

**TOWARDS A CROSS-GENERATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF  
EFL LEARNER AGENCY:  
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY ON LEARNERS FROM TAIWAN**

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**ABSTRACT**

Aiming to develop a contextualized understanding of language learner agency (LLA) as defined by van Lier (2008), this study asks the question: How do Taiwanese EFL learners of two generations under different educational policies and social atmospheres narrate their English learning experiences and exert LLA differently? Narrative and interview data were collected from four participants born in two different time frames: the 1950-60s, or the post WWII period, and after 1987, when the 33-year-old martial law was lifted and educational reforms were gradually introduced. Analyzing the data using van Lier's three features of LLA and interacting with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) notions of context and continuity revealed many differences across the two generations' exertion of LLA in terms of their respective times, places, and relationships. As the 12-year curriculum is to be implemented soon and is expected to impact the next generation of Taiwanese learners, this study provides insights into LLA in EFL as both personal and social experiences and allows us to ponder on our shared past, present, and future EFL learning experiences. Implications and suggestions are provided based on the results.

**Key Words:** Language Learner Agency, Generational Differences, Taiwan as an EFL Context, multiple case study

**INTRODUCTION**

Defined in terms of socioculturally mediated capacity and activity to regulate one's learning (Ahean, 2001), language learner agency (LLA) has been frequently associated with context. For example, it has been considered the "complex interaction between individuals and communities

on the one hand, and human cognition and experience on the other, focusing on the ‘intersubjective processes’” (Deters, Gao, Miller, & Vitanova, 2015, p. 3). Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) also maintain that, “agency is never a property of the individual but a relationship that is constantly constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with society at large” (p. 148). Obviously context is one of the key features of LLA, but as an SLA concept, LLA is still in need of contextualized understanding.

The issue of context has been discussed by many narrative studies in TESOL in recent years. For example, *TESOL Quarterly* published a special issue on narrative inquiry in 2011, edited by Barkhuizen. Another edited volume by Barkhuizen (2013) published twelve studies from many different countries. However, it is hard to find one study that attempts to understand multiple generations of LLA experience in one particular sociopolitical context. A close possibility is the edited volume by Kalaja, Menezes, and Barcelos (2008), which collected fourteen EFL narrative studies from Finland, Brazil, and Japan. The chapters having a clear focus on three geographical areas seem promising in providing a clear picture of the learners in these areas. But, coordinating efforts were not attempted: each of the chapters remains independent from one another. Darwin and Norton (2015) focusing on the concept of investment have also identified many studies from such geographical areas as North America, Asia, and Africa, but studies comparing learning experiences by multiple generations of EFL learners in one area are not included.

The importance for capturing generational differences lies in the need to understand the *continuity* of a shared experience, i.e., learning English as the first foreign language in the early days of life among EFL learners from one particular area. ‘*Continuity*’ in Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) notion is the past, present, and future of an experience. They cited John Dewey in stating that

...experience is both personal and social. Both the personal and the social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context. (p. 2).

To capture a shared experience, it is important to understand that “experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences” (p. 2), and thus the concept of *continuity*. Along with Clandinin and Connelly, this researcher is interested in “move[ing]

back and forth between the personal and the social, simultaneously thinking about the past, present, and future, and to do so in ever-expanding social milieus” (pp. 2-3) because then language educators will have a better idea of where we came from and where we are going as a unique EFL learning community.

This study is thus concerned with contextualizing the concept of LLA through addressing the question—How do Taiwanese EFL learners of two generations under different educational contexts and social atmospheres exert their LLA during their early English learning experiences? The early experiences or the beginning stage of English learning in this study was defined as from the time when the participants first became aware of the existence of English to when they graduated from university and before they started their chosen career. These included English learning in formal and informal as well as pedagogical and non-pedagogical contexts. During these formative years Taiwanese learners would experience English education impacted by social norms and ideologies existing in society, and the study is interested in how such impacts were experienced by learners of two different generations.

Indeed, the presence of English in the Taiwanese school curriculum has brought both joy and pain to generations of Taiwanese learners in their childhood or early teens. Since the 1990s, in the name of globalization, reforms and changes to English education started to happen at a high speed (e.g., Chen, 2009; Chou & Ching, 2012). What all these and other recent reforms and changes add up to is likely different early English learning experiences across generations. Impacts from these differences, however, have not been fully understood. Since educational reforms have brought changes to learner experiences (see Chou & Ching, 2012), documenting and analyzing EFL experiences by generations of Taiwanese is expected to derive not only deeper theoretical and contextualized insights into EFL LLA but also have historical significance.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Taiwan as an EFL Context**

Chen (2009, p. 103) in discussing the recent history of Taiwanese education makes the distinction of three stages of development: 1945-1969 was considered the stabilizing stage in which the educational

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*Chin-chi Chao*

policy served the purpose of stabilizing the post WWII society; 1970-1986 was the policy implementing stage, in which education had the mission to help the government solidify shared or advocated values among citizens. After 1987 when the 33-year martial law was lifted, it was the multidimensional reform stage; education started to provide room for learner autonomy and creativity. The contrasts in policy emphasis among the three stages being so obvious, variations in learner experiences can be expected.

