

Qiuming Lin

Agency Construction and Navigation in English Learning Stories

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bearing my son was all the way accompanied by producing the book, both of which have been huge but exhilarating endeavors to me. It is no exaggeration that this book is just like a twin brother of my son. It is dedicated to my family.

About This Book

This book is based on a longitudinal research with the author's English-majoring students, who had built and varied their images of active or passive language learners with certain linguistic devices in their accounts of English learning stories. The research is aimed to obtain an adequate discursive description of agency construction and navigation in autobiographic oral narratives, as well as to achieve an in-depth understanding to the agency issues of Chinese English-majors.

By integrating relevant theories from cultural psychology, second language acquisition and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this research has established a three-level theoretical framework: agency construction at clausal level, agency navigation at discoursal level and structural mediation at contextual level. This framework operationalizes the notion of agency on individual clauses in narrative discourses and attributes learner agency to their multiple, contradictory and ever-changing identities. The general research objectives have been developed into four specific research questions. First, how do the English-majors construct different levels of agency in individual clause in the telling of their learning stories? Second, how do they alter or maintain their agency level within one narrative discourse? Third, how do they navigate their agency dilemma across narrative discourses in different situations? Forth, what contextual factors influence agency construction and navigation in their learning stories?

To answer question (1) and (2), the author elicited significant English learning stories from life-history interviews with the participants, and then employed SFL's system of transitivity and system of logico-semantic (LS) relations to analyze the narrative data. To answer question (3) and (4), the author conducted follow-up interviews with the narrators and then applied qualitative analyses to the reflective data, with the focus on the diverse identities and the structural factors that mediate learner agency.

The research has produced specific and comprehensive findings to the research questions. At the clausal level, the English-majors configure diverse transitivity patterns with certain "*Process*" and "*Participant role*" to construct different levels of agency in their learning stories. At the discoursal level, the narrators navigate the agency dilemma by employing certain LS relations of "*enhancing*," "*extending*,"

“*elaborating*” or “*projecting*” between adjacent clauses within a narrative discourse, and by varying their actual or imagined identities across narrative discourses. At the contextual level, multifarious structural factors at the layers of “*self*,” “*setting*” and “*situation*” interact with each other, jointly shaping learners’ identities and manipulating agency construction and navigation. The research findings have fully demonstrated that agency is a dynamic construct negotiated by the English-majors with the social world. It is the result of their identity positioning and repositioning within a complex and ever-changing context, and significantly correlated with their investment in English and their English learning process.

The research has made theoretical and methodological contributions to linguistics and applied linguistics, and also offered pedagogical implications for foreign language education. It provides a dynamic perspective and a linguistic approach to study agency of the second language learners, and gives inspirations for enhancing the agency of English-majors in the English learning context in contemporary China.

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Abbreviations

BEC	Business English Certificate
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
GW	A key university in south China
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
LS	logico-semantic
SFL	Systemic Functional Linguistics
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TEM-4/8	Test for English-Majors 4/8 Band

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Chapter 1

Introduction



1.1 Research Background

As an EFL teacher working for over 20 years in the English Faculty of GW, a prestigious university in south China which is well known for its foreign language and culture education, I have heard numerous stories told by my students when we exchanged small talks on various occasions. They told me why they came to GW for their tertiary education, why they chose English as their major, how they perceived English language and culture, what they thought about the courses and the teachers, what they expected for their English learning, how they learned English in and out of class, how they used English in daily life, so on and so forth. There are joyful stories, sad stories, ambitious stories and gloomy stories.

We are so excited that our team has advanced to the final contest of English Pronunciation and Intonation! We practice for hours every night. Now I just hope we can give our best performance in the next week's final.

I have been obsessed with American TV series recently. I watch them one episode after another, one series after another. I have learned a lot of colloquial expressions of American English. Sometimes I even speak fluent American English in my dream! It's really amazing.

I have made a new friend recently. He's a Canadian learning Chinese in our university. The first time when we met, he said my English was very good. I don't know whether he meant it or was just being polite, because later he always speaks with me with his poor Chinese. How much I wish I can practice English with him!

The final examination is coming. I am nervous again. I don't know how to go over the lessons and achieve a high score in the exam. The exam has nothing to do with the lessons we take. Although I have spent a lot of time and efforts in reviewing the lessons, it is just not paid off. I am always struggling near the pass line.

.....

I am always deeply carried into their story world, feeling cheered, grieved, inspired or depressed. Anyone who has listened to their stories can undoubtedly sense different levels of agency in different stories, and very often, fluctuations of agency level in one single story. Sometimes they sound active, confident, powerful and hopeful in learning, and sometimes they sound passive, confused, impotent and helpless. How exactly do the narrators position themselves as agentive or non-agentive in their storytelling? How do they alter these positionings through their accounts? What linguistic resources do they resort to in agency making and variations? Having been trained as a linguistic researcher, I realize that such investigations must be engaged with proper linguistic techniques of analysis, especially with textual micro-analysis. Without a meta-language of some kind, discussing these issues is extremely difficult, and may even lead to the unfortunate split between “meaning” and “form”. My training within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has convinced me that its grammatics has considerable potential for such work.

SFL has been concerned with language as “a complex adaptive system” (Matthiessen, 2009), a system not only for carrying meaning, but also for creating meaning. The exploration of grammar in SFL starts from the standpoint of how language creates and expresses meaning. According to SFL, grammar is the powerhouse where meanings are created, while the clause is the central resource for making meanings (Matthiessen, 2009; Thompson, 2008), since “critical aspects of representation, concerned particularly with questions of the agency of grammatical participants and the relative focus (foregrounding/ backgrounding) on those participants involve highly specific grammatical features at the level of the individual clause” (Poynton, 1993: 6–7).

SFL further contends that language has the experiential function to make representation meaning. Language comprises a set of resources for referring to entities in the world and the ways in which those entities act on or relate to each other. At the simplest level, language reflects our view of the world as “consisting of ‘going-on’ (verbs) involving things (nouns) which may have attributes (adjectives) and which go on against background details of place, time, manner, etc. (adverbials)” (Thompson, 2008: 86). This experiential function of language is achieved by a system network called “Transitivity”, which is a means of conveying ideas about who acts, speaks, sees, reflects, etc. in individual clauses. An analysis of transitivity patterns “helps readers understand human interactions in social contexts and can be used to uncover ideological meanings within them” (Nguyen, 2012: 86). In other words, transitivity analysis can give a careful examination to the linguistic features that help to constitute subjectivity and agency.

With a huge system network of meaning potentials, SFL is a fine-grained approach to tease agency out in texts. It provides a comprehensive tool-kit to bridge meaning and form, to be more specific, to bridge agency and English learning stories in the current study.