



Understanding EFL Learner Agency in Collaborative Activities: A Case Study in a Taiwanese English Course

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Although language learner agency has recently gained attention in the field of applied linguistics, the concept of language learner agency remains predominantly theoretical based; empirical studies in EFL classroom settings centering on this topic are scarce. Furthermore, task-based teaching in language classrooms has gained popularity, yet studies on how tasks are implemented and in which students exert learner agency are understudied. Through audio recordings of group activities, class observations, and interviews with student focus groups, the purposes of this study were 1) to illustrate how a wordless picture book project was designed and implemented in a Taiwanese English course with 31 students, and 2) to explore how the college learners approached and what they did in the collaborative tasks. Situating this work within the conceptualizations of agency as action-oriented endeavors, it revealed that the students exerted learner agency by co-constructing and developing a deeper understanding towards the story content through peer discussions. They self-initiated actions by employing their own resources and self-monitored their Mandarin and English in order to achieve the task objectives. The study also confirmed the learner agency was shaped by the specific communities of practice they engaged in. Based on the results, pedagogical implications will be provided.

Keywords: collaborative activities, language learner agency, tasks

Introduction

Freshman English is one of the compulsory courses in Taiwanese universities. Through the course, Taiwanese college-level language learners acquire English words, sentence structures, reading strategies, and some content knowledge; however, students can be passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants (Chien, 2014; Xiao, 2005). Scholars have stated the benefits of implementing task-based learning in language classes (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Oxford, 2006; Willis, 1996) and one of the advantages of using tasks in language class is to let students be more engaged in their learning and become agentive learners (Nunan, 2004; Oxford, 1990; Yuan, 2016).

The concept of agency has gained interest in the field of language education recently, and it is partly due to the growing attention to the importance of self-directed lifelong learning (Benson, 2011). Little, Dam, and Legenhausen (2017) conceptualized agency as both an individual and a collective capacity, and they emphasized that teachers can stimulate students' pre-existing capacity and harness their development of agency by incorporating social-interactive processes in language classrooms. However, the concept of language learner agency remains predominantly theoretical based and empirical studies in EFL classroom settings centering on this topic, particularly at the postsecondary level, are understudied. Furthermore, even though task-based teaching in language classrooms has gained popularity including East Asian

countries (Lin & Wu 2012; Littlewood, 2007), studies on how tasks are designed and implemented and in which students exert learner agency are quite scarce. In light of what has been discussed, this present study aimed to provide some theoretical underpinnings of agency and to give a practical account of student interactions that shed light on language learner agency.

The purposes of the study were, first, to illustrate how the wordless picture book, *The Farmer and the Clown*, was implemented as a series of group activities into a Taiwanese Freshman English course. Second, it aimed to understand EFL learner agency through joint collaboration and completion of a group project. It explored how the Taiwanese freshman students manifested agency while engaging in collaborative tasks. The following research question guided this study: How is learner agency manifested through participation in group-oriented activities?

Literature Review

Agency

Western theorists used to regard agency as one's property (van Lier, 2008) and later many scholars have conceptualized that agency is ultimately action-oriented. For instance, Inden (1990) indicated that agency is the realized capacity of people that helps them to act upon their world and "that capacity is the power of people to act purposively and reflectively" (p. 23). In the same vein, Wertsch, Tulviste and Hagstrom (1993) argued that agency is not merely someone's character trait but a contextually enacted way of being in the world. Similarly, Ahearn (2001) and Morris, Menon, and Ames (2001) also viewed people as agents who can execute *planful* actions. van Lier (2008) explained that agency is something that learners do, rather than something that learners possess.

Over the past two decades, SLA scholars have paid attention to the relation between agency and language learning. For instance, Lantolf and Thorne (2006) argued that "learning a language is necessarily the action of an intentional agent" (p. 142). Sociocultural theorists (i.e., Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) further shed light on the social element of language learning and the social context of agency. For example, following the Vygotskian sociocultural perspective that regards learners as active agents who develop knowledge through interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978), Lantolf and Pavlenko viewed learners as agents who "actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning" (p. 145). Their concept of agency also entailed "the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events" (p. 143). Regarding the social context of agency, van Lier (2008) stated that agency is situated in a particular context. In the same vein, Lantolf and Thorne proposed that agency is shaped and "constrained by social groupings, material and symbolic resources, situational contingencies, and individual or group's capabilities" (p. 238).