Li (2012) in his article, the Evolution and Vision of Taiwan's English Education, further traces carefully the development and impact of our English education policy from before the KMT government moved to Taiwan around 1949 all the way to the 2000s. The initial stage of our English education was said to start between 1945 and 1955, a time when there were not sufficient teachers, materials, or other resources, but, based on Li's personal experience and observation, students were enthusiastic about mastering the language through mostly rote memorization. In the 1960s, high school students started to use the Ministry of Education (MOE)-approved English textbooks authored by scholars who had been educated in Western countries. In 1968, compulsory education was extended from six to nine years, and English started to have a place in the formal curriculum. This change eventually led to a large number of Taiwanese young people studying abroad in the United States and Europe from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Between 1945 and the early 1990s, the teaching focus for English did not have much variation. However, as the nine-year curriculum guideline was implemented in the early 1990s, the teaching emphasis of English was supposed to shift from reading and writing, or academic literacy, to listening and speaking, or communicative competence. By 2006, the textbook market was no longer monopolized by the MOE. Instead, it was open to all publishers who invited scholars to edit textbooks based on a set of MOE curriculum guidelines. The guidelines for high school English specified basic and advanced exit levels of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and integrated skills as the objective for all high school English classes. They meant to provide consistency to how textbooks were developed and how teachers taught. Meanwhile, in elementary schools, English became part of the formal curriculum for Grade 5 in 2001 and extended to Grade 3 in 2005, although many students, particularly those from well-to-do families, usually start learning English much earlier than they are expected to

according to the official school curriculum by the Ministry of Education (MOE). In 2009, another revised curriculum guideline was issued. This time, English proficiency levels for elementary, high school, and vocational schools were all clearly defined.

In the long history of English education in Taiwan, wash-back effects from high school and college entrance examinations have been the most obvious on how teachers taught, students learned, and parents and the general public responded and made demands of the school. According to Li, the first college entrance examination was given in 1956; the questions tested at the time were discrete items (i.e., multiple-choice questions). It was not until 1981 when writing and translation sections were included that students had to demonstrate their writing ability in English. Including writing in the entrance examinations marked a critical change that influenced how high school English was taught and learned. In 2011, the College Entrance Examination Committee pilot-tested a listening exam, which is now a part of the entrance examination.

In addition to official curriculum reforms, there have also been growing opportunities for students to experience overseas travel or study abroad or to interact with international students right on campus. Many schools and teachers have engaged their students in global tandem learning projects through the Internet. It has also been a common practice among Taiwanese parents to invest in their children's English learning, giving them ample opportunities to take additional English courses and experience the wider world from an early age. This means the current generation of Taiwanese learners has many more opportunities to engage in real-world English use than their parents had in their early English learning experiences. There is indeed a need to focus on cross-generational understanding of EFL experiences and LLA.

#### **Core Features of Language Learning Agency**

The analytic framework adopted for this study consists of the core features of LLA by van Lier (2008) and the notion of context by Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 32). In his study, van Lier illustrated six levels of intensity of agency by means of six classroom extracts. Based on his observations and analyses, three core features of agency were proposed (p. 172). Since the author did not provide elaborated discussions on these core features, a preliminary discussion of the three features from van Lier's study is attempted below interacting with

Clandinin and Connelly's notion of context. This notion of context focuses on temporal context (or time), spatial context (or place), and key people around the learner (or relationships with parents, teachers, peers). Time, place, and relationship as clear categories of context when cross examining with van Lier's LLA features were expected to generate useful insights for an enriched understanding of LLA.

*"Agency involves initiative or self-regulation by the learner."*

Learner initiative in van Lier's study is about the learner's own will and self-selection, through which they engage themselves in a response or a course of action (e.g., asking a surprising question) sidetracking from the teacher's plans or expectations and eventually becoming the focus of the class. Although this current study is about LLA happening during multiple time frames and at multiple contexts in the learner's early English learning experience, not at one particular time in one particular classroom as in van Lier's study, learner initiative is still relevant. Specifically, it is possible to focus on time factors when the learner took initiatives and moved away from the authority's will (i.e., teachers, parents, or more capable others). With learner initiation and time as the focus, this current study analyzed episodes in particular time frames that suggest the learner's self-selected responses to authority and pays attention to the choices and actions that the participants took that might have been confined or enabled by time.

*"Agency is interdependent, that is, it mediates and is mediated by the sociocultural context."*

As agency is the result of social interaction, the sociocultural context in van Lier's conception is "the heart of the matter" (2008, p. 5). Norton and Toohey (2001), in their attempt to understand good language learners, also emphasize that "a focus on the learning context must be complemented with a focus on the identity and human agency of the language learner" (p. 312). The mutually mediated relationship between context and LLA is closely related to the affordance that the learner perceives in the context and their decisions to take agentive actions, although Block (2015) cautions the presence of structural constraints in the context surrounding the learner might discourage learner agency.

For the current study, this feature is taken literally to highlight places for LLA to happen. The places in the Taiwanese English learning context may include school, home, and private language institutes where English

classes are offered for those who need additional instruction. Among the three places, the language institutes typically focus on test-taking skills and thus the learning experience there can be mostly examination-oriented featuring effectiveness and efficiency. The mediational roles that each of these three places played in the two-generation participants' journey to English proficiency and LLA were analyzed in the study.

*“Agency includes an awareness of the responsibility for one’s own actions vis-à-vis the environment, including affecting others.”*

The awareness that the learner has regarding what to do with people and relationships related to LLA is the focus here. In van Lier’s study, the particular group of students that demonstrated a high level of LLA raised questions that they were interested in, volunteered answers and elaborations, and collaboratively chose to take a different route to a class discussion even though the teacher was present and was supposed to be leading the discussion. Although the teacher in van Lier’s study was not portrayed as a challenge at all, in the current study the focus would be the people around the learners that challenged or enabled LLA. Thus, for this feature, how the participants discussed their LLA in relation to teachers, parents, or peers was the focus.

