe it, is about more than voluntary control over behaviour, although to be sure this is a critical component of what it means to be an agent. The concept also entails the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events.

This emphasis on personal relevance and significance (for a more detailed discussion on these issues, see Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001) bring the definition of agency close to some of the interpretations about the multidimensional notion of autonomy (see discussion above, and see also Huang, 2006b; Kenny, 1993a, 1993b). There is, however, literature which conceptualizes agency and autonomy in sociocultural settings in much the same way, for example, in language education: "learner autonomy as socially situated agency" (Toohey, 2007, p. 232); and, autonomy "not so much as individualized performance but as socially oriented agency" (Toohey & Norton, 2003, p. 59). Here Toohey (2007) and Toohey and Norton (2003) tend to equate autonomy exclusively with freedom from control by others, a conceptualization prevalent in the field of general teacher education in regard to teacher autonomy (see a review by Benson & Huang, 2008). Looking beyond social sciences, for example in computer science, we can also find autonomy conceptualized as "motivated agency"; "autonomous agents" are agents who can generate their own goals, which are in turn generated from motivations (Luck & d'Inverno, 1995, p. 258). In defining agency and autonomy, Luck and d'Inverno (1995) emphasize the purposes for acting.

We would like to outline the contributions of the literature on critical discourse perspectives to the understanding of agency (Benesch, 1993, 1999, 2001; Canagarajah, 1993, 1999; McKay & Wong, 1996). Particularly relevant are the models drawing on what Canagarajah (1999) calls "resistance theories" (p. 22), in which individuals are accorded agency to resist being positioned marginally in dominant discourses and to fashion alternative subject positions that fulfil their goals and purposes (Morita, 2004, p. 590). We

may need to bear in mind that agency does not equate with free will or resistance (Ahearn, 2001; see also Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), but should also be aware that resistance as a form of "oppositional agency" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 115) can afford us to problematize the teaching situations and to critically examine the power relations in the second/foreign language classroom as well as learners' choices and rights.

Although it is hard to find an explicit working definition of the term in earlier literature, the following researchers in recent years have attempted (actually struggled) to offer a definition which can be used, more or less, as a working definition to guide their empirical research.

- van Lier (2008) proposes that language learners' agentive capacity to act differs from any notion of linguistic competence as something that a language learner can possess. Agency, according to him, is "action potential, mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors" (p. 171). He also cautions against treating apparent action, e.g., active participation in a language classroom, as learner agency at work (e.g., one can express one's agency by deliberately not acting).
- Developing ideas in Allison and Huang (2005), Huang (2009, 2011) proposes that agency, including learner agency, entails action, and often suggests action that arises from deliberation and choice. Huang notes that while this is not strictly a definition of agency, "such a conceptualization enables a close scrutiny of language learners' responses to the constraints and opportunities in the particular research context, which in turn offers a useful way to problematize and look critically at actual language and teaching situations" (Huang, 2011, p. 230).
- In a case study, Gao (2010) examined the interaction between contextual conditions and agency in a particular learner's autonomous learning efforts. According to him, individual learners reveal their agency through the exercise of their capacity and willpower to achieve desired and intended outcomes in the language learning process (p. 581). Theorized as "the root of autonomy" ("a point of origin for the development of autonomy", see Benson, 2007a, p. 30), agency is regarded by Gao (personal communication) as a universal, defining attribute of agents that places them in the position of being subjects who can act, rather than objects that are acted upon. Gao associates it with individual agents' self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition, emotionality and so on (citing Giddens, 1984; Sealey & Carter, 2004). He also argues that language learner autonomy is always relative to individuals in specific contexts since such capacity has a developmental nature and its exercise is mediated by contextual conditions (e.g., Benson, 2007a; Gao, 2007; Sealey & Carter, 2004).
- According to Rowland (2011, p. 435), agency is concerned with "the individual's influence over his/her particular situation".
- Agency has also been examined through the lens of complexity theory (Mercer, 2011; see also Paiva, 2011). Mercer (2011, p. 435) explains: "…a learner's agency…can best be understood as a complex system composed of a number of constituent components; each of which can itself be thought of as a dynamic complex system. Learner agency exists as latent potential to engage in self-directed behavior but how and when it is used depends

on a learner's sense of agency involving their belief systems, and the control parameters of motivation, affect, metacognitive/self-regulatory skills, as well as actual abilities and the affordances, actual and perceived, in specific settings."