In light of the sociocultural perspectives, van Lier (2008) focused on language learner agency and he proposed three core features of it. First, agency involves learners' initiative or self-regulation. Second, agency is interdependent, and third, agency includes "an awareness of the responsibility for one's own actions vis-à-vis the environment, including affected others" (p. 166). van Lier (2004) also mentioned *affordances* which referred to "relations of possibility" (p. 95) that offer learners opportunities to take action to achieve certain goals (Ahn, 2016). In other words, learners serve as active agents who are capable of take the initiative to "perceive affordances and take action to use them as resources for learning" (Ahn, 2016, p. 167).

Although learner agency has gained attention and become the research focus in the field of applied linguistics recently, the concept of learner agency remains predominantly theoretical based. More recent studies, taking the sociocultural perspectives of agency into consideration, have focused on exploring the construction and framing of students' agency and these studies provided insights into the concepts of agency in terms of what learners do in relation to their environments. For example, Kanno and Varghese (2010) and Varghese (2012) explored how linguistic minority students at the undergraduate level framed

and used their agency in order to get access to some academic resources and to strategically navigate their (high school and college) institutional environments in the United States.

Little et al.'s (2017) study was one of the few studies that not only was empirical but also specifically focused on learner agency in an English-learning classroom setting. Focusing on Danish learners of English at lower secondary level, Little et al. theorized that agency is universal human capacity and they underscored that it is the teacher's job to stimulate learners' pre-existing capacity for agentive behaviors. In addition, according to Little et al., agency is both an individual and a collective capacity and therefore language teachers can incorporate social-interactive activities to stimulate cooperation, which ultimately facilitates the development of agency. Based on their study, Little et al. concluded that agentive language learners are communicators, experimenters with the target language, and intentional learners who "assume responsibility for managing their own learning: setting targets, making choices, taking decisions, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes" (p. 4). The idea of intentional learners also closely echoes van Lier's (2008) core features of agency mentioned earlier.

Furthermore, as stated previously, the concept of language learner agency in the field of applied linguistics remains predominantly theoretical based. Little et al.'s (2017) study, as mentioned earlier, was one of the few studies that provided accounts of classroom practice and explored learner agency in a classroom setting. Empirical studies in EFL classroom settings centering on the idea of learner agency, particularly at the postsecondary level, are understudied. Meanwhile, as mentioned above, one essential benefit of using tasks in language classroom is to foster agentive language learners (Nunan, 2004; Oxford, 2006; Yuan, 2016). However, few studies, at the college level in particular, have highlighted how learner agency is enacted in group-oriented activities. Taking the sociocultural perspectives and situating this work within the conceptualization of agency as action-oriented endeavors, the present study used theorizations of agency as an analytical tool and aimed to understand how EFL college learners approached and what they did in collaboration and completion of group-oriented activities in a Taiwanese Freshman English class.

Using Collaborative Tasks in Language Classrooms

Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, Little (1996) and Benson (2011) noted that collaboration of tasks plays a key role in the development of agency. Nunan (1989) regarded tasks as pieces of classroom work "which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language" (p. 10). Throughout the present article, *tasks* and *activities* were used interchangeably.

Collaborative tasks in language classrooms promote students-centered learning as learners achieve a sense of accomplishment when they perform task successfully (Little et al., 2017; Prabhu, 1987; Yuan, 2016). Many researchers have noted that one of key benefits of using tasks or activities in language classrooms is the production of authentic communication (see Cutrone & Beh, 2018; Lin & Wu, 2012; Little et al., 2017). Based on their study on Danish learners of English at lower secondary level, Little et al. argued that collaborative tasks require learner interaction and idea sharing, which can generate authentic communication that ultimately promotes "collaborative construction of knowledge" (p. 68). In addition, situating their study in Japanese postsecondary context, Cutrone and Beh (2018) pinpointed that collaborative tasks among EFL learners made a positive impact on the Japanese college students' willingness to communicate. According to Skehan (1996) and Ellis (2003), language learners through participation in tasks use the target language for meaning making and thus their collaborative dialogues enhance language learning.

