

The Role of Learner Identity/ Self-guides and Agency in Learning English as a Foreign Language: The Stories of Two English Learners at the Higher Institute of Language in Tishreen University

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□ ABSTRACT □

The general focus of the present article is on two interrelated concepts, that is, identity and agency and their role in learning English as a foreign language.

An examination of the language education literature would reveal that there is a division between the post-structuralist concept of identity which gives primacy to the contextual influences that shape how we conceive ourselves, our relationships with the world around us and how we behave, and the psychologically oriented self-guides theory with its focus on the individual and on human behavior as being guided by some inner visions that individuals have of themselves and the world around them.

Therefore, the present study suggests an analytical framework that combines those two perspectives and shows that individual agency in life in general and in language learning in particular is restricted both externally and internally. This is achieved through the analysis of the life stories and learning behaviors of two language learners at the higher institute of language in Tishreen University.

Key words: identity, self-guides, individual agency, learning English as a foreign language

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دور الهوية/موجهات الذات والفاعلية الفردية في تعلم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية: قصة متعلمين للغة الانكليزية في المعهد العالي للغات بجامعة تشرين

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□ ملخص □

تركز الدراسة الحالية على مفهومين مترابطين و هما الهوية و الفاعلية الفردية و على دورهما في تعلم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية.

تكشف القراءة المتمعنة لأدب تعليم اللغة بشكل عام عن وجود انقسام بين مفهوم الهوية بعد البنوي و السوسيولوجي والذي يعطي أولوية لمؤثرات السياق التي تشكل ادراكنا لذواتنا و لعلاقتنا بالعالم المحيط بنا و تحدد سلوكنا بشكل عام و بين نظرية موجهات الذات السيكولوجية و التي تركز على الفرد و التي ترى السلوك الانساني بشكل عام موجهها برؤى داخلية يملكها الأفراد حول أنفسهم و العالم المحيط بهم.

و بناءً على ما سبق فإن الدراسة الحالية تقدم اطاراً تحليلياً يجمع بين هاتين المقاربتين، و تظهر أن الفاعلية الفردية بالحياة يشكل عام و في تعلم لغة أجنبية بشكل خاص محددة داخلياً و خارجياً. و هذا سيتم من خلال تحليل قصتي حياة اثنتين من متعلمي للغة الانكليزية في المعهد العالي للغات بجامعة تشرين كما يرويهما كل منهما و سلوكهما في تعلم اللغة في الماضي و الحاضر ضمن المعهد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية، الموجهات الذات، الفاعلية الفردية، تعلم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Introduction

The present article focuses on two interrelated concepts in the area of learning English as a foreign language, that is, 'agency' and 'identity'. Those two concepts are the focus of the analysis of the data of two students learning English at the Higher Institute of Languages in Tishreen University. The importance of this study stems from the fact that most studies in the literature on those two concepts took place in contexts where English is taught as a *second* language or in multilingual contexts (Norton and Toohey, 2011) focusing on issues related to the identity categories of race and gender, while there is a scarcity in the studies in contexts where English is taught as a *foreign* language. Recently, Norton and Toohey (2011, p. 413) argue that research on identity is 'of great relevance to foreign language learning'. Hence, the present study offers an insight into issues related to identity and agency in learning English as a foreign language in the Syrian context. This article starts with the theoretical background of the concepts of 'identity' and 'agency', describes the context of the present study and the research methodology, and then moves to data analysis, discussion and concludes with some theoretical and pedagogical implications.

Literature review

1. Identity

1.1. Definitions and theoretical background:

Identity is defined as 'the self' (Taylor, 1989. p.5), or 'who we are' (Kanno, 2003, p. 3). Lamb (2009, p.229) argues that though the concept of identity has a long history in the field of second language learning, yet recently it has been dominated by poststructuralist approaches (e.g. Norton, 1995, 2000). In reaction to the absence of indication to the socially situated nature of L2 learning in the field of SLA (at that time) and the depiction of motivation in particular as an individual property, Norton (1995, 2000) proposed a theory of identity that highlights the social nature of L2 learning and positions identity at the center of the L2 learning process. Norton (2000, p.5) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future". In this sense, identity is a person's potential force for change, which, in order to become an actual force, needs the learner's agency defined by Norton as 'investment' (see section 2.2.2).

In the field of language education, research on identity owes much to sociological theories which attempt to explain how individual agency and social structure are mutually shaped and constrained (Lamb, 2009. p.230). Most prominent are Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning and Bourdieu's (1977) social theory. For Lave and Wenger (1991), human learning is an integral and indispensable aspect of social practice, whereby knowledge and understandings are negotiated in interaction with other people, and skills develop as changing forms of situated practice entail changed relations with others. Human learning is always linked to the construction of identities. Identity, in this case, implies a long-term and complex relationship between individuals and their participation in communities of practice. A community of practice (CoP), according to Lave and Wenger (1991, p.98), is "a set of relationships among persons, activity, and world, over time, which bear a relationship with other tangential and overlapping CoP". Lave and Wenger argue that learning occurs in, or in relation to, communities of practice, with learners gradually moving from a position of 'legitimate peripheral participation' toward full participation through their engagement in community activities, interaction with more experienced members, and the gradual alignment of their practice with those of these 'experts'. With new forms of participation a new identity is formed. Communities of practice may be 'as

broad as a society or culture, or as narrow as a particular language classroom' (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148); they may be a 'real' community in which a person has regular involvement (e.g. a school) or an 'imagined community' (Kanno and Norton, 2003, p. 241) Quite similarly to Lave and Wenger- yet with more elaboration on the influences that shape the process of identity formation- Hawkins (2005, p.61) argues that the individuals negotiate and co-construct their views of themselves and the world influenced in this by their *lived histories, existing cultural and power relations and dominant values and ideologies which 'privilege certain practices over others' and 'shape the dynamics of the interactions'*.

One salient feature of the situated learning theory is that the nature of identity has always been depicted as multiple, changing (as implied in the discussion above), contradictory and a site of struggle (Norton and Toohey, 2011. p.414). Elaborating on this idea and linking the concept of identity to the concept of agency discussed below, Norton (1995, p.15) argues that according to the poststructuralist conception of subjectivity- upon which much of Norton's work is based- subjectivity/ social identity is constructed in a variety of social sites 'all of which are structured by relations of power in which the person takes up different subject positions- teacher, mother, manager, critic', with multiple desires or aspirations, and that some of these positions- and therefore desires and aspirations- could be in conflict with each other. However, the person, argues Norton, is not always subject to the power relation within a particular site; s/he has human agency, and, therefore, 'although a person may be positioned in a particular way within a given discourse, the person might resist the subject position or even set up a counter-discourse which positions the person in a powerful rather than marginalized subject position' (p.16). An illuminating example of this argument is the language learning experience of Martina, one of the participants in Norton's longitudinal case study (1995). Martina's social identity was a site of struggle. To resist being positioned by her co-workers as something invisible like a "broom," Martina reframed her relationship with her co-workers as a domestic one, repositioned herself as their mother rather than a powerless immigrant or a "broom," and she claimed her "right to speak" (p.23) or to use Bourdieu's term "the power to impose reception" (