Bringing together the various definitions or explanations of agency, we may find that in spite of the similarities shared by agency and autonomy, in the field of applied linguistics and in research on autonomy in language education in particular, agency and autonomy are in most cases treated as two distinct terms with different emphases. For example, agency may carry a focus on self-conscious reflexive learning actions (see Candlin & Sarangi, 2004) while autonomy is concerned with a sense of being in control of the learning process. The point is that one may take actions consciously for a certain purpose (the exercise of agency), but there is no guarantee that one is in control of the process (autonomy), although self-conscious and personally relevant actions may often enhance one's controlling capacity (autonomy).

3.3 Agency or autonomy?

In the current literature on autonomy in language education, the boundaries between autonomy and agency are often blurred and muddled, especially in definitions of autonomy by Toohey (2007) and Toohey & Norton (2003) as shown earlier. Bringing the concept of agency into the discussion of autonomy may thus help us better understand autonomy and agency in practice through examining real-life, ordinary events.

According to Benson (2011), autonomy implies "a systematic capacity for effective control over various aspects and levels of the learning process" (p. 119), not simply the "*attempt* to take control of one's learning from time to time" (p. 91). From this perspective, "autonomous episodes" or "episodes of learning autonomy" in the form of setting priorities and following agendas different from the teacher's during lessons or doing the minimum amount of work during the semester and revising lessons throughout the night and day for three or four days before the examinations (Dickinson, 1996) seem to be more appropriately described as instances of agency rather than autonomy, if autonomy is understood as a capacity (for systematic and effective control over learning) rather than a learning behaviour.

Along a similar line of thinking, what Allwright (1988) describes as the "seeds of autonomy and individualization" (cf. Benson, 2011, p. 91) in whole-class instruction are also instances of agency:

> […] no matter how infertile the soil may be in the whole-class environment, we can, if we look, find the seeds of "autonomy" and "individualization" even in that apparently inhospitable place. (p. 35)

These seeds of autonomy and individualization can be found in the idiosyncracy of classroom language learning (and in the co-productive nature of classroom lessons):

> In an important sense […] each lesson is a different lesson for each learner, and as teachers

> know very well already, different learners take away quite different things from the same lesson.
> [...] if learners somehow individualize what they learn, it may be interesting to look into what happens in classrooms that makes such idiosyncracy of 'uptake' possible. Perhaps the learners are already 'autonomously individualizing' their classroom experiences. (Allwright, 1988, p. 36)

One last term related to agency presented here is "autonomy of learner thought" (Block, 1996, p. 168), grounded in classroom evidence (learners' and teachers' reports of classroom events) that "learners tend not to respond directly to classroom instruction, but rather treat it as an experience to be interpreted" (Benson, 2011, p. 81).

In summary, Dickinson's (1996) use of terms such as "autonomous episodes" or "episodes of learning autonomy" and Allwright's (1988) descriptors such as "seeds of autonomy and individualization" and "autonomously individualizing" one's learning experience, together with the phenomenon of "autonomy of learner thought" (Block, 1996) all refer to the similar independent efforts on the part of learners: initiating and managing own learning, setting own priorities and agendas, and attempting to control over psychological factors that influence learning (see Benson, 2011, p. 91). These learners, as Benson (ibid.) cautions, are not necessarily autonomous, because their independent efforts to control over their learning are episodic and often ineffective. Based on the discussion so far, much of the description about "autonomy" in the current literature can be related to the construct of personal agency. These real-life scenarios also support an observation that the development of autonomy depends on the exercise of personal agency, although agency itself may not be sufficient for autonomy.

