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Concealing Identity Strategy: an Autonomous Chinese-Speaking Sojourner’s Linguistic and Social Involvements in a Religious Social Setting in the UK

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Abstract

This article reports on a case study that investigates how a successful Chinese sojourner exhibits learner autonomy through mediating agency, identity, and language learning strategies (LLS) to seek out affordances within a religious social setting in the UK. This study employs an ecological perspective and ethnographic methods through participant observation and interviews to identify a set of LLS employed by this sojourner to deal with language and socio-cultural issues in a complex ecosystem comprised of interacting human and non-human components within this social setting. The results predominantly show this sojourner exercises agency by utilizing the newly observed *concealing identity strategy* to hide his ‘atheist identity’ which is a self-perceived barrier to the setting. Employing this strategy mitigates this sojourner’s affective barrier to open access to the linguistic and non-linguistic affordances within the dynamic second language (L2) changing circumstance in this specific social place. This case study broadens the LLS research area by taking a socially-oriented perspective to investigate LLS in relation to socio-cultural and interactional abilities in real communicative L2 settings. Therefore, this study gives insights into how learner autonomy is socially mediated in a complex transnational world through the constructs of LLS, agency, and identity based on ecology theory.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Language Learning Strategies, Agency, Identity, Affordances

Chinese-speaking sojourners are currently the largest group of international students across UK universities (HESA, 2022). Most research reports that Chinese-speaking sojourners have a low level of social integration in the UK due to culture shocks and learning shocks, and they tend to stay with their co-nationals (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2017; Page, 2019; Wu, 2014). For example, Gu and Schweisfurth (2017) found that some Chinese sojourners show a lack of willingness and confidence to use English to communicate in a new environment as a result of these sojourners’ learning shocks caused by different education systems in other countries.

Meanwhile, these sojourners’ cultural shocks can come from different values and conflicts between home and host cultures, together with common feelings of missing their

family and friends (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2017; Page, 2019). Stephenson (2002) and Spencer-Oatey et al. (2016) further investigate that these sojourners could have barriers such as cultural distance, situational context, and language issues during their socialisations with different social networks in the UK.

However, there is a limited amount of research that focuses on whether and how any autonomous Chinese-speaking sojourners stand out from their co-nationals to interact with different social networks in the UK. Also, there is a lack of research investigating what strategies these sojourners employ to deal with such cultural shocks, learning shocks, and barriers during this process.

Meanwhile, in the field of applied linguistics, ecology thinking (Kramsch, 2003; Leather & van Dam, 2003; van Lier, 2004) has become widespread to investigate learner autonomy as a result of the ‘social turn’ (Block, 2003), by exploring how the affordances emerged through learners’ engagement with the complex environment in social learning settings and spaces (Murray, 2017a, 2017b).

Following this, an ethnographic case study has been set up adopting an ecological perspective (Palfreyman, 2014) to investigate the manifestation of learner autonomy in a Chinese-speaking sojourner’s (Jason, pseudonym) capacity to seek out affordances in a religious social setting in the UK. In ecology theory, de Bot et al. (2007) proposed the term ‘social ecosystem’ which implies the environment or social contexts that an individual is involved in. Also, an ecological perspective views such an ecosystem is constituted by individual, situational, cultural, and societal factors that have an interactive and combined impact on the evolution of language learning, which develops not individually but also holistically (Damşa et al., 2019; Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008). Given this, an ecology theory acknowledges individuals and the social settings as dynamic complex systems rather than regarding them as a static entity (Damşa et al., 2019; Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008).

Therefore, this case study views this religious social setting as a dynamic, changing, and complex ecosystem. This study predominantly focuses on how Jason exhibits agency to self-initially employ a set of language learning strategies (LLS) not only for linguistic issues but also to deal with socio-cultural contexts and to negotiate identity to gain entry into a complex changing L2 ecosystem comprised of interacting human and non-human features within this religious social setting. It is found that Jason hides his self-perceived ‘atheist identity’ to avoid any offence or affective barrier in his access to language learning in the ecosystem created by this specific social setting. Although Jason does not have religious

knowledge, his high motivation in improving language abilities leads him to employ a *concealing identity strategy* to open up access in this setting.