In addition to the merit of generating authentic communication in collaborative tasks, tasks that require collaboration encourage language learners to negotiate, modify, rephrase, and experiment with language, and these processes are essential elements of second language learning (Lai & Li, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Sociocultural theorists specifically stated that learners' knowledge develops through collaboration with peers and learners collaboratively co-constructing knowledge in a joint activity fosters

learners' both cognitive and language development (Lantolf, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Little (1996) indicated that "the processes of analysis, planning and synthesis" (p. 214) are more external and explicit when collaborative tasks are performed between two or more learners; whereas when task is performed along, those processes are mainly internal and implicit.

Furthermore, deriving insights from the sociocultural perspectives, many TESOL scholars look at how learners jointly accomplish tasks, and how learners' L2 learning is contributed by the process of accomplishing tasks (Shehadeh, 2005). As Kern (2006) articulated:

If we look at language learning from a broad semiotic perspective, we will be less interested in whether learners successfully acquire a particular linguistic structure and more interested in how they attempt to deal with specific communicative situations and with the linguistic, cognitive, social, and material resources available to them. (p. 198)

Taking this perspective, the present study aimed to understand learner agency in terms of the specifics of what students do with collaborative tasks and how they do it.

Many studies on task integration in language classrooms have focused on teachers' concerns and many of these studies are in EFL primary and secondary school contexts. For instance, Carless (2004) stated that teachers in Hong Kong primary schools were concerned about classroom management when implementing tasks in class. In the same vein, Lee (2005) noted that teachers in the context of a South Korean primary school indicated that some students avoided using the target language English when performing tasks. Ho (2004) also noted that some teachers were concerned about their own English proficiency when they introduced and implemented communicative tasks in class. Empirical studies focusing on the impact of tasks on students' L2 performance are scarce (Cutrone & Beh, 2018), especially at postsecondary level. Furthermore, case studies that illuminate empirically based discussion of how tasks are actually operationalized in classroom settings are quite limited (Markee, 2015), especially in EFL contexts at college level.

In addition, although research studies indicated that group work or collaboration in joint completion of tasks foster language learner agency (Little, 1996; Nunan, 2004; Oxford, 2006; Yuan, 2016), empirical studies centering on the topic of understanding language learner agency and shedding light on how students approach and perform group-oriented activities are understudied, in particular in EFL classrooms at the postsecondary level. Focusing on having a better understanding of the modalities of effective student learning, the present study used collaborative activities as a means to understand EFL learner agency through participations in collaborative tasks and completion of a group picture book project at college level. The project in the present study adopted Nunan's (2004) principles in terms of task procedures and how this project was implemented will be introduced in the Method section.

Methods

This study followed the tradition of qualitative research, in which the focus was on process, meaning, and understanding and the primary instrument of data collection and analysis was the researcher (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, qualitative research method also yields more detailed and nuanced data and thus is particularly appropriate for exploring the topic of learner agency. This study employed multiple data collection methods, including audio recordings of group activities, class observations, and interviews with student focus groups. These data helped the researcher compare ideas and then triangulated data sources and therefore the findings and interpretation could be more credible (Merriam, 2009). One noteworthy point is that even though the interview data just included the student focus groups rather than the whole class, what could be learned from a single participant student might suggest a circumstance that related to student learning (Wolcott, 2005).

Participants

There were 31 non-English-majored Taiwanese students who enrolled in this Freshman English class at a university in central Taiwan. Each student had completed at least six years of English study prior to entering the university. The average age of the students were 18 years old. The students were placed at the intermediate level by the university authorities based on their college entrance examination administered by the Taiwanese Ministry of Education. The Taiwanese college entrance examinations are paper-and-pencil tests and in terms of the subject of English, the assessment mainly tests students' English vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and basic writing proficiency (Wu, 2019). In light of this, it should be noted that although the students were placed at the same-level class according to their college entrance examinations, their English competence could vary. In addition, only a handful of students in this study expressed familiarity to the genre of English picture book; others mentioned that they had a limited exposure to it before entering college.

Setting

Data was collected from this particular setting due to the following reasons. First of all, this institute implemented a policy that starting from the academic year of 2017, 10% of student grades in the Freshman English course would be based on in-class communicative tasks. Secondly, I was an instructor at this university and this particular Freshman English course did not conflict with my teaching schedule and the instructor was willing to allow me to conduct the fieldwork for this study at her class. The students had one 100-minute Freshman English course per week to a total of 18 class meetings a semester and the instructor used mostly English as the medium of instruction based on the school requirement. The picture book project was conducted after the students' midterm examination. Throughout the nine meeting sessions in this class, the instructor of this class spent roughly the second half of the class (50 minutes) for the project. The main reason for conducting the project only half way through the semester was because the first half of the semester was used for the picture book introduction, as the majority of the students indicated that they had limited access to English picture books.