In a study addressing the question of what roles agency and identity play in the development of autonomy in a Chinese social and institutional context (that of Chinese trainee TEFL teachers in a mainland Chinese university), Huang (2011) comes up with the following remarks about autonomy, agency and agendas:

> In a broad sense, agendas can be understood as "things to do", agency "entailing actions arising from deliberation and choice", and autonomy "the capacity to do". As the "raw material" for autonomy, agency is more concrete, specific and observable, while autonomy is a capacity that entails long-term development. What can further distinguish agency from autonomy is perhaps the degree of control that learners are able to exercise in a specific context... (p. 242)

To close this section, we want to point out that in the literature, both identity (which we will discuss below) and agency are countable nouns and have a plural form, i.e, identities, agencies (e.g., Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011 on agency/agencies). However, do we accept the plural noun of autonomy ("autonomies")? Is autonomy a more unified concept?!

4. Identity

This section first presents how identity is defined in social sciences and in language education, then discusses identity research in second and foreign language contexts. Meanwhile, we acknowledge that it might be somewhat simplistic to distinguish between identity work in foreign and second language contexts, especially if we consider the possible impact of "imagined selves" and "imagined communities" (see e.g., Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009; Murray, 2011) on identity formation in the foreign language context at an age of globalization when learners have access to various internet resources and when easier and more frequent intercultural communication is possible.

4.1 Defining Identity

Identity is the concept of "the self" (Taylor, 1989), or, "who one is" (Gao, Li & Li, 2002, p. 95). This concept (or sense) of self, however, is often based on perspectives on human learning in general. To Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice. Based on their relational view about learning, learning always involves the construction of identities, which they conceptualize as "long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice" (p. 53). A community of practice, according to them, is "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98).

In the field of language education, research on identity owes much to Lave and Wenger (1991), and many other theorists, including West (1992), Bourdieu (1977), Weedon (1987/1997), and Cummins (1996). For example, Norton (2000) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). In a broader sense, the concept of identity may simply refer to "our sense of who we are and our relationship to the world" (Kanno, 2003, p. 3).

Another concept that often goes together with identity in the language education literature is identity formation/construction. Hawkins (2005, p. 61) defines it as follows:

> Identity formation can be described as an ongoing negotiation between the individual and the social context or environment, with particular attention paid to operant cultural and power relations. Individuals bring lived histories to activities and events in situated environments, and it is through communications and interactions with others in these environments that learners negotiate and co-construct their views of themselves and the world. The activities and contexts, however, are imbued with and represent specific values and ideologies (which privilege certain practices over others), and these shape the dynamics of the interactions.

In summary, in recent literature on identity in social sciences and second language education, the nature of identity is often described as multiple, changing, contradictory, elusive, and fragmentary; identity can be transformational and transformative; it is constructed, maintained, and negotiated to a significant extent through language and

discourse in particular historical, sociocultural and political contexts (e.g., Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005; Norton, 1997, 2000).

4.2 Identity research in the second language context

In the field of applied linguistics and language education, many studies on identity have been conducted in second language situations, typically immigrants in Western countries. Norton's work (e.g., 1995, 2000, 2001) conducted in the North American context has been influential in identity research. She is primarily concerned with interactions between native speakers and non-native speakers of the target language, and the social context in which these interactions occur. Therefore, the issue of power relations between language learners and target language speakers becomes the most salient. Her case studies illustrate how the life and work contexts of her case study participants had profound effects on their willingness and opportunities to interact with members of the target language community.

Generally speaking, studies conducted in second language, immigration contexts, have focused on a number of "deep issues" that have profound effects on one's sense of "who one is" and one's membership in a certain target language community or a social group. These deep issues include access to the social networks of their living communities and desired resources, access to participation in activities of their target language communities and school practices, representations (images, archetypes, or even stereotypes of identity which immigrant students are labelled), positioning in relations of power, negotiating entry and membership in target language communities, negotiating participation in dominant discourses, academic discourse socialization, and, non-participation and resistance, etc. (see e.g., Harklau, 2000; Hawkins, 2005; McKay & Wong, 1996; Morita, 2004; Norton (Peirce), 1995, 2000, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Toohey & Norton, 2003).