Identity concealment is a widely researched psychological and social phenomenon in which people conceal parts of their stigmatized identity (Copper et al., 2020; Quinn, 2017). Their stigmatized identity is typically kept hidden from others due to negative stereotypes or connotations attached, which may cause a loss of status and/or discrimination if exposed (Copper et al., 2020). In the field of applied linguistics, Chiang and Grant (2019) investigated how a child sex offender performed a deceptive online identity to engage in child abuse.

However, concealing identity strategy in this study has been observed for the first time in a real L2 social setting in the field of LLS from a socially-oriented perspective. This broadens the knowledge of multiplicity and instability of identity in transnational contexts (Anderson, 2019; De Fina & Perrino, 2013) by investigating the interactive relationship between identity, agency, and LLS in a dynamic L2 ecosystem. This study offers a broader perspective on learners' strategic efforts not only in self-regulation cognitive abilities (Plonsky, 2011; Redmer, 2022) but also in socialisations and intercultural abilities in LLS research.

Therefore, this case study provides insights into the construction of learner autonomy through a Chinese sojourner's ability to mediate agency, identity, and LLS in a dynamic changing transnational world based on an ecological perspective.

Theoretical Background

The Ecological Theory in Learner Autonomy

This case study mainly follows the working concept of learner autonomy from an ecological perspective which is viewed as “the capacity for perceiving and using a range of interacting affordances in the eco-social system, towards a learner's personal purposes and needs” (Palfreyman, 2014, p. 176). Palfreyman argues that an autonomous learner can recognize and understand the ‘affordances’ available and relevant to him/her. This argument underpins the application of learning strategies, such as cognitive strategies, social strategies, and affective strategies. Employing these learning strategies, an autonomous learner can recognize affordances, be open to new affordances in the involved environment, and be able to adapt to changing circumstances by pursuing new affordances or adopting new approaches while employing them (Palfreyman, 2011, 2014).

‘Affordance’ is an important metaphor offered by an ecological perspective for understanding language learning, particularly beyond the formal classroom. Affordance in language learning can be understood as opportunities or resources for learning, such as material, social, or discursive features of the environment (Menezes, 2011; van Lier, 2000, 2004). The crucial thing is that, as Menezes (2011) suggests, the notion of affordance is linked to an individual’s perceptions and actions. An affordance can only be an affordance when it is perceived as an opportunity for action. This point of view again supports the argument that affordance is not the property of the environment (Ellis, 2019; Menezes, 2011), because “different individuals have different perceptions of the world, also the interactions between individuals and the environment emerge from different social practices based on different individuals” (Menezes, 2011, p. 62).

This study incorporates the concepts of agency, identity, and LLS as elements of learner autonomy to make sense of how learner autonomy is socially mediated during the process of the dynamic interplay among individual, situational, cultural, and societal ecological features in a holistic ecosystem (Damşa et al., 2019; Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008; Lacerda & Sundberg, 2006)

Agency

To make the most of learning affordances in an ecosystem, it is important and necessary for a learner to feel a sense of agency in relation to such contexts (Benson, 2011; Mercer, 2011). Thus, learner autonomy regards the learner as an active agent in the process of language learning (Benson, 2011). This echoes an ecological point of view that individuals are one of many agentive components in complex and dynamic ecosystems and discourses, they are dynamic beings (Damşa et al., 2019; Menezes, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to bring in the construct of agency in the investigation of learner autonomy from an ecological perspective. Agency is a socially co-constructed relationship and a form of action rooted in time, history, space, and culture to take advantage of affordances in the nested eco-system (Hunter & Cooke, 2007; Morita, 2004). However, in some cases, the mediated agency could be external and observable (visible to an observer) (e.g. social, behavioural). In other cases, the mediated agency could be unobservable (invisible to an observer) (e.g. no behavioural action, cognitive, affective) (Lantolf, 2013; Tweed, 2019).