The three features of agency as proposed by van Lier are not meant to be mutually exclusive. They tend to interact with one another and need to be taken as a whole. However, for the sake of analysis, focusing on time, place, and relationship, respectively, was expected to better facilitate analysis and allow rich insights for LLA to be generated. The following are the research questions:

1. What are the EFL learning journeys like for four agentive Taiwanese learners from two different generations?
2. How do their narratives reveal the varied interaction between sociocultural contexts (i.e., time, place, and relationships) and language learner agency?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Context and Participants**

This study follows the qualitative case study tradition adopting narratives and interviews as the main data sources. According to Gall, Gall,

and Borg (2007), case study research is “(a) the in-depth study of (b) one or more instances of a phenomenon (c) in its real-life context that (d) reflects the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p. 447). In particular, the phenomenon this study focused on is the EFL learning experiences of two generations of Taiwanese learners, i.e., those who were born during 1950-69, or after WWII, and after 1987, or when the educational reforms started to be discussed and then implemented. This division of generations generally corresponds to Chen’s (2009, p. 103).

Four participants were invited to the study, including two TESOL professors, born in the 1956-60s, and two TESOL graduate students or English-major students, born after 1987. These participants were purposely chosen because of the obvious LLA episodes in their narratives. Their ability to articulate, reflect, and discuss their experiences in depth with the researcher as well as the rapport between the researcher and the participants were also taken into consideration. Although the researcher did not know all four of the participants well before the study, two of them were long-term friends, while one was a previous student. With the relationships in place, the participants seemed to have little concern about discussing their experiences with the researcher. More information about all four participants is provided in the result section as their experiences are reconstructed.

### **Data Collection**

The data for this study included the participants’ language-learning oral narratives and responses to follow-up in-depth interviews. The initial prompt for all four participants was the same, “Please tell your story associated with English learning, since the time when you first became aware of the existence of this language.” All participants were given sufficient time to tell their stories, and they were not interrupted until they signaled the storytelling was completed. During the process, the researcher also made sure that the story-telling sessions went naturally and comfortably as conversations. If questions and clarifications were needed, the researcher would raise them at appropriate times. The storytelling session for any one participant lasted from one to two hour(s). Follow-up interviews were also conducted to make sure that sufficient details were collected. While the stories were told and interviews were conducted, digital audio recorders were used to capture the entire process.



**Data Analysis**

Data were first transcribed from the audio files. As the language used for narratives and interviews was Mandarin Chinese, the details discussed in this paper were verified as much as possible by the participants during member checking. In addition, pseudonyms were used in order to protect the participants' identities.

There were three stages to the data analysis procedure: First, it was the holistic-content analysis procedure (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), focusing on the participants' experiences for the purpose of constructing a profile for each of them. This process allowed the researcher to address the first research question. With the stories in place, the second stage of analysis focused on the second research question analyzing by means of the three core features of agency by van Lier (2008) and then further examined by the notion of time, space, and relationship by Clandinin and Connelly (2000).

It must also be noted that the analysis process was facilitated by the researcher's insider experience, as I shared with the participants the experience of Taiwanese language education. In a sense, the study was reflective in nature: That is, being part of the field, I often engaged in "simultaneously mediating and interpreting the "other" in dialogue with the "self" (Riessman, 2008, p. 17). This position was mostly helpful in analysis, although bias could also get in the way. Member checking and triangulation through multiple data sources really helped to guard the trustworthiness of the study, as presented in the results of analysis below.

**RESULTS**

Addressing the first research question, this section reconstructs the four participants' early English learning experiences, starting from the two participants (C and G) from Generation One, followed by N and S from Generation Two.

Generation One (Born in the 1950-60s)

**C's Experiences (1960)**

C is a daughter of a telecommunication company's employee who was a single parent. C's first impression of English was the vinyl records

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*Chin-chi Chao*

of Western songs at home that her siblings listened to. “They [my siblings] seemed to project the feeling that it [listening to the Western songs] was a cool thing to do.” C became aware of the existence of English as a foreign language that she needed to learn when she was about to complete elementary school,

There were some classmates...they would say that their parents had planned for them to attend... They were going to learn ABCD... I started to know that we were going to learn a new thing.

C moved to a different school district after elementary school, so at the beginning of her junior high school she did not have any friends and felt lonely. In the first class when the teacher asked who had already learned how to do the four forms of English handwriting, C recalled, “I was dumbfounded. Almost all of them [the new class members] raised their hands. I was not sure how many, but I was one of those people that didn’t...” C did not think it a problem to not have learned but was only surprised that the teacher decided to go quickly through the basics. Then the class was given the first quiz, and the result was

I scored zero. ... I got zero. I also didn’t have the slightest idea that this thing [English] required practice at home.

What was even more devastating was the teacher’s response. C said, “She was like, ‘Why couldn’t you answer just one of the questions?’ ...Right in front of the whole class. ...”

C was very frustrated: “I did very well academically in elementary school. I seldom got bad scores, not to mention this [zero].... I was utterly humiliated.” When feeling most frustrated, she thought about the joy her big sister demonstrated when listening to English songs and practicing speaking English. “I didn’t want to believe that I couldn’t learn it. I said to myself I would work really hard on it, on my own, not telling anybody, quietly, secretly, steadily studying it hard. Gradually, my interest emerged, and my scores were fine.”

C actually developed her own study scheme. She first spent some time making up for the four types of handwriting that she had not learned. “I told myself I would never experience such humiliation again!” Next, she focused on sentence structures. Her strategy, which she had no idea where it was from, was actually substitution drills:

I would replace one word for another using the sentence pattern that we learned in class. I created many, many sentences. For example,

for “This is a book,” I might replace ‘book’ for ‘box’ and create the new sentence, “This is a box”. When I learned possession, I would change “This is my book” with “This is your book.”

She also studied kinesthetically:

I never liked sitting around quietly studying. I would jump from one end of the bed to the other in the bedroom, creating and saying sentences... meanwhile pretending to be teaching others English, all by myself. I did this again and again... until I realized I actually had created many sentences and developed a sense of achievement toward English.