Research on identity in second language, border-crossing contexts generates rich insights into the relationship between language acquisition and personal identity construction. Many of the interpretations about identity (e.g., identity as multiple, contradictory, fragmentary, and learning involving identity construction, etc.) are also useful and relevant for research on identity in foreign language contexts (without border crossing). However, since the two broad contexts are different in many ways (e.g., power relationships between native speakers and non-native speakers in second language, border-crossing contexts may not become a salient issue in the foreign language context where native speakers are seldom physically around to control the "access to the words of others in community practices" (Norton & Toohey, 2002, p. 19), so identity work in one context may be substantially different from that in another context.

4.3 Identity research in the foreign language context

In comparison with the ample literature on identity in the second language context, there has been little research on identity conducted in the foreign language context. Underlying this imbalanced research attention, according to Gao, Li and Li (2002, p. 97), is the assumption that EFL students lack target culture exposures or reflexive power, hence the deep issue of identity is either irrelevant or not feasible for empirical research. However,

Gao, Li and Li (2002, p. 115) have argued in their research that in the Chinese context, EFL learning can go beyond the level of instrumental language skills and be part and parcel of students' self-identity construction and that the extent to which EFL learning contributes to identity construction may not be less than that of ESL.

Gao, Li and Li (2002) were among the first to call our attention to the imbalanced research work on identity in foreign and second language contexts. In their study, the question of "who am I?" can be rephrased in a range of specific questions regarding one's discourse style (e.g., preference for English or Chinese way of speaking and thinking, and selection/construction of a social role—a writer, a reader, or a speaker in the three cases in the study), career directions, self-perceptions of talents and competencies, personalities, values and beliefs, cultural belongings, external images and inner pursuits (p. 115). At first sight, these issues are different from those embedded in the second language context arising from the asymmetrical power relations between native-speakers and non-native speakers of the target language.

Another finding is defined in terms of the function of macro- and micro-level contexts: In their study, both context of culture (broader socio-cultural context) and context of situation (immediate learning context) (see Halliday, 1978) exerted influence on the learners' selection of selfhood. Compared with ESL contexts, the immediate learning situation in the Chinese EFL classroom might be playing a more crucial role in the learners' identity formation.

The study also shows that the EFL learners demonstrated the potential of exercising individual agency in the selection of identities, and they varied in the actual use of such agency. (Agency in their study refers to the extent to which learners take actions to shape their context in the pursuit of their chosen goals.) The authors point out that this finding is consistent with findings in ESL contexts. Another consistency between the two contexts in their study is that the EFL students' learning identities were also multiple, competitive and changing. However, they identify the existence of a "core identity" among their research participants, which means that the learners tended to demonstrate consistency and unity in their general orientations of English learning and personal development. The core identity or unitary identity could lead the learners to choose learning situations (e.g., particular courses in university), their positions in the situation, and their actions in the situation (e.g., full devotion or partial escape).

In another large-scale, quantitative study conducted by Gao and her colleagues (Gao, Cheng, Zhao & Zhou, 2005), two research questions are addressed: (1) Have English learners undergone self-identity changes after learning English? What types of changes have they undergone? (2) Do learners' self-identity changes differ with regard to their sex, college major, and starting age of English learning? For research question (1), while such a yes-no question about whether English learners undergo self-identity changes after learning English is still a concern in research in the foreign language context, it is often taken for granted (not a concern at all) for learning in the second language immigration context. For research question (2), again, in the second language, immigration context, these factors (especially college major) might not matter so much. And in their study, self-

identity change is defined by constructs of self-confidence, values and communication styles, which may not sound "deep" issues to researchers in the second language, immigration contexts.

Other examples that are typical of research in the foreign language context are studies by Murray and Kojima (2007), Chik (2007) and Huang (2009, 2010, 2011). They are also to date among the few studies that tie autonomy to the ideas of identity and agency.