Procedure of the Tasks

The followings are descriptions of how the project was operationalized in class. The procedure of the tasks also aligned with Nunan's (2004) task procedure principles, which involved introducing, scaffolding, task dependency and recycling, and reflecting. The first phase centered on introducing the project. First, the students reflected on their previous experience of reading picture books and then they were given a comic strip which the students collaborated with another peer and co-created dialogues based on the pictures given. The purpose of this phase was to help the learners be more familiar with the genre of picture book. The comic-strip task assisted the students to be more cognitively and mentally ready for the upcoming writing tasks. The teacher also walked around the class providing support during this phase.

Then, the students found their own team members and formed groups of three or four. With their team members, the students read the wordless picture book, *The Farmer and the Clown*, together for the first time (as all students indicated that they had never read it before). Later, based on the content, the students worked with their group members and co-created a vocabulary list called Word Bank. The students were encouraged to write words from the units in the textbook that the first half of the semester had covered. In this way, the learners could review and use recently taught language. For instance, unit one of the textbook featured weather and therefore the students were encouraged to list words related to weather. Examples on their Word Bank logs included: cloudy, gloomy, overcast, etc. In unit two of the textbook, the students had learned words related to people's facial features. Therefore, they listed words such as beards and wrinkles, etc. Unit 4 described personalities and the students listed words such as unhappy,

moody, melancholy, lonely, etc. Later the students shared their Word Bank entries via the school's e-platform and therefore they were able to see other groups' work.

In the following week, each student was given a handout called Story Map, which included columns such as characters, settings, plot, problem, etc. that students needed to fill out. This handout, along with the comic-strip activity mentioned earlier, served as scaffolding materials (Nunan, 2004) that provided supporting frameworks to have a better understanding of the goal, procedure, and specific outcome of the task. Additionally, to fill out the Story Map handout, the students collaborated with their teammates and the discussions enabled them to read the picture book more closely, and in this way, they were able to focus on some drawing details which were overlooked earlier.

In the second phase, the groups wrote their own first drafts of the story. The students monitored their own performance and were asked to finish the first draft within two weeks. They were also encouraged to write down their first drafts based on their Story Map handouts and the Word Bank entries. This task echoes Nunan's (2004) principles of task dependency and recycling: the students were able to produce their first drafts that were built upon their previous work. Using the vocabulary words in their first draft means recycling language that enhances language learning opportunities. In the following week, the students did a peer evaluation for their first draft. The teacher also provided some feedback according to the students' first drafts. Then the students were asked to revise and then finalize their stories based on the peer evaluations and the teacher's feedback.

The third and also the final stage centered on storytelling presentation. Each group was given peer evaluation sheets to assess the presentation performance of their peers. During the first half of this class session, half of the groups presented their stories and the other half were the audience groups. In the second half of the session, the groups switched their roles. Within the presenting groups, one member was in charge of reading the whole story in one round, which means that all presenting group members had his or her chance to read the story. Audience groups were assigned to listen to one presenting group and when all the storytellers from the first round finished reading their stories, the audience groups worked on their peer evaluation sheet and then rotated to the next presenting groups. Second storytellers from the presenting groups began to read their stories. The same procedure continued for several rounds. Three groups that obtained the top three highest scores from the peer evaluation sheets were the winning groups.

Data Collection

Group activities throughout the implementation of the project, including the warm-up comic-strip activity, Word Bank entries, Story Map handouts, and the first-draft and final-version writing activities were audio-recorded. The researcher also received all the students' consents before administering the recording procedures. In total there were twenty-two recordings received. Under the teacher's supervision, sometimes students were allowed to converse in their first language (L1) Mandarin and sometimes only in English (L2). In some cases, no specific instructions were given so the students were free to converse either in Mandarin or English, or in some cases, in a mixture of both.