C was fully aware that her kind of practice had little use for school examinations: “Because they wouldn’t ask you to create sentences.” Using the language was not the point; getting the right answer was. As C provided the example,

If there is this sentence “She is tall,” they would ask you to replace ‘tall’ with ‘not short,’ so the correct answer would be “She is not short.” ... This kind of examination has very little to do with what I could really do with English.

Instead of for the sake of meeting requirements, C said her way of learning English actually served a different purpose:

It made learning English fun. It’s like toy building blocks. Say you only have 40 blocks, ... you can change the position of just one piece of them to create many different forms. ...Building things up excited me. English was a lot like that.

There was also an element of pretending that made English learning enjoyable.

I enjoyed pretending that I was teaching people something new. I actually used pretention games when studying all the subjects in junior high school. Being a teacher was never my career goal, but I would say to the empty bedroom, “Pay attention, Class. This is very important!” (laughs)

C said when her father walked into the room she would immediately stop what she was doing. C lost her mother to illness when very young. As the youngest child in the family, learning English was like exploring her secret garden, not to be shared with anybody, not even her father. C

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*Chin-chi Chao*

said years later, after her father passed way, her aunt told her that for a while her father was worried watching her jumping here and there and murmuring some unknown words. “He thought that I was mentally ill.”

In the last semester of junior high school, C and her peers became affected by a new school policy that placed students into different classes based on their academic scores. C shared the discontent felt among her fellow students and did not feel like preparing for the senior high school examination. She also had some health issues that created problems for study. She ended up entering a nursing school with a low reputation and whose students not only were not interested in studying but also would make fun of those who showed any interest in studying. Since she was not interested in nursing and her peers kept teasing her every time when she wanted to study, she finally decided to change to a different school at the beginning of the second year. This decision came as shocking news to her father:

I did well academically in the nursing school. I had the first place in my class. There seemed no reason [for me to refuse to go back to campus]... Dad thought I must have been bullied or something. ... I actually had kept my decision all to myself for a long time.

Realizing his daughter was firm in her will, C’s father had no choice but to allow her to stay at home. C started preparing for the entrance examination all over again. It would take her two years to finally obtain admission to a junior college famous for strong foreign language training (hereafter, FL College).

Even though she was admitted with a good footing, C said she lacked confidence. In order to manage her anxiety, C engaged herself in her old English learning materials from junior high school and started to review the lessons using the same substitution drill method. This strategy worked very well, as later she realized that she was one of the few students who did well without experiencing much discomfort attending English-only classes:

I remember one American teacher who had just arrived in Taiwan and did not speak any Chinese. She used a lot of methods to make us understand... body movements, gestures, graphics and drawings, ... we [the class] might still not understand her. But, not too long into the semester I found myself understanding her questions. It’s just that I couldn’t answer her in English. I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t. In the second semester, she noticed that I would smile in

response to her questions. She called on me. Once when the teacher called on me, you know, I had to answer. Then, I found my responses correct. My confidence grew.

After the FL junior college, C managed to pass another examination and enter the English department of a university in Taipei. She enjoyed all the literature courses, and her performance often went beyond her professors' expectations. She graduated with high honors. After working two years as a teaching assistant teaching aural-oral English at the university where she graduated from, she went to the States for graduate study and later successfully received her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in literature. C recounted her experience this way:

When I first arrived in the States for graduate study, I was surprised ... I could actually understand random conversations around me quite well. I wasn't afraid and didn't feel that I was in a strange place. I thought it's all because I had insisted on oral practice.

#### **G's Experiences (1969)**

G is the first child of her parents. Since very young G was often asked to prepare meals for her family and the workers of her parents' workshop when they were busy. She was quite used to playing the big sister's role in the family, always taking care of others.

G's parents gave her prior English preparation lessons during the summer before junior high school. It was organized by several parents in the village who happened to have children that were attending junior high school after the summer. These parents pitched in and hired somebody's relative, a college student returning to the village, to give their children English preparation lessons. From the way G described the experience, it was as if her parents basically were dealing with other people's anxiety, not their own:

I don't think they [my parents] had any idea about English... It's just ... Since some people said English was important, then... [they said to me] how about starting from ABC? For them, English meant ABC, period. (G, interview, 2015-2-12)

The fact that, when G was 12 years old (i.e., in 1981), some parents in this remote village in southern Taiwan worked together to create an English learning opportunity for their children shows that there was already anxiety toward English learning and that many parents wished to

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*Chin-chi Chao*

give their children a head start. However, parents at this time did not have many resources or much knowledge to do more than providing these early lessons for their children. G said,

It was actually a blessing that they didn't know much...[because] they wouldn't give you many opinions or interference. Like when I told my dad I was going to study Spanish in college, all he said was, "Oh, I see." He didn't know what opinion to give me at all.

With the preparation lesson, however, G still described herself as feeling humiliated by her school English teacher in the junior high.

I remember he (the teacher) used English to give us instructions, but my reaction at the time to him was actually... not good. I didn't know what he was trying to do. [Once in class,] I only knew... he wanted us to close our eyes. Okay, I closed my eyes. I waited and waited, but nothing happened. I opened my eyes, and the teacher had already left. I was like... What is this all about!? At that time my feelings toward English were ... I just couldn't comprehend it. And, this experience with the teacher actually... I had a feeling of being humiliated.

The turning point for G's English learning happened during the summer vacation when she ran into a group of international missionaries.

I met these missionaries who told me that they had learned Chinese for five months so they could speak some simple Chinese. ... That was the first time that I knew... some real people speaking English. ... Later, she (one of them) used English to write letters to me. I was excited. For the first time, I knew this was a real language that I could use to communicate with somebody from a different country.

G started to feel that she could learn the language. During the second and third year of high school, she gradually developed an interest in the subject. She once received an English book as a gift from the teacher: "It was tremendous encouragement. I felt that I could actually do it. From then on, I studied and I would get good scores... My scores for English were always at the top of the class."