Following a life history research approach, Murray and Kojima (2007) examine how foreign language learning (in an out-of-class setting) can play a significant role in learners' evolving identity and thus their learning motivation (and autonomy), through telling the story of a Japanese female adult learner of English and German (the second-named author, Masumi Kojima). The authors are also aware of the difference of identity work in the second language and foreign language contexts. Citing Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000, p. 174) to recognize that learning a foreign language accompanied by the experience of adapting to a new cultural setting can lead to "a profound struggle to reconstruct a self", they then ask: "But what about foreign language learners who remain in their own culture? What is the impact on their lives and sense of self?" (p. 38) Their finding is that Masumi's learning motivation has evolved over time with her identity and is strengthened by the "personal fulfilment" she experiences as a language learner and speaker. The defining terms for identity here are personal pursuit and fulfilment. Thus, they conclude:

> Although Masumi has not had the traumatic experience of having to reconstruct her sense of self in order to survive in another culture, learning foreign languages has changed her and her perception of self. (p. 39)

While the defining terms of identity in their study are personal pursuit and fulfilment, and perception/sense of self, Chik (2007) demonstrates in her two case studies that the deep issues in the Hong Kong context are academic and career promotional aspects. A point implicit in Murray and Kojima's paper but made explicit in Chik's study is that the development of learner autonomy may evolve in tandem with the development of learner identity.

Huang's (2009, 2010, 2011) studies were built upon how the term of identity has been defined and conceptualized in the above studies in the foreign language context and linked the idea of identity, and also agency, to autonomy in a more explicit manner. For example, drawing on learner autobiographies, life history interviews and participant observation, Huang's (2009) study explores the long-term development of autonomy among students (student teachers) in a particular Chinese social and institutional context (a non-prestigious teacher-education university in mainland China), through examining the roles of identity and agency in the development of autonomy and the interrelatedness of all the three major concepts. In all the three studies, Huang conceptualizes autonomy, agency and identity as interrelated but distinct concepts—a point that we will return to in the following section.

5. Relationships of autonomy, agency and identity in language education

In a state-of-the-art review on autonomy, Benson (2007a) notes that although the concepts of agency, identity, and autonomy are used in more than one way in the socio-cultural literature, "agency can perhaps be viewed as a point of origin for the development of autonomy, while identity might be viewed as one of its more important outcomes" (p. 30). Huang (2009, 2011) provides empirical evidence for Benson's contention, and also suggests that identity conceptualization and construction can also be a point of origin for autonomy. His research demonstrates that a personally relevant and meaningful agenda might lead to the exercise of agency, which, in turn, might lead to greater autonomy (taking greater control over own learning and personal life) in the long term. However, learner agendas and agency might be affected by the research participants' (student teachers') conceptualization and construction of future development, such as career orientation (future identity). Huang's studies thus draw our attention to a more complex, non-linear relationship among identity, agency and autonomy, which is embedded in a particular learning context.

In a narrative enquiry into his own life and educational experiences, Huang (2010) examines the complex relationship among teacher autonomy, teacher identity and teacher agency in foreign language teaching and teacher development. According to him, while the development of teacher autonomy relies on teacher identity construction and the exercise of teacher agency, the development of teacher autonomy can in turn enhance teacher identity and teacher agency.

Huang (2009) was among the first to bring the three constructs of autonomy, agency and identity within a single research study in a more explicit manner. His studies (2009, 2010, 2011) have also highlighted two points that were evident in empirical research by other researchers: (1) the development of autonomy and identity depends to a large extent on the exercise of agency; (2) identity formation provides a direction for the development of autonomy (or the development of autonomy and the construction of identity may go side by side). Studies illustrating these two themes include Gao (2010), contributions to Benson and Nunan's collections of (auto)biographical studies of language teaching and learning (2002, 2005), and Benson's (2007b) and Murray, Gao and Lamb's (2011) collections of research studies on autonomy in language learning. We shall provide below examples within the three collections for both theme (1) (Lim, 2002; Malcolm, 2005) and theme (2) (Chik, 2007).