In order to have a better understanding of how the students engaged in activities, in addition to conducting the audio-recordings, the researcher also administered class observations. During the class observations, the researcher kept field notes in order to record impressions and questions. Additionally, the researcher paid particular attention to student participation and collaboration: who answered the instructor's questions and how the students selected the spokespersons for their groups, etc.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three groups of students. These groups of students were selected based on the result of the peer evaluation of the storytelling presentation activity. These groups received the highest scores according to the peer evaluation sheets. Each group was interviewed individually and one interview lasted around 20 minutes. The students were given the choice of being interviewed in Mandarin or in English, and they all chose to be interviewed in Mandarin. The student focus interviews were conducted after all the class observations and at nearly the end of the semester, which enabled the researcher to ask some questions from the class observations. For example,

“I noticed that some students volunteered speaking English while answering the teacher’s questions. Do you know why the students did so?” “I noticed that sometimes the students divided work among themselves during some group activities. How did your group assign work for individual team member?” Some questions were also aimed at eliciting their perspectives on several group-discussion activities: “How do you like the speaking rules and the mission cards used in class?” All interviews were later translated and transcribed in English.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure included several steps. First of all, if students’ recordings were in Mandarin, they were translated and transcribed in English. During the whole-class or group discussions, if the students were allowed to communicate either in Mandarin or English, the researcher paid particular attention to what and when the learners used L1 and L2, and she kept additional and separate notes of that. The analysis began by analyzing all the interview transcripts line-by-line to identify some possible themes and key phrases. While engaging in the process of open coding, some emerging ideas or key phrases could be noticed. The second step was mainly looking for connections between codes and then proceeded to group codes into categories (Murray, 2009). This stage also involved the codes that gained from the group activity recordings. Through repeatedly reflection of some overlapping codes or ideas, it allowed the researcher to find some connections between what was said in the interviews and what was recorded during the activities. Furthermore, the triangulation of data helped to avoid possible presuppositions or assumptions.

Results and Discussion

According to the results, through participation in collaborative tasks, the students exerted agency in co-constructing and developing a deeper understanding towards the picture book content with their peers, in self-initiating actions by employing their resources, and in self-monitoring their language use of L1 and L2 in order to achieve the task objectives.

Students Co-constructed and Developed a Deeper Understanding towards the Story Content Through Peer Discussions

The students as a group coped with the task completion, and some of them further helped their peers paid more attention to some drawing details, which in return led the students to understand the story better. It is an excerpt from a recording related to the task of writing the first draft. The discussions occurred as the students were about to wrap up their work and they all conversed in Mandarin in that moment.

Student 1: Is the clown a child or an adult?

Student 2: Hum ... he looks like a child but sometimes he acts like an adult.

Student 3: Maybe he is an adult but pretends [disguises] as a kid so he can accompany the farmer. In this way he can be [act] like his kid and play with him.

Student 2: How do you know the farmer wants his company? Maybe it’s the clown who needs company.

Student 3: I think maybe both of them need and want each other’s company ...sometimes they act more like friends, not like father and son.

Student 1: Good, good. I like your idea ... so maybe we can add “sometimes they act more like friends”?

The students demonstrated their agency in actively co-constructing knowledge through discussions, and each utterance from the peer discussions pushed the participants to reflect deeper on the story content. For example, at the beginning, Student 1 may be merely curious about the group members' opinions regarding the character's outer appearance (i.e., look like a child or an adult). Then, Student 2 answered the question mentioning not only the farmer's outer appearance but also his behaviors (i.e., acts like an adult). Student 3 pushed the discussion further by talking about the relationship between the farmer and the clown. The interaction among the students exemplifies Leal's (1994) idea that in considering the task-based group discussion activity, peer discussions resulted in more complex meaning construction than knowledge held by individual students. The group discussions also enabled the learners to reflect deeper on the story content: through their conversation, the students shifted their attention from the clown's appearance to his behaviors. Then from his behaviors the students assumed his relationship with the farmer. The relationship between the two characters played an important part of the story, and since the picture book contained no words, the readers were invited to interpret their relationship differently based on the pictures. The students in this group helped each other co-constructed their understandings of the two characters as well as the connections between them and together the students decided that the relationship between the two characters was multilayered. This example also echoes the sociocultural perspectives of learning which underscore that learners' knowledge develops through collaboration (Lantolf, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978).

Another example of learners co-constructing and developing a deeper understanding towards the story content through peer discussions is as followed. The following dialogues were also extracted from one group's first-draft writing activity and the group discussed in English.

Student 4: We can say "The farmer stood there alone."

Student 5: Add "unhappily."

Student 4: Was he unhappy?

Student 5: Look at his face. He was not smiling at all. I think he was quite sad.