The teacher then told G's mother that G should try to apply for the FL College. "I had no idea what that was, but it sounded like a good idea. So, I took her advice and later became a Spanish major in the FL College."

In this five-year junior college, G learned both Spanish (major) and English (minor). At the beginning when her peers were struggling and having problems understanding English-conducted classes, G said she could actually understand well. She could also stand on the stage and orally give a short report in English, without having to write a script first. Her classmates were curious why she could speak English with such ease. G thought it must have to do with her junior high school English teacher:

She didn't teach us in a traditional way... She kept leading us to voice things out loud in English. So, you keep hearing English. I learned to always ...speak to myself, teach myself, talk to myself. Hearing others' voices also made it easier to sound things out myself. This was probably the most important difference [between my experience and my peers'].

The Spanish department was full of exciting festivals and joyful activities; G had a great time in the first three years. In the fourth year, she decided to get herself prepared for an examination so that she could become an English major in a university. "Being a Spanish major was not decided by me. It was because of scores. I was still wanting to be an English major." She did not do it alone; she and her friends worked together to study for the exam. Much as she had these supportive friends, G did not get into the English department as she had wished. Instead, she was admitted to a Spanish department again in a private university. G explained,

After three years being a Spanish major, there was a gap between my English and English majors'. For me, English was all about language skills, but for them, ... they were already using English to do advanced-level work... critical thinking and in-depth discussions. They had travelled so far away with English that I couldn't catch up.

While in the university, G decided to take as many courses as possible offered by the English department and was still thinking about becoming an English major. At that time, G was also teaching English part time at a children's language center. Her wish was to continue with graduate study. Years later she would acquire both an M.A. and a Ph.D. degree in language education in the U.S. and return to Taiwan to teach English and TESOL in a university. As G put it, "Spanish... now exists passively in my life. It appears... from time to time in response to unexpected triggers. With English, however, what I have been doing

is ... to find some kind of life satisfaction which I don't know yet.”

Generation Two (Born after 1987)

### **N's Experiences (1990)**

N's parents were both professors. They met when studying in the U.S., and N was the first of their three children. N's father was actually her first English teacher. He used flash cards to teach her English and a foreign language (FL) that he taught in university. “My dad always says that I had a better control of pronunciation when small. I sounded beautiful in both English and the FL that he taught me.”

N's formal English class started in the fifth grade, following the educational system at the time, but she said many of her classmates had started learning the language much earlier than that. She was fully aware of the distance between her level of English and her classmates'.

I knew very little...My classmates would call me names and make fun of me. One boy called me pig, but I had no idea what that was. It was a time... I was very upset.

In the summer before junior high, N's mother arranged to have her attend a pronunciation class. “Those two months were very critical. ... I developed a sense of English sounds.”

In junior high, the teacher assigned a small book, *Mr. Bean*, without the intention to teach the students anything about the book. “It was basically a self-study and reading activity but the book was full of new words.” Facing such a big challenge, N asked her father for help, but N said,

My father has this philosophy... which probably has to do with how he learned languages: He believes that there is nothing else to language learning but memorizing. You need to memorize a lot of things, words, sentence patterns, phrases... You just need to commit everything to your memory, however you could do it.

N's father also thought, “Whatever he had explained to me once, I would have to remember.” This attitude made N feel extremely “painful.” She explained:

I had just entered junior high school – lots of adjustments to make. Then, there was this thing called English– which I had no idea what



it was. I thought my Dad was my only help, but when studying with him, he always said, “Didn’t I explain this to you before? You need to memorize what I said! You didn’t try to memorize it, and how would you ever learn?” I am not that kind of person who likes memorizing. If I didn’t understand, I just couldn’t memorize. It wasn’t a pleasant experience at all. I always ended up crying.

In the final year of junior high, N implemented a change.

I wanted to prove to my Dad that I could do it my way. So, I signed up for the GEPT<sup>1</sup> proficiency test. Instead of attending an exam preparation program like my peers, I did it my way... using many, many practice questions. ... That process allowed me to develop my own methods... Whenever I encountered a new word, I would ask myself what other words were similar and what words might be opposite in meaning. I would arrange them all into a note. That’s how I started to have feelings toward English.

N further analyzed her experience:

It was not that I genuinely liked English so I studied it, but it was more like... I was trying to beat up this monster. When I could beat it up just a little bit, I started to feel ... maybe I could develop it [my ability] further. Now when I look back, I didn’t really have a workable method to study English. Or I should say I was still looking for my own method to study it... Obviously I disagreed with my dad’s method, so the question was ... What was mine? What do I want to do?

In university, N again had the opportunity to study English intensively all by herself. She was seriously injured in a car accident during her freshman year and could not go to school for one whole semester. “That started my life with American dramas.” She said,

I watched a whole lot of TV dramas, and my favorite was *Grey’s Anatomy*. I would watch it day in and day out, from the first episode, first season all the way to the last episode, fifth season. ... I learned how to say things in English that I knew in Chinese. ... Dramas made

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<sup>1</sup> GEPT stands for General English Proficiency Test, which is a locally developed English proficiency test that became available to learners in the early 2000s.

# airiti

*Chin-chi Chao*

me eagerly want to know more about how to express daily ideas in English. I spent a lot of time on dramas, learning a lot and feeling very happy.

Watching N spend so much time on dramas, however, her mother's reaction was, "It was such a waste of time." N again needed to prove to her mother that she was not wasting time:

When my mom and I went to movies together and heard some English expressions, I would tell her what those meant. She would be very surprised and ask, "How do you know?" "How could you figure it out?" I would just say... I learned it from the dramas that I watched.

For N, her experience with English can be best characterized as: "I need to prove to them [my parents] that I was really learning something, not just wasting time."