Lim (2002) examines her own struggle to achieve English proficiency over a 20-year period using an autobiographical approach. She argues that her relative success seems to have resulted from being able to form "a goal outside the educational system" (e.g., a goal beyond learning English only for getting a job for many Koreans) (p. 103):

> Although I adopted at times and in part the educational goals for English as defined by the school, I always kept a somewhat distinct goal. Therefore, my motivation was sustainable because it was not based entirely on the rewards mediated by others. So, this gave me a greater perception of

> control over my learning leading to increased effort and greater performance. (p. 103)

This is clearly an example to show how a learner exercises personal agency to take control of her own learning (autonomy).

Malcolm (2005) documents an Arabic-speaking English learner's (Hamad's) path to autonomy through examining his evolving personal theory of reading (which the author takes as the key to the development of autonomy). Although the term "agency" is not used, it is at the heart of Hamad's stories and much of the discussion of the study. Agency is evident in Hamad's formulating, testing, and revising of his beliefs about learning and reading, and his active participation in learning opportunities which he had a personal stake or could see the relevance to his own life. This fits with Lantolf and Thorne's (2006) interpretation of agency as entailing "the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events" in addition to "voluntary control over behaviour" (p. 143).

It should be noted that agency may benefit not only the development of autonomy, but also the construction of individual identities through, for example, negotiating and resisting positioning, attempting repositioning, and deploying discourses and counter discourses (see e.g., Morita, 2004; McKay & Wong, 1996).

To illustrate theme (2), we present Chik's (2007) study below. Based on a biographical study of two Hong Kong learners of English, Chik (2007) comes to the following conclusion:

> If learner autonomy entails a global capacity to take charge of one's learning, identity formation may navigate the direction of its development. (p. 41)

Chik notes that given the social and functional dominance of English as regards access to resources, learner identity construction in the Hong Kong context may well be defined by academic or career promotional prospects. She tells the story of one of her research participants—Karen—who intended to construct a "speaker identity". According to the researcher, Karen's ability to form a well-grounded learner identity motivated her to drive and take control of her own language learning in one particular direction, through crafting "individual spaces" within an institutional setting to satisfy the needs of her speaker identity. Through crafting individual spaces, Karen sidestepped classroom routines and actively participated in out-of-classroom English oral activities to facilitate her learning. Chik therefore argues that in the case of Karen, the development of autonomy as a learner evolved in tandem with the development of a speaker identity.

Chik's study also points to the role of agency in the formation of learner identity and the development of learner autonomy. Agency here refers to the learner's ability to take necessary actions within the constraints of a particular social context, that is, the ability to craft individual spaces to pursue personal and language-proficiency development.

In relation to the navigating role of identity for the development of autonomy, there is literature illustrating that the development of autonomy and the construction of identity may go side by side in many cases. For example, commenting on contributions to Benson and Nunan (2002, 2005), Benson (2007a) points out that "the construction of individual

identities and the achievement of personal autonomy are often interwoven in stories of long-term language learning experiences" (p. 30). This observation further expands our awareness of the complexities of the interrelationships between agency, identity and autonomy.

6. Conclusion

The more recent literature on autonomy in foreign and second language education tends to link the idea of autonomy to other "student-focused constructs" (Benson, 2007a, p. 34), especially agency and identity, in order to understand better how autonomy is conceptualized potentially differently in various institutional, socio-cultural and political contexts and thus to make the theory of autonomy work better "here" (in their own contexts). This review has examined the complex meanings of autonomy, agency and identity (and related concepts such as learner agendas and affordances) and their interrelationships. While there are good reasons to treat these concepts especially autonomy and agency as interrelated but distinct constructs in terms of learner sense of being in control over one's own learning process, the empirical knowledge base on how these notions are actually conceptualized and how they interact with each other in different parts of the world, remains rather weak. Further research should therefore first explore, in greater depth, these issues in learners' short-term, and also long-term, language learning experiences.

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