Student 6: What made him unhappy?

Student 5: I think he was quite lonely. He was by himself all the time ... See? In the first few pages, it was just him and his house ... not even one animal appeared ...

Student 4: Yeah ... you are right.

Student 5: We can read these pages one more time?

Student 4 and 6: Okay.

This example characterizes the joint activity of collaborative teaching and learning, and this joint activity is highly correlated with van Lier's (2008) concept of agency. Student 5 volunteered to teach her fellow students and she proceeded to lead the group step by step through the process, and this instructional initiative required a strong sense of agency (van Lier, 2008). Student 4 and 6 also exhibited a strong level of joint or collaborative agency because they were willing to be instructed. The interaction among the students also depicts how the learners' learning of the story was developed through collaboration with more a capable peer (Vygotsky, 1978).

Students Self-initiated Actions by Employing Their Own Resources

One remarkable students' self-initiated action was observed during the activity of storytelling presentation. As mentioned earlier, the storytelling presentation was preceded by several rounds of different students reading out loud their final versions of the story to their peer groups. During the first round of storytelling presentation, there was one female student who vividly used two different voices for the two main characters in the story. Furthermore, when she narrated the story from the third-person point of view, she switched back to her own voice. As she finished reading her story, she won a big round of applause from the audience. Interestingly, at the beginning only this female student initiated and

employed the voice-switching technique while presenting, but during the next few rounds of presentation, there were quite a few students used the same strategy to read their stories.

This particular incident indicates that the students manifested their agency in participation in the presentation task by acting purposively and reflectively (Inden, 1990). First, the way that the female student self-initiated using various voices to read the story demonstrates a clear indicator of learner agency, since the instructor did not tell the students to do so (van Lier, 2008). Furthermore, it shows that the student was able to recognize her own capacity and used her own linguistic resource (i.e. doing voice impressions of two characters in the target language English and switching voices back and forth in English) to accomplish the task. In other words, the student self-initiated reading the story with various voices during the presentation activity and strategically used her linguistic resource to achieve her goal.

Meanwhile, the voice-switching action seemed to stimulate some fellow students' interests and when those students presented their own stories, they employed the same strategy. In one of the focus group interviews, two students noted that although initially they did not plan to change their voices as they read, they saw the voice-changing performance received positive feedback from the audience so they decided to "give it a try," as one student stated in the interview. The voice-switching, self-initiated action indicated that the students acted purposively in order to achieve their goals. They further acted reflectively by assigning relevance and significance to the activity they were engaging in (Inden, 1990; Lantolf & Throne, 2006).

Another students' voluntary initiation of learning behavior was also noteworthy: the students' efficient division of work among their group members, including those students who answered the teacher's questions publicly. There were several instances indicating that a number of students voluntarily answered the teacher's questions in public. This reveals that, first of all, the volunteering learners acknowledged the teacher's instructions. Then, they had to formulate and articulate a thought. Further, the learners had to employ some additional level of initiative, since the teacher did not nominate those students to answer questions, but rather made a general solicit to which these learners chose to respond publicly.

Students voluntarily answering questions in public leads to considering the issue of what roles students take in order to accomplish tasks as groups. According to the class observations, the collaborative activities yielded a division of labor such as note-takers, time-keepers, coordinators that led tasks to proceed, and spokespersons for their teams, etc. The division of labor also served as a crucial indicator of learner agency—the students as a group were capable of planning one's role and executing those plans. In addition, the study also finds that the students' choices of roles were highly related to their own learning resources. For instance, according to the class observations, every time when the instructor assigned a group activity, some students would *automatically* take the role as the note taker. Those students, without being asked to do so, quickly jotted down notes on the worksheets. In one of the focus group interviews, a student, who often took her role as note taker, indicated that she liked to write things down and writing helped her think more carefully. Therefore, in group discussions, she preferred to let other people talk first. "Maybe later I can say something too," as the student stated. Oxford (2001) explained that learners with highly analytic or closure-oriented learning style might enjoy accuracy-oriented or form-focused tasks, like notetaking, rather than face-to-face fluency tasks.