## **S's Experiences (1993)**

S's parents were both junior high school teachers, and S is the second of their four children. She had the rare opportunity of attending a public kindergarten affiliated with an elementary school. A public kindergarten is usually affordable in tuition and is staffed with teachers with strong educational and teaching backgrounds. A child needs good fortune to get in because admission is competitive, typically requiring drawing of lots or good connections. This shows how much her parents attempted to provide the best possible educational opportunities for S.

The school policy at the time had it that English would first be taught at Grade 3, but her parents arranged to have S attend an after-school private language institute when she was still in kindergarten. S said she was constantly "in a state of not understanding. ... It was all very fussy. Why am I learning this? ... Nobody ever explained this to me."

By the time she reached fourth or fifth grade, she was enrolled in another private language institute. In the entrance examination, S's score was so low that it did not allow her to pass the lowest threshold. S did not think this was a big deal, but her mother was very upset because "she felt that it was a waste of money having arranged all the additional language programs for me to attend."

In school, the English class was twice a week: One was conducted by a Chinese teacher, while the other, by an international teacher. However,

for S, “The focus of my English learning was basically after school in the private language institute. School was a bit slow. I could pass exams without even studying.” The private language institute obviously took over the role that formal school was supposed to play in S’s English learning.

By the time S reached Grade 5, her father had her transfer to an elementary school in an affluent neighborhood hoping that she would eventually enter a high-ranking junior high school nearby. This again indicates her parents’ strong intention to provide S with the best possible English education. In the second and third years of junior high, S had a teacher who finally gave her impressive English instruction in school. S happily recounted,

The teacher was good at giving us clear structures. We wouldn’t get lost. There was also not much homework—I didn’t like homework, you know (laughs). We did a lot of memorization work, including dialogues, readings, and many texts. In quizzes the teacher would give us the Chinese meaning, and we needed to recite the whole dialogue. We also needed to do the exercises on our own. Her teaching was very helpful.

This description was surprisingly traditional, not exactly like what would be expected for a new generation’s EFL classroom. At that time, S said people around her, including her parents, teachers, and peers, “all had this look on their faces that I was going to the best senior high school in Taipei.” But, it turned out that she was admitted to one that was considered second best. “My mom, particularly, was devastated. I had a big argument with her because of this.” S said she did not care about her parents’ face issue at all.

The social science specialty class that S was admitted to in high school gathered students who were good in every subject including English and gave them a variety of learning opportunities. S said, “such as offering services to aboriginal tribes, conducting a research project, visiting Beijing University, and attending classes in some high schools in Beijing.” In order to visit Beijing, S and her peers had to do all the necessary contact and preparation work in the first year. They also read, discussed, and presented Greek Mythology and such books as *Five People You Meet in Heaven*. In the second year, some Ph.D. students from top-ranking universities led them to read some other literature classics. In the third year, S and her friends conducted a research study: “It was about the impact of cell phones and TV commercials on high

students' attitudes... a questionnaire study. A painful experience... very tiring, when you didn't know how to put together a paper."

All these atypical activities happened in addition to the conventional senior high school curriculum. S obviously kept a very busy schedule. When asked what she had learned from these experiences, S gave a surprising response, "I knew I would not study social science in university." The reason was,

I found those concepts... difficult to understand. When I did my presentations, I didn't really know what the main point was. This is similar to my earlier experience in the language institute: When I didn't understand what the teacher was doing, I couldn't force myself to learn.

Her comment suggests insufficient instructional support for the innovative curriculum. As was her wish, S entered an accounting department in a university. At the time of interview, S was a double major in English and Accounting. S also did volunteer work for a non-profit organization, played the flute, and studied Korean and French. Again, she was leading a very busy life. In the final part of the interview, however, S seldom mentioned her parents; it seemed she had outgrown their influence. Then, she said her parents' English learning was more confined to textbooks, always following rules or whatever was assigned them. "I was more an autonomous learner, always exploring and always enjoying whatever I like to explore."

## CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

*"Agency involves initiative or self-regulation by the learner"*—And, time matters.

For this LLA feature, the episodes in which the participants took initiative and started to self-regulate their English learning were identified with a clear focus on 'time' in the analysis. These critical LLA time frames include C's developing her own strategies after getting zero from the first quiz and feeling humiliated by the openly expressed negative comments by the teacher, G's English study becoming more meaningful after meeting and interacting with the foreign missionaries although she also depended on scores to develop her sense of achievement with English, N's asking her mother to enroll her in a

summer course after feeling humiliated by her peers' using words that she had not learned and calling her 'pig,' and S's not caring much about her mother's anger toward her low score, feeling that she knew exactly what she was doing with her learning. In all these episodes, there are two issues related to time.

The first issue is macro in nature. After all, the most obvious contextual difference between the four home backgrounds is historical: that the first two participants, C and G, were situated after WWII, while the other two, N and S, after 1987. The historical factor did impact how the participants exert LLA. For the former, life was relatively hard, and parents needed to work long hours to make ends meet. Under this circumstance, school was considered the authority of knowledge and was granted the full responsibility for teaching English to the child. For example, as a single parent and a government employee, C's father had the whole family to support. He probably did not have time to worry too much about C's study even though he cared about C very much. G's parents were also busy with their business, although G's parents also supported her the best they could. C's father and G's parents seemed to accept the authority position of school as well as their children's capability to make important school decisions for themselves, and the participants felt that they enjoyed much room for LLA.

When the second generation was developing their EFL, however, it was a time when the economy was booming. The two participants' parents being teachers or professors indicated that they understood how the educational system worked in Taiwan and their incomes were at least stable; both conditions allowed the parents to get involved. In addition, the parents had also been educated in Taiwan and went through the Taiwanese educational system themselves; they were indeed in a better position to provide help and suggestions than the previous group of parents. Their presence and involvement in the child's language learning journey thus was obvious, but this often left their children with little room for LLA and resulted in more conflicts.