This study investigates how the participant feels a sense of agency in relation to his involved social contexts to make the most of learning affordances in an eco-social system and

thus take control of such a process (autonomy) through a set of observable and unobservable actions.

Identity

The construct of identity can help to investigate how autonomous individuals perceive affordances and how identity is mediated by their communicative interactions with affordances in an eco-system (Menezes, 2011; van Lier, 2010).

Norton (2000) uses the term identity to refer to 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.

Additionally, according to Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 53), identity is conceptualized as “long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice” (CoP). Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is introduced to investigate how identity is mediated in different communities. Identity is at a central position in situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Individuals belong to multiple CoPs, thus they have multiple identities, and as the different overlapping CoPs have influences on individuals in different ways, their identities can be contradictory and can never be completely stable. This is caused by power relations in different CoPs, and also the individuals can deny the identity that they most value and however have unwanted identities (Block, 2007; Lamb, 2013; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). It is found that individuals can conduct different types of participation in a CoP, which are non-participation, marginality, and full-participation, and these different participations entail and have an impact on individuals’ identities in different ways (Lamb, 2013).

Language Learning Strategies

The investigation of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) can help to understand how learner autonomy is manifested through a learner’s employment of LLS to make use of affordances, be open to new affordances, and be able to adapt to changing circumstances by pursuing new affordances or adopting new approaches while employing them from an ecological perspective (Palfreyman, 2011, 2014). Therefore, this study employs LLS taxonomies proposed by Oxford (2013) to investigate not only cognitive and metacognitive strategies but also sociocultural interactive strategies for learners to open up access and alternative affordances within power structures and cultural alternatives in a complex eco-system (Norton & Toohey, 2001; Oxford, 2013, 2017).

Research Questions

The present study addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What strategies are employed by an autonomous Chinese-speaking sojourner for linguistic encounters in a religious social setting in the UK?

Research Question 2: To what extent does identity inhibit or support an autonomous Chinese-speaking sojourner's socialisation in a religious social setting in the UK?

Method

Ethical Considerations

To protect the participant's privacy and confidentiality, the participant's background information is kept confidential and for this reason, his real name is not reported with this pseudonym, Jason, used alternatively. Jason consented to participate in the study and there is no incentive offered to him.

Research Site

Religion is one of the social activity categories proposed by Wiklund (2002). These categories can be used to measure the social integration conducted by an individual into a certain social network while studying abroad

The religious event that Jason attends is organized by a UK religious organization that reaches out to international students to introduce them to Christianity. This organization is beyond the university and organizes various events to help international students to meet local people and learn about local culture including the knowledge of Christianity. Thus, it could help to ease the international students' cultural shocks while they study in the UK. This organization states that its activities are open to everyone including those who identify as religious (any faith) and non-religious.

This religious event is in line with the organization's objectives focusing on international students and educating them about Christianity. This event is carried out in one of the rooms in a local church centre, and it occurs every Wednesday night for around two hours. During the event, a free dinner is provided followed by a film session on Bible learning and the chance for questions and discussion of the Bible in small groups.

The Participant

The male participant, Jason (pseudonym), is a sojourner doing a Master's degree in TESOL at a university in Southeast England. Jason was born in Mainland China and his first language is Mandarin Chinese.

Jason has a high interest in interacting with different social networks while he studies in the UK. Jason is a typical example whose interaction with people from different cultures is highly driven by the development of English language competencies. As Jason states:

“I feel the authentic English-speaking environment offered by the UK is the linguistic affordance for me, and my interaction with non-Chinese speakers is 90% motivated by improving my language abilities.”

Therefore, Jason attends this religious event to improve his language abilities rather than for Christianity, and Jason describes himself as an ‘atheist’. Jason's linguistic goals in this event are to improve his oral proficiencies and listening abilities. Jason states:

“My main aim in this event is to improve my oral proficiencies and listening abilities, I will grab someone there and ‘consume’ them to the most to have a conversation with me.”