In considering the concept that agency is often "relational" and "is shaped by participation in specific communities of practice" (Lantolf & Throne, 2006, p. 239), it can be assumed that those positive learning effects might not be existed if the fellow students were not situated in those specific communities of practice. That is, the fellow students may just read their stories dully, or they could answer to the teacher's questions in Mandarin, or in the worst case scenario, they could decide not to response to questions at all. One noteworthy point is that the teacher did not specifically point out those impressive self-initiative actions as they occurred in class; the peer students spotted those actions and then made a decision to follow the actions. This example confirms that students' active engagement is shaped by the situated communities of practice or social groupings (Lantolf & Throne, 2006).

Students Self-monitored Language Use of L1 and L2

According to this study, some students also demonstrated their agency in self-monitoring use of Mandarin and the target language English. The action of the students self-monitoring their L1 and L2 is remarkable because, as Lee (2005) pointed out, some students may avoid using the target language when performing tasks, especially under time pressure to complete their work. The following examples highlight how the students acted as agentive learners to take responsibility for making choices (between their L1 and L2), taking decisions, and monitoring their learning progress (Little et al., 2017).

According to the field notes from the class observations, in considering the students' English level and also aiming for maximizing students' English speaking opportunities, the instructor stated clearly when, where, and for what Mandarin may be used before each task had begun. Sometimes the instructor set specific time for students to discuss in Mandarin and once the time was up, she asked the students to "switch back to the English mode," the phrase that the instructor used several times in class. Since this language-switching approach was administered as early as the semester had started, the students understood the rules and most of them worked within them. Furthermore, this approach also echoes Swain and Lapkin's (2000) idea that students used their L1 as a resource for managing tasks, and English for accomplishing tasks.

In addition, in order to encourage the students to interact with their peers in English as much as possible, during "the English mode", the instructor sometimes employed the following speaking rules. First, if the students spoke Mandarin once, they received an index card. Second, after they had finished the task, whoever receiving the most index cards needed to draw a mission card and the mission needed to be accomplished immediately. Those missions included singing Happy Birthday songs in both Mandarin and English, or dancing to an English pop song for 30 seconds, etc. Interview data from the focus groups indicated that the students perceived those speaking rules and mission cards quite positively. One student stated:

I think it really works. I tried to speak English as much as possible because of the rules. Although I did not want to perform, I enjoyed watching my classmates drawing the cards and doing the performances. It was fun.

Another student mentioned:

At first, I did not believe I could use English to communicate with my group members all in English. However, I really made it! I did not get any index cards or mission cards that day. It made me so happy.

The students' statements resonate with Prabhu's (1987) and Yuan's (2016) idea: learners achieve a sense of accomplishment when they successfully perform tasks. Although one can argue that it was the cards that push the students to speak English and therefore it was not self-monitoring. However, several recordings from the group discussions showed that at times, some students asked their groups to discuss in English during those English-only discussions and the groups would switch to speaking English. Additionally, once in a whole-class discussion session, the instructor did not require the students to reply in English. All the spokespersons from each team replied the questions in English publicly. In the interview with the focus groups, when asked why those students self-initiated speaking in English, one student stated:

Because it [replying in English] was kind of expected, although the teacher did not ask us to do so. Also because the first student replied in English, and then the second student followed to speak in English and I guess the third and the rest of the students did not dare to reply in Mandarin, haha ... I also think because the teacher used English all the time during that activity, so we replied in English.

This student's statement closely echoes Little et al.'s (2017) and van Lier's (2008) idea of learner agency: the learners were keenly aware of their responsibility for their own actions. Those spokespersons from the whole-class discussion activity demonstrated their strong sense of agency since they not only self-initiated volunteering to answer the questions in public, but also self-regulated or self-monitored to reply in English.

Furthermore, from the field notes of the class observations, it was noted that sometimes if a student in a group got tongue-tied while answering the teacher's questions, either did not know a specific word in English or could not pronounce an English word, a high-proficiency student from the same group would assist that student in terms of English word choice or English pronunciation. Additionally, during some group discussions, some students would try to remind their peers to speak in English. This indicated that not only the students were in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978), but also those students who assisted their peers helped their fellow learners engage in sustained target language interaction (Little et al., 2017).

Those examples of the students using their L1 and L2 while engaging in tasks indicate that they understood clearly when and where and for what purposes to use one language. Although the speaking rules mentioned above could not encourage *all* students to speak English, at least it encouraged the students to communicate in English as much as possible. Furthermore, those mission cards made activities more fun. According to the class observations, laughter could be heard during some group discussions when the speaking rules were administered. Furthermore, even though the speaking rules may be stressful for some students, the learners could actually "play" during the activities, which is considered an important element for language learning (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Meanwhile, the learners also needed to self-monitor their own language use to prevent violating the speaking rules and getting the mission cards. The engagement of self-monitoring is also a key indicator of active and effective learning (Benson, 2011).