The second time difference between the two generations and their LLA is the starting year. Because most students in the first generation started English learning in a relatively similar time frame (13 years of age), it would have been less difficult for C in the first generation to initiate efforts to catch up than N in the second. The fact that the starting year for the second generation can be quite varied (some started many years earlier than others), N's peers would have been a lot more

# airiti

Chin-chi Chao

advanced in their English learning when N decided to catch up, and the effort N needed to put in and the suffering she needed to endure could have been difficult.

*“Agency is interdependent, that is, it mediates and is mediated by the sociocultural context.”*—And, both macro and micro contexts matter.

For this LLA feature, I chose to focus on the literal meaning of 'context,' examining both the macro and micro aspects of place in the four participants' LLA activities. In terms of the macro aspect of place, or the sociocultural context, since the EFL context did not afford many options for the participants to know how well they performed, low scores and negative comments gained in school played important roles in affecting the participants' confidence and their drive for success. In fact, both generations of participants seem more similar than different when it comes to taking low scores in school as the drive for taking initiative. After all, there were not many English-speaking people around that the EFL learners could use as a way to become aware of one's proficiency level or to interact with in order to gradually appropriate their language skills. The opportunities to interact with international individuals outside the formal learning context, for example, as experienced by G, were just too random and incidental. For G, the experience was significant and motivational as it gave her concrete and important reasons to study English, but it was too unique and too random to be expected by all EFL learners from this context.

The micro aspects of place discussed by the four participants include schools/formal English classes, private language institutes/English classes, and homes, and each played different roles in LLA. As discussed before, LLA was often initiated in school where the participants became aware of the fact that they were not performing as well as their peers. Private language institutes helped make up for what could not be achieved with school English teaching, particularly for the second generation. Home, on the other hand, was important for LLA for both generations because of their parents as well as the fact that learning strategies were developed in the privacy of their homes.

The different roles of schools and private language institutes deserve some consideration. For the second generation, particularly for S, learning at language institutes lasted for a long time and often parallel to her school EFL. This supposedly informal learning experience actually took over the formal status of a school English class. Unlike the second

generation of learners, however, the two participants in the first generation did not continue attending private language institute once formal school English began. This means for the participants from the first generation, school was the main place (if not the only place) where English language input was provided, while for the second generation, school input was replaceable and language institutes became the main place where they received input.

It is important to note that schools and language institutes were very different in nature, and they each encouraged a different sense of LLA. School English was official, formal, and authoritative in nature, and attending the English class was never the learner's own choice. Learners like C learned to comply without giving up her own method of EFL learning. This is her way of exerting LLA in this context. On the other hand, learning in language institutes could be examination-oriented, but attending language institutes for N and S was their own choice. Their willingness to attend language institutes was itself an exertion of LLA, and their drive to get better grades in school and be successful in keen competitions was generally the reason.

*“Agency includes an awareness of the responsibility for one’s own actions vis-à-vis the environment, including affecting others.”—And, relationship is the key here.*

van Lier’s LLA feature 3 led the study to further focus on ‘relationship’ and how the two-generation participants’ parents, teachers, and peers are related to their sense of responsibility and LLA. First of all, relationships in school were important. Feeling humiliated by teachers and peers because of low scores happened to all of the participants, and it was probably equally unbearable for both generations; otherwise, they would not have taken actions afterwards. However, other relational challenges that led to LLA were different between the two generations of participants. For the first generation, their schoolteachers were the major source of challenge that led to LLA, while for the second generation, their parents. Both C and G experienced schoolteachers who discouraged them and made them feel humiliated in their first English classes. Unlike G’s teacher who unconventionally emphasized speaking out the language, C’s teacher taught in a traditional way which was not how C thought she could learn. While complying and playing along with the teacher, C actually took things into her own hands. She understood that her way of learning the language (i.e., drilling and orally making

# airiti

*Chin-chi Chao*

sentences) was not useful for school examinations, but she wanted to learn it her way anyway. She obviously managed to exert her LLA regardless of the teacher's authority.

As to their parents, C's and G's parents at the time had little choice but to rely on school and school teachers for their children's English education. G commented that it was actually a blessing that her parents did not and could not be involved as this gave her sufficient room to explore and experience on her own. C too had the room to decide not to return to the nursing school that she did not think appropriate for her. This freedom to explore and experience given by the fact that their parents could not participate obviously afforded LLA for these two participants. The two participants' relationships with their parents actually facilitated their sense of responsibility and LLA.

For the second generation, their parents were more of the authority and were more interested in taking their children's English learning into their own hands and thus more conflicts were reported as the participants fought for their LLA. Besides the sociocultural reasons discussed earlier, N's parents had overseas backgrounds and resources to get involved, while S's parents being teachers in high school seemed very familiar with how to prepare their child for EFL learning. Both parents had high expectations that the two participants described as 'painful,' even though the parents provided rich English learning and overseas travel experiences that schools could not.

The problem is that the parents were limited by their own English learning experiences and understanding. Both N's and S's parents expected them to learn in a way that the parents themselves were used to: to memorize, work hard, and not to "waste time." These concepts are actually more consistent with the traditional Eastern concepts of learning (Li, 2012), but they were not easily embraced by the newer generation of language learners who were more used to learning through actual experience.

Indeed, the educational reforms and the variety of international experiences over the years have emphasized learning through experience and expanded the students' understanding of the world, not merely for the sake of passing examinations as in the past. The two participants thus often discussed conflicts with their parents and the need to "prove" to their parents that they were just fine with their own ways of learning English. Camara, Bacigalupe, and Padilla (2017) who studied social support also found similar conflicts between teenagers and parents in



Spain; the subtitle of their paper, “Are you helping me or stressing me out?” resonates with the situation captured in the current study. Taking actions to prove to their parents that they could do it in their own ways is actually a clear demonstration of LLA.