Data Collection and Analysis

This study mainly adopts the method of qualitative research through ethnographic methods. According to Dörnyei (2007) and Starfield (2015), the employment of ethnographic approaches in applied linguistics is encouraged by the ‘social turn’ (Block, 2003) in language study which leads to the development of in-depth analysis of language learning in the specific social and cultural contexts within which they are taking place.

Ethnographic methods are suitable for this study that views language learning and use are constructed by the social contexts in which they occur. Ethnographic research privileges the direct observation of human behaviour within certain cultures, and intends to understand a social reality from observed interactions (Starfield, 2015). One researcher (one of the authors) conducted the participant observation and will refer to themselves as ‘I’ throughout the description in the following paragraphs.

As a researcher who conducted the participant observation, I carried out the intrusive observation while engaging in the activities with Jason during the event. The organizers of this event permitted me to carry out this study.

The reason for conducting the intrusive observation in this event is that this event is a religious setting and the way that organizers set up the event is more formal and more regulatory. Therefore, it was hard for me to ‘hide’ while conducting the participant observation, as the non-intrusive observation would make me look out of the place and make all attendees feel uncomfortable as they potentially could feel they are being ‘supervised’. Therefore, I came to this event with Jason as his ‘tag-along friend’ and engaged in all the activities with him. I behaved as a non-active participant to minimise my influence on Jason’s activities and just observe.

During the event, I did not only observe the contexts and surroundings of this religious setting but I also observed observable actions (Benson & Huang, 2013; Tweed, 2019; Yashima, 2013) exhibited by Jason. The field notes of this event and my observation are all audio-recorded. The audio-recorded fieldnotes can help to show more lively and contextual data.

After the participant observation, I further conducted three follow-up semi-structured interviews with Jason to make sure my interpretation of his actions aligned with his own explanations. Also, the follow-up interviews further explored the unobservable actions exhibited by Jason. Each interview lasted around 1 hour, and the design of the interview outline is based on Benson and Huang (2013), Tweed (2019), and Yashima (2013)’s definitions of observable and unobservable actions as mentioned before. For example, according to the data extracted from the participant observation, I asked him: “why did you sit at this table, who did you interact with, what did you guys talk about, how did you feel during the interaction, what did you think about during that time?”

In this way, the combination of participant observation and follow-up interviews helped me to investigate the observable and unobservable agency exhibited by Jason. I was also able to investigate how Jason’s identity is conditioned by the communicative interactions with affordances in the ecosystem (Benson & Cooker, 2013; Menezes, 2011, 2013; van Lier, 2010).

For this study, I employed computer-assisted transcription software (Transcribe - Speech to Text 2019) to transcribe the one radio-recorded observation field notes and the three follow-up interviews. The qualitative data collected are processed and analyzed utilizing the software NVivo 12® through two rounds of coding.

Moreover, this study employs ‘vignettes’ to present the narrative clips of the social and language interactions retrieved from the interviews and participant observation to particularly focus on LLS and agency exhibited by Jason. Vignettes are storylike short narratives that provide focused descriptions of events or participant experiences that are viewed as typical or representative (Creese et al., 2016.; Dörnyei, 2007).

Results

Affordances Perceived and Employed by Jason for Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Encounters

From an ethnographic perspective, Jason’s strong motivation to learn English leads him to perceive the religious event as a linguistic affordance. This is because he comes to this event for his language learning with his self-perceived *second language learner/user* and *atheist identity* rather than for acquiring religious knowledge as other Christians. Jason’s unique choice and perception of the religious event echoes the point that affordance is built upon personal needs and perceptions, which are in line with their identity (Menezes, 2011). Therefore, different people can perceive different affordances even when they are situated in the same ecosystem (Murray, 2017b).

Jason particularly perceives and takes *two non-Chinese speaking organizers* for his linguistic and other encounters. One is a British elder man, who is an experienced English and French language teacher. Jason perceives and employs his interactions with this British man as an affordance to learn authentic English expressions and also to create opportunities to have English conversations:

“I always ask this British man to teach me some authentic expressions, such as ‘grab a seat’, ‘elevenses’. Also, if I do not understand a word, he will explain and clarify it for me.”