Implications

The implications were derived from this empirical study centering on EFL learner agency through participation in the collaborative tasks. First of all, in light of the findings, it is suggested that when implementing tasks or projects in language classrooms, as long as teachers strive to strike a balance between structure and freedom—that making sure students understand from the start what each stage of the task entails and letting students lead—learners can gain a sense of ownership of the activities (Basharina, 2009), which can be helpful for developing student agency. This study demonstrated that it was this less teacher-in-control, more student-centered environment that created opportunities for learning (Cho, 2006) and for observing how the students exerted learner agency. For example, firstly, the Word Bank activity allowed the students to work in groups brainstorming vocabulary words and later the students were able to share their work with the whole class. Then, the Story Map handout that each group created became the basis for their drafts. Finally, the students collaboratively worked together to write their own versions of the story. All the activities mentioned above not only highlighted student creative language use and centered the students' voices, but also took priority over examination-oriented and teacher-centered instruction. I argue that this student-centered approach, which has always been highly valued in English language learning, is not always easy to be realized in classroom practices in considering factors such as time pressure to implement and finish tasks within the planned time. However, it was this less-controlling learning environment that facilitated the researcher to be able to observe and examine learner agency.

Secondly, the study showed that students' active engagement is shaped by the situated communities of practice or social groupings (Lantolf & Throne, 2006). Therefore, it is suggested that in cooperative learning environment, teachers could be more aware of students' grouping patterns. If necessary, teachers may need to mix both high- and low-proficiency students in groups. If teachers continually watch, assess,

learn, rethink, retool, and improves their grouping strategies, students can use different patterns of interaction and therefore be provided with some best possible learning experiences (Chien, 2014; Johnson, 1994). The students in this study demonstrated their sense of agency in self-initiating some actions in order to achieve the learning objectives. The female student who initiated the voice-switching action and those students who volunteered answering questions in L2 served as agentive learners because they were keenly aware of their responsibility for their actions. More importantly, those actions further affected positively the ways in which the fellow students performed or acted.

Thirdly, teachers can help learners to be more aware of their own strengths, and support learners to capitalize on their strengths as resources, and in this way, it can help learners to realize and develop their sense of agency (Liao, 2017). Ultimately, it is hoped that by fostering students' agency and enhancing their autonomous learning, learners demonstrate a capacity to control or self-monitor their own learning, both in class and out of class. The students in this study demonstrated their agency in self-monitoring their L1 and L2 and some of them were capable of using Mandarin as a resource for managing the tasks, and English for accomplishing the tasks. Some students chose analytic tasks such as notetaking over face-to-face fluency tasks based on their analytic learning style. Some students volunteered to be spokespersons for their teams and self-initiated answering questions in English publicly in class. A number of students read their stories with various voices in English. These examples all indicated that the learners were aware of their own resources and utilized them in their specific contexts.

Finally, in a mixed-level classroom, some tasks may be challenging for some students. In this case, teachers can serve as facilitators that guide those students throughout the tasks. In addition, task demands and expectations can be explained explicitly to the learners (Little et al., 2017). Furthermore, before implementing more advanced-level writing or communicative tasks, more small-scale, warm-up activities such as the familiar question-and-answer practice could be helpful in terms of providing scaffolding to support learners to be more prepared for more challenging tasks (Littlewood, 2007).

Conclusions

Situating this work within the conceptualizations of agency as action-oriented endeavors, this study explored how the EFL college learners approached, and more importantly, what they *did* in collaboration and completion of the group-oriented activities in a Taiwanese Freshman English course. It also described how the wordless picture book project was designed and implemented in a college course in the EFL context. Furthermore, it brought to the forefront the voices of the EFL college students during the group-oriented activities. Through the means of collaborative tasks, the EFL college students exerted their learner agency by co-constructing and developing a deeper understanding towards the story content through peer discussions. Additionally, they self-initiated actions by using their own resources or strengths to act purposively and reflectively in order to achieve the task objectives. Some students also self-monitored their language use of L1 and L2 and some further encouraged their peers to use the target language English while working together and therefore the target language interaction was able to be sustained.

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