Interestingly, schoolteachers for the second-generation participants became almost insignificant and irrelevant. N only briefly mentioned that she liked her first English teachers in elementary and junior high schools. S’s teachers in school were also mostly irrelevant in comparison to those in private language institutes, but she felt that the school teacher who emphasized solid practice and memorization impressed her. It is quite surprising that regardless of the fact that the second generation experienced more open and autonomous learning in school, the participants’ chosen teaching practice was still mechanical and lower-level processing. This might have a lot to do with the examination-focused learning in private institutes that they spent a lot of time engaging in.

Peers for all four participants served first of all the important role of comparisons so that the participants knew how well they themselves did academically and how they could improve. Peers were also important in many other ways, including the generous support from G’s peers while she was working on transferring to a four-year college. Although most of C’s peers in the nursing school teased her for her dedication to study, she also found one girl who read a lot of English books and whose example made her start reading English novels. N described how she was teased by her peers and was called ‘pig’—a painful experience that made her decide to look for solutions to the challenge she met. S, on the other hand, sought to be just as good as her peers studying in high-ranking universities. All in all, since peers are similar in age and status, the participants often projected a sense of self (or “what they had is also what I wanted”) when describing their positive relationships with peers and suggested a sense of non-self (or “that’s not what I wanted for my life”) when describing other peers who gave them negative feelings and experiences. The relationships with peers obviously are related to the learner self and are important in facilitating LLA.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides van Lier’s three features of agency with contextual meanings experienced by two generations of Taiwanese EFL

# airiti

Chin-chi Chao

learners. It is clear that LLA in the early stages of EFL learning does not happen in a vacuum; it is the result of the learner's complex and dynamic interaction with time, place, and relationship. The most interesting result is perhaps 'relationship' or the parent's role: that changes in time have made EFL experience between the two generations in many ways very different, but many parents may be generally unaware of the difference and would insist on having their children use the parents' habitual methods, as well as ideology, in studying English.

Indeed, in addition to achieving a contextualized understanding of LLA, this study was also an attempt to understand the *continuity* of a common experience among all Taiwanese: learning English as the first foreign language in the early days of our lives. Following Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the four participants' experiences must also be understood as both personal and social. The four narratives allow us to reflect on our own experience as we move back and forth between the personal and social and among past, present, and future, knowing that whatever Taiwanese EFL learners experience today, whether it is deemed good or bad, is continuity from the past. As the 12-year curriculum guideline is about to be implemented in schools all over Taiwan and new emphases of English education are going to impact the next generation of English learners, this study may remind us that success in English learning is also both personal and social. The question now is how it is possible to provide the best possible context and to encourage LLA among the new generation of learners by all possible parties, including schools and private language institutes, teachers and parents.

A suggestion based on the result of this study is that there is a need to help parents keep up with the changes experienced by the learner. In other words, in the previous generation, our educational policy sought to improve the quality of teaching staff, but in the current generation, it seems equally important to educate parents. While the educational reforms implemented since the late 1990s have made the English learning experience of the second generation more enriched, autonomous, and experience-based, parents from the previous generation may be unaware of the differences. Thus far, parents' roles related to English education do not seem to have sufficient attention from academic discussions in Taiwan (See for example Cheng, 2006). This missing piece obviously could create conflicts between generations and discourage learner agency. For example, since private language institutes are an unavoidable part of English education, it is important to help

parents choose a quality service for their children while making sure that English learning in school is truly meaningful, instead of allowing children from resource-rich families to think of school English learning as irrelevant and hurting those who may not have family resources to attend additional English classes. Likewise, if entertainment is an important aspect of language learning for the newer generation, parents also need to be informed. They not only need to have peace of mind with their children's pastimes and entertainment being useful for English learning but also need to know how to support them in an appropriate way: especially, knowing when to help and when to make room for LLA.

This study can be considered a preliminary understanding of cross-generational differences in LLA in the EFL learning context. It demonstrates an analysis of narrative and interview data for understanding LLA in different generations. It also provides a reflective visit to the interaction between and among language policies promoted by educational reforms, English language instruction in formal and informal schooling settings, and the individual learner's LLA in response to her immediate social context. The insights and implications derived from this study show that it is helpful and fruitful to conduct studies crossing generational boundaries as such efforts contribute to a contextualized understanding of the shared EFL experience. More studies of this nature are certainly needed in order to develop deeper understanding into learner experiences impacted by educational reforms and sociocultural changes as well as raise awareness of generational differences among parents, teachers, and policy makers.

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探究跨世代的 EFL 學習自主：  
台灣學習者的多重個案研究

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為能賦予 van Lier(2008)語言學習者自主概念，較為具體且屬於特定場域下的詮釋，本研究探詢的問題是台灣兩世代 EFL 學習者如何在他們各自的教育政策與社會氛圍下敘述屬於他們的自主英語學習經驗？敘事與訪談資料蒐集自四位研究參與者，包括生於 1950 到 1960 二次大戰之後的兩位、與生於 1987 解嚴與教改後的兩位。分析理論是 van Lier 的三項自主學習特色以及 Clandinin and Connelly(2000)關於場域的三概念，也就是時間、地點、人際關係。兩理論與敘事資料相互交集之下，顯現出 EFL 學習自主基本上是個人與社會群體經驗的展現。在此十二年國教即將展開之際，本研究得以對 EFL 共同經驗之過去、現在、未來提供省思。文後並提出相關建議。

**關鍵詞：**語言學習自主、跨世代差異、台灣的英語學習場域、  
多重個案研究