Jason also perceives and employs his encounters with a French organizer as another affordance to speak English rather than learning language knowledge:

“This French boy is very nice, he is someone you can ask for help. But he is not an English speaker, I rarely ask him for help with my language issues, I mainly use him for creating opportunities to have English conversations.”

This result indicates Jason is good at organizing non-Chinese speakers for *his self-perceived different language levels* as affordances to achieve his different learning needs and to make the learning contents ‘personally relevant.’

Additionally, Jason’s interactions with the British man and the French boy are also perceived and employed by him for *non-linguistic encounters*, such as information encounters. These two organizers always provide information to Jason regarding events and seminars that Jason might be interested in.

In addition to the non-Chinese speakers, Jason also perceives and employs *other affordances*. For example, the friendly and welcoming environment provided by this event brings more *linguistic encounters and emotional encounters* at the same time, as Jason feels such an environment brings him *more confidence and willingness* to speak English and socialize with non-Chinese speakers. For example, he mentions:

“People here in the religious event are all very warm and friendly, it brings me a very strong sense of security, this gives me strong emotional support, as I am less nervous and feel less panic to interact with others and speak English in such an environment, it potentially brings me more linguistic encounters when I become more confident and more open to talking with others.”

Furthermore, *social etiquette* are perceived as one of the important social encounters by Jason. He perceives that he needs to hide his ‘atheist identity’ and change his persona to achieve his language learning goals due to his perceived intensive religious atmosphere in this event. As Jason mentions:

“I still feel awkward although I have been here so many times, I still cannot speak out my real feeling. Christianity is incompatible with my values. But this event has very intensive religious atmosphere, as people here keep persuading me to join Christian, but I really do not want to, I can only pretend I am interested in it.”

Although Jason’s main aim is not to acquire knowledge of Christianity, this event is still perceived as an affordance by him to have *cultural encounters*. It broadens his knowledge of the culture of Christianity *incidentally*, as Jason states:

“I can have the knowledge of it without believing it.”

Jason's Identity

As Jason states:

“I am an atheist, I do not believe in Christianity. I cannot speak out my real feeling, I do not want to offend people in this event, and they really have a very strong belief in Christianity, it is a sensitive thing.”

It is also interesting to find at the end of the event, Jason rushes to leave as he wants to avoid the prayer meeting. Jason tells me:

“let's go, let's go, I do not want to stay for this prayer meeting, I cannot learn and gain anything from the prayer meeting.”

Therefore, it is interesting to find that Jason negotiates his identity by *selecting different parts* of the events to achieve his different goals. If Jason feels some parts can offer him affordances for linguistic encounters, then he conceals his identity in these perceived ‘useful parts.’ However, Jason defines his core identity by engaging in perceived ‘useless parts’ (e.g. the prayer meeting).

Following this, such results illustrate that Jason shows *different types of participation* in different parts of this changing ecosystem. He shows full participation in the perceived ‘useful parts’. He shows non-participation in the perceived ‘useless parts.’

Additionally, Jason's self-perceived core ‘atheist identity’ potentially inhibits him to build closer relationships with the non-Chinese speakers. For example, Jason feels that the interactions with the elder British man and the French boy are mainly for language learning rather than having fun, hanging out as close friends, or anything deeper. As Jason states:

“I feel I am only ‘泛泛之交’ (Fan Fan Zhi Jiao: general acquaintance, shallow interaction) with them. They are very nice to me, but they are Christians, it is hard to open my heart to them, I only use them for English learning.”

LLS and Agency Exhibited by Jason

This section presents two vignettes to predominantly highlight the newly-discovered LLS which have not been recorded in the existing taxonomy of LLS proposed by Oxford (2013). These vignettes also show how Jason exhibits a high degree of agency through a set of observable and unobservable actions in response to a changing circumstance comprised of interacting human and non-human components within this religious social setting.

Vignette 1 – Participant Observation Field Notes, Follow-Up Interviews

During the free talk session before the dinner starts, Jason stands in a circle with other attendees and talks about the weather with them. Jason says: “it is quite chilly today”. The elder British man says to him “ you can also use ‘nippy,’ which has a similar meaning as ‘chilly’.”

When the dinner starts, Jason follows the British man and chooses to sit beside him. During dinner time, Jason directly uses the word ‘nippy’ in conversations with others. A Canadian boy says during the dinner: “I will travel to Canada very soon, it must be freezing.” Jason replies: “it is quite nippy... nippy right?” The Canadian boy replies: “ it is more than nippy.” (Jason then repeats ‘nippy’ to himself without paying attention to the Canadian boy’s response and does not continue the conversation.)

During the dinner conversations, the British elder man uses the word ‘sleet’, Jason has a quick response to this unfamiliar word and asks the British man directly: “ how to spell this word, could you please make a sentence for me.”

LLS in Vignette 1

This vignette shows Jason employs a set of LLS at the same time to deal with linguistic issues and also to open up and get access to affordances for his linguistic goals. For example, Jason employs ‘interacting to learn and communicate’ (Sociocultural Interactive (SI) Strategies) to learn the new word ‘nippy’ and ‘sleet’ but also autonomously to use the word ‘nippy’ practically in conversations with interactants. He also uses ‘appeal for help/clarification’ and ‘express nonunderstanding’ (Communication Strategies) to ask the British man how to spell the word ‘sleet’ and to make a sentence with it.

Meanwhile, Jason ‘uses auditory senses to understand and remember’ (Cognitive Strategies) to keep repeating ‘nippy’ (speak out) many times to remember it. Although it makes him not pay attention to others’ further explanations on the degree of ‘nippy’ and ‘freezing,’ Jason also employs ‘conceptualizing broadly’ (Cognitive Strategies) to combine and link similar things to better understand and learn a new word, such as using the synonym ‘chilly’ to understand ‘nippy.’

It is important to notice, that there are newly-discovered tactics utilized by Jason to employ the ‘orchestrating strategy use for contexts, communication and culture’ strategies (meta-sociocultural interactive strategies: meta-SI strategies) to open up more opportunities for himself to have linguistic encounters. For example, Jason is very good at employing

‘orchestrating strategies’ (meta-SI strategies) to create more opportunities for himself to have English conversations via seat selection.

Agency in Vignette 1

Observable Actions

- Seat selection

Jason intentionally chooses to sit with the British man who is more talkative and familiar to create more opportunities to have English conversations.

- Being proactive

Jason proactively asks non-Chinese speakers questions when he comes across words that he is unfamiliar with during the conversations, such as: “how to spell this word, how to use this word, could you please make a sentence for me with this word?”

He actively and autonomously picks up the new words during the conversations and then uses and practices them in other real communicative contexts.

Unobservable Actions

- Being aware

Jason is very aware when he comes across unfamiliar words during conversations and then further uses these new words in other real contexts.

Vignette 2 – Participant Observation Field Notes, Follow-Up Interviews

As mentioned, Jason mainly uses this event as a good affordance to have linguistic encounters, rather than to acquire knowledge of Christianity. Jason especially mentions:

“Social manners are very important in this event. I need to show my respect to Christianity even though I do not believe in it. I feel awkward when the people in this event talk about Christianity as this is incompatible with my values. Although people here at the event are very friendly to me, which makes me feel much more confident and comfortable having conversations with non-Chinese speakers, it still has an intensive religious atmosphere. I hide my real feeling and real identity due to the pressure from such an atmosphere and power relationship of these people who believe in Christianity.”

LLS in Vignette 2

This vignette shows that Jason self-initiates the novel concealing identity strategy to be able to access linguistic encounters. It is interesting to find that Jason uses different identity strategies to orchestrate different parts of the event as mentioned before. This is also a newly observed tactic in the ‘orchestrating strategy use for contexts, communication and culture strategies’ (meta-SI strategies). As mentioned before, Jason puts on the unwanted identity during self-perceived ‘useful parts’ for creating more opportunities for linguistic encounters, but he defines his real identity by not participating in his self-perceived ‘useless parts’ (e.g. prayer meeting). The data also illustrate that Jason hides his real feelings and atheist identity due to the intensive religious atmosphere and he feels pressure from the power relationship of these people who believe in Christianity. As Jason mentioned in the interviews these people mainly dominate this event and keep persuading him to join Christianity.

