

Finding Agency in Language Learning Histories

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Abstract

In this exploratory study, 20 language learning histories (LLHs) written by Japanese university students were analysed using attribution theory, socio-cultural explanations of learning as a socially embedded process, and a meta-analysis from the field of psychotherapy. We investigated various factors of language learning reported as useful, helpful or encouraging. We found individual agency to be a salient factor. However, rather than simply being an independent variable, we present evidence of the co-constructed nature of agency, student autonomy and social capital as they emerge from interaction-rich learning environments nurtured by cohesive communities of practice. While personal agency at first may seem to be enacted 'autonomously', we illustrate how agency is often modelled in social capital-rich environments. We conclude, following Vygotskian socialisation models, that while individuals may seem to act independently, they have in fact inculcated aspects of their social encounters that provide them with tools to act with agency.

Attribution Analysis and 'What Works' in Psychotherapy

Studies of attribution theory have demonstrated the relationship between the causes to which people attribute their successes and failures and their subsequent behaviours (for a short review from the perspective of second language acquisition, see Kalaja 2004). If people's beliefs form the basis of their behaviour, there is much to be learned in an investigation of those beliefs (Barcelos and Kalaja 2003). Teachers interested in promoting student autonomy and agency may find it pertinent to ask, by what variables and in which contexts are learners more likely to attribute their successes and failures to factors within their control. In other words, when do learners tend to make *internal attributions*, recognising success as within their control, as opposed to *external attributions*, to factors beyond their control? Students' own narratives of their learning, such as those which are found in their language learning histories (LLHs), are a rich source of data on such beliefs and perceptions. (For an overview of the method and benefits of using these student-produced learning materials, see Murphey, Chen & Chen (2005)).

In addition to attribution theory, this study is also informed by a field-wide meta-analytic review of over 40 years of psychotherapy research which highlights the 'common factors' leading to psychological improvements in clients regardless of the particular therapeutic techniques applied (Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 1999). Factors such as setting, relationship, beliefs and expectancy were found to be much more important to client improvement than any single methodology. Analysis of such common factors led to the following breakdown in terms of importance to successful recovery:

- 40% extra-therapeutic factors (relationships, changed circumstances, etc.)
- 30% relationship with therapist
- 15% therapeutic method
- 15% placebo, hope, expectancy

As much as 85% of client improvements had nothing to do with the methods. As language teachers, we felt impelled to ask to what extent common factors might play a similar role for our students. Of particular interest is the role of 'hope' or expectancy. According to Snyder, Michael & Cheavens (1999), hope is a feeling of empowerment caused by modes of thinking related to pursuing ones goals. These modes of thought may be known generally as agency but can be more specifically thought of in terms of *agency thinking*, the will or determination to meet certain goals, and *pathways thinking*, the ability to imagine and find possible routes to these goals.

When people find their pathways blocked, or when they cannot think of how to begin and execute a plan toward their goal, they often become demoralised and lose their will to work toward their goals. Murphy (1999, p. 365), investigating the efficacy of therapy in educational settings, finds some compelling parallels between the fields and notes that, 'just as effective psychotherapy requires the client's active participation, the success of teaching rests largely on the student's involvement in the learning process.' Indeed, *empowering individual agency* may be the most important step for success in both disciplines.

Exploratory Research Questions and Coding Protocol

Students were asked to write their LLHs in the fall of 2006. All students, four male and sixteen female, were in their second year of undergraduate study or above. The average length of each LLH was 680 words. The following research questions were used to guide our exploratory analysis of these LLHs:

1. *What 'works' for language learners? What do they report as helpful, useful, or empowering?*
2. *When do learners report taking ownership of their learning? How do they explain their learning and display agency in their LLHs?*

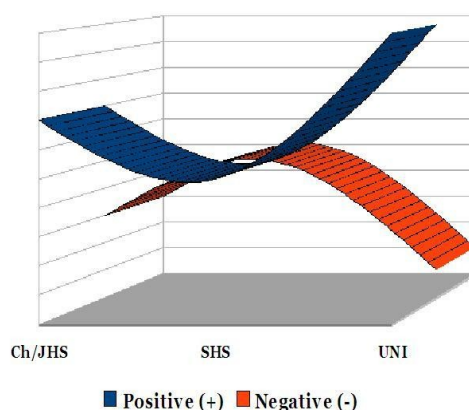
A coding protocol was developed to address these general questions, and each LLH was coded using three time-frames: *early childhood/junior high school*, *senior high school*, and *university*, and then analysed statement by statement for the following variables:

- *Positive or Negative*
- *Learning Context*: 'In School,' 'Out of School,' or 'General.'
- *Mode of Engagement*: 'Relationships,' 'Activities,' 'Other'
- *Agency*: 'Agency Thinking' and/or 'Pathways Thinking'

The Growth of Agency in LLH Discourse

The most general tier of the coding matrix is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the proportion of positively and negatively coded items through the three time-frames:

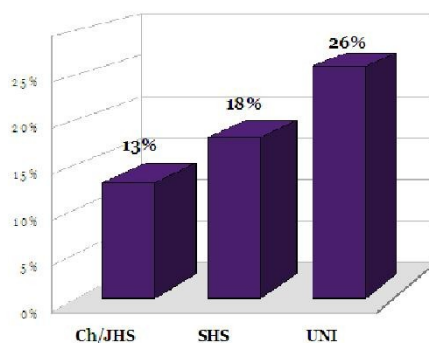
Figure 1: Pattern of Positive and Negative



Predictably, considering the extreme testing focus of Japanese high schools, negatively coded items rise in *senior high school* but then drop again in *university*. Conversely, positively coded items drop in *senior high school* and rise sharply in *university*.

On the other hand, we found a steady increase in the proportion of agency-coded items through the three time frames. As can be seen in Figure 2, beginning with merely 13% percent in the *childhood/junior high school* period, agency-coded items double to 26% in the *university* period.

Figure 2: Growth of Agency Coded Items



Agency can be associated with activities, environments or even simple affective states ('I loved English because it sounded so unusual and I was always using English phrases with my friends!'). Below are two excerpts illustrating different ways in which relationships manifested themselves in these narratives of learning:

Excerpt 1:

[My JHS teacher] often told me many stories which he had experienced in foreign countries. It was fresh for me, because I had never been abroad then. I dreamed to go overseas, and that motivated me to study English.

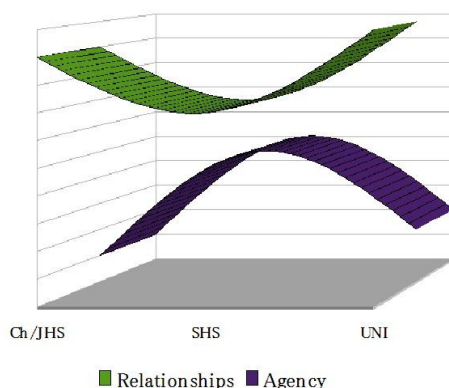
Excerpt 2:

My motivation was always high, but I didn't know how should I learn English effectively. Now, I know my friends are good partners to practice English. And there are many friends who like to learn English and many opportunities to learn English, so I want to try to use English as much as possible.

In the first excerpt, through his stories, a teacher plants a dream in the mind of the student, a dream of a foreign landscape and future self which she hopes she can someday enter. The student feels the possibility of belonging to an imagined community (Norton 2001) and has a view of an ideal self (Dörnyei, 2005). In the second excerpt, it is a community of peers which plants the seed, modelling the form (agency thinking) and practice (pathways thinking) of an imagined self which the student wishes to become. These seeds of agency seem to grow in the fertile relationships of a supportive community of peers who are themselves accessing near peer role models (Murphey & Arao, 2001) and displaying engaged collaborative autonomous learning (Murphey & Jacobs, 2000). This is infectious social capital at its best.

Our own experience as university teachers led us to assume that the high proportion of agency uncovered in the *university* time-frame would be significantly correlated with relationships. However, this assumption was not supported by the data, which presented one of the central mysteries of our study. In Figure 3, the top ribbon illustrates the trend of total relationships recorded in each time period. The bottom ribbon shows the proportion of those same statements that were coded for agency.

Figure 3: Agency-Associated Relationships



While total items coded for agency climbed in *university* (Figure 2), we see a drop in those related to relationships. While university potentially offers greater access to relationships where agency might be modelled, this was not reflected in the quantitative analysis of the LLHs. A closer reading of the discourse of the LLHs, however, uncovers some possible clues to this counter-intuitive decline.

Expressions of agency in language learning narratives may take various forms. They may illustrate initiative and perseverance in some mode of independent study. However, when agency is associated with relationships, it often takes the form of efforts in creating and maintaining relationships. On the other hand, relationships which develop naturally in interaction-rich environments, like universities, perhaps take less individual agency to initiate and maintain.