The data also shows Jason employs the ‘paying attention to affect’ strategy (meta-affective Strategies) and ‘paying attention to contexts, communication and culture’ strategy (meta- SI Strategies). As he feels the welcoming and friendly atmosphere created by this event makes him feel confident and comfortable interacting with non-Chinese speakers. Meanwhile, he is also aware of the intensive religious atmosphere of this event, thus he is very cautious of his conversation topics and social etiquette. That is also the reason why he uses the concealing identity strategy to deal with such a religious culture setting.

Jason feels awkward when others talk about Christianity which is incompatible with his values (meta-affective Strategies and meta SI Strategies). But he employs the ‘activating supportive emotions, beliefs and attitudes’ strategy (affective strategies) to overcome such an awkward feeling by thinking positively that he can gain knowledge of Christianity incidentally.

Agency in Vignette 2

Unobservable Actions

- Being aware

Jason is very aware of and cautious about social etiquette in this event, as he feels religion is a very sensitive thing, and he needs to be cautious to avoid offending others.

- Concealing identity

Jason conceals his identity and changes his persona to better associate with this religious setting, and to gain access to linguistic encounters.

- Adjusting emotions

Jason adjusts his emotions to make himself feel less nervous and less awkward when others talk about Christianity which is incompatible with his values.

Discussion and Implications

Language Learning Strategies Employed by an Autonomous Sojourner for Linguistic Encounters in an L2 Religious Social Setting

The results show Jason mediates and reconstructs agency through observable and unobservable actions to better fit into this religious setting. It indicates Jason has a sense of agency in relation to a range of affordances as an active human agent.

The agency exhibited by Jason is in line with the point that from an ecological perspective, individuals are one of many agentic components in complex and dynamic eco-social discourses, they are the dynamic beings (Damşa et al., 2019; Palfreyman, 2014; van Lier, 2004). The results expand on the point that language learner autonomy regards learners as active agents in the process of language learning (Benson, 2011). In this way, learner autonomy is manifested through Jason's sense of agency to perceive and use the interacting affordances for his linguistic goals in a dynamic complex ecosystem from the ecological perspective (Mercer, 2011; Palfreyman, 2014).

The different forms of agency through a set of observable and unobservable actions exhibited by Jason also expand on the point that agency is not a property owned by individuals but “a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large” from the ecological perspective (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148). Therefore, “agency is not the same always and everywhere, but how it emerges is dependent on certain circumstances and contexts.” (van Lier, 2008, p. 163). Agency is a socially mediated action rooted in time, history, space, and culture to take advantage of affordances in the nested eco-system. (Hunter & Cooke, 2007; Morita, 2004).

Meanwhile, according to Gao (2007, 2010), agency is a precondition for individuals to make choices for LLS, and individuals make choices for utilizing particular learning strategies due to particular contextual realities. Following this, the results show LLS are employed by Jason through a set of observable and unobservable actions (agency). This further indicates agency underpins individuals' LLS as the agency could constantly modify their LLS along with their personal goals and capacities in response to the changing learning

contexts. Consequently, the ongoing interplay between individuals' agency and contextual realities underpins individuals' LLS (Gao, 2007, 2010).

Therefore, the results show that Jason employs not only meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies for language learning but also more about meta-SI and SI Strategies. The meta-SI and SI strategic efforts exhibited by Jason facilitate his exposure to different social networks in this L2 social setting and also assist him to deal with non-linguistic issues to gain entry into this setting for his personal needs. The results extracted from vignettes further show he does not employ one strategy individually, but autonomously utilizes a set of strategies continuously to deal with language issues, affect, and also identity issues at the same time during his interaction with others in this setting.

The meta-SI and SI strategic efforts exhibited by Jason further show his ability to subvert the imposing ecosystem to “open up or create access and alternative affordances within power structures and cultural alternatives for learners” (Oxford, 2003, p. 79). Meanwhile, the sociocultural and identity issues addressed by Jason with meta-SI and SI strategies also expand on Kramsch (2006, p. 251) point that “ecology theory acknowledges communication as not just items of vocabulary or communication strategies, but embodied experiences, emotional resonances, and moral imaginings.” Social interaction during study abroad not only requires language competencies but also socially grounded interactional competencies which facilitate individuals to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds (e.g., Badwan and Simpson (2019); Howard (2019); Jackson (2018, 2019).

All in all, the results indicate learner autonomy is manifested through Jason's exercise of a high degree of agency to employ a set of LLS in response to the affordances offered by a dynamic complex L2 ecosystem based on the ecological perspective. This is in line with arguments made by Palfreyman (2011, 2014) that an autonomous learner can employ different strategies to make use of affordances, be open to new affordances in the involved environment, and be able to adapt to changing circumstances.

The Relationship between an Autonomous Sojourner's Identity and Socialisation in an L2 Religious Social Setting

This concealing identity strategy employed by Jason expands on the point that identity is a complex multi-layered, and contested construct by showing the dynamic relationship between identity, agency, and LLS in a specific L2 setting. This strategy also indicates the development of identity is from the negotiation with a set of communicative interactions with

affordances in certain eco-systems from the ecological perspective (Benson & Cooker, 2013; Block, 2014; van Lier, 2010).

The different types of participation conducted by Jason in his perceived ‘useless and useful parts’ of this setting are in line with the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Jason conceals his perceived ‘atheist identity’ to conduct the full participation in self-perceived useful parts follows the argument that power relations in different Communities of Practice (CoPs) have influences on individuals in different ways, their identities can be contradictory and can never be completely stable (Block, 2007; Lamb, 2013; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Also, individuals can deny the identity that they most value and however have unwanted identities (Block, 2007; Lamb, 2013; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Meanwhile, Jason’s non-participation in his perceived ‘useless parts’ follows arguments by Wenger (1998, p. 164) and Lamb (2013) that individuals can still define their identities by not engaging in a CoP.

Furthermore, Palfreyman (2011, 2014) argues that an autonomous learner can recognize and understand the ‘affordances’ available and relevant to him/her from an ecological perspective. Meanwhile, individuals *perceive* affordances in line with their identity (Menezes, 2011). Therefore, ‘learner autonomy’ based on Palfreyman (2011, 2014) argument is manifested through Jason’s abilities to adjust his identity to interact with his self-perceived ‘relevant affordances’ of the changing circumstances for his language learning. Jason perceives the prayer meetings as ‘irrelevant affordances’ in line with his perceived atheist identity.

Conclusion

This case study predominantly shows how learner autonomy is socially-mediated through a sojourner’s ability to reconstruct agency by employing a set of novel LLS in real L2 social settings (e.g. concealing identity strategy, orchestrate identity strategy) which have not been recorded in the existing taxonomy of LLS proposed by Oxford (2013). This sojourner employs these LLS to subvert the imposing ecosystem to enhance the access to affordances offered by a complex transnational world.

The novel concealing identity strategy mitigates the sojourner’s psychological barrier during his SLA in a specific L2 social setting. This strategy further shows the interactive relationship between agency, identity, and LLS in response to the affordances in a dynamic changing circumstance based on the ecological perspective. In this way, this study offers

insights into how concealing identity strategy could be used in the real L2 communicative social settings in the field of LLS research in addition to being a researched psychological and social phenomenon (Copper et al., 2020; Quinn, 2017)

The results extracted from this study additionally show that interactions with different social networks in L2 social settings can bring a whole package of not only linguistic encounters but also cultural, social, and affective encounters if the sojourners act upon the affordances while studying abroad. This can further benefit Chinese sojourners' multidimensional integrations in a transnational context. This expands on Jia (2019)'s point that Chinese sojourners can constantly visualize the successful second culture selves by interacting with the social networks of the target culture.

Notes on the Contributors

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