Remember, overall, agency coded items in the *university* time-frame did increase (Figure 2). As students begin applying more pathways and agency thinking in university to help themselves progress in their language learning, meeting new friends also becomes easier in the more open environment. This is in sharp contrast to, say, the Japanese high school environment where students are marched through their years in set groups, with rigid guidelines for interaction and almost no interaction with students outside of their immediate class or desk group. The LLHs reveal a much more dynamic picture of life in university.

While the total proportion of agency associated with relationships does appear to drop in university, the impact of certain relationships is undeniable, particularly those

with peers. While a teacher may show pathways and encourage students to take an active role in their learning, most often it is to friends and classmates that learners turn for models of agency. The power of these near peer role models (Murphey and Arao, 2001) is seen expressed in passages like the one below:

[I was] helped by one of my friends. His name is N. His motivation to improve his English is really incredible! ... *He had great influence on me, and I was inspired.* Then I tried to study hard and at last I could get good grades in the second year's spring semester. [Emphasis added]

Interaction-rich environments not only increase the potential for making new friends, but they can also create communities of practice which in turn suggest imagined communities beyond the immediate group of peers to which a learner might imagine themselves belonging (Wenger 1998; Norton, 2001). *Imagined* communities can still have a very *real* power to inspire and change the way we think about ourselves.

Emergent Agency in Social Capital

Communities of practice are also sites for generating social capital, which Bourdieu (1985) defines as a network of peers and others that one may access for various benefits. One of the reoccurring patterns in our data was how agency often originates through social capital. It is through these accessible networks that we are able to find new pathways and new models of persistence. Significantly, attributions associated with agency seem to be missing from many of these narratives until university. Indeed, previous research has shown that for Japanese learners of English there is not much interaction at all in the target language before university (Murphey, 2002, 2004), thus, the social capital in which agency grows simply is not there.

How exactly does this process work? Using the inherent power in good group dynamics (Dörnyei and Murphey, 2003) gets us part way there, but we suspect there is more to it. We propose that the learners who model more agency are also those who are more actively engaged in developing their social capital through the construction of identities and communities that support autonomous learning. This creates a positive cycle of agency building (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Emergent Agency in Social Capital



One student who made an effort to meet foreign students in Japan and go to parties with them alluded to such a cycle quite explicitly:

I could make good circumstances to study English with fun. I think that kind of circumstances don't appear if you are just waiting, but if you try to make it with great effort, then that attitude will naturally attract the good circumstance.

At the same time, other students seem to be at a loss, with vague pathways that seem to have little attraction to them. Even successful students may feel unfulfilled in environments that don't encourage agency, as implied below:

When I entered HS, I liked English as well as in JHS. And my motivation for learning English was high, but I did nothing special except prepare for classes and test. My scores of English tests were high, so maybe I was satisfied.

Conclusion and Implications

Obviously, the LLHs of these 20 students are too few and homogeneous to generalise to wider groups. Moreover, many factors influenced the data, such as context of writing, structure of the assignment and instructions. The immediacy of the relationship with the teacher who assigned the LLH task and that teacher's pedagogical beliefs and style might have also influenced the results. Finally, while we analysed the LLHs by time-frames (childhood and junior high school; high school; and university), one should remember that this was not a longitudinal study and it does not reflect learners' changing beliefs over time.

Despite these limitations, we found the data to be rich in its potential to elucidate the use of agency, and we are excited by the possibilities of more comprehensive research in the future. We propose that teachers might stimulate agency and hope by structuring activities and environments in ways conducive to near peer role modelling of agency and hope. Specifically:

- Create cohesive learning communities that support the growth of social capital and ecologies of learning. (e.g. Use pair work and collaborative interaction structures.)
- Provide models of agency and pathways thinking and opportunities to find such models among their peers. (e.g. *'In groups of three, brainstorm different ways you might complete this task.'*)
- 'Blame' the students for...their SUCCESSES! Attribute agency and pathways thinking to learners. (e.g. *'YOU studied hard. YOU are really getting better.'*)
- At the risk of sounding circular, get students to write their LLHs, which provide opportunities for students to see the power of agency written out in their own learning narratives as well as those of their peers.

Besides being effective sites for modelling agency and pathways thinking, LLHs can be instrumental in creating a sense of the commonality of experience within the community. Reading model LLHs, writing them, and sharing them with classmates support both student and teacher learning, and help to create optimal conditions for the development of valuable social capital as well as language acquisition.

N.B.: The study reported in this paper is more fully discussed in: Murphey, T. & Carpenter, C. (2008). The seeds of agency in language learning histories. In A. Barcelos, P. Kalaja, & V. Menezes, (Eds.) *Narratives of learning and teaching EFL* (pp. 17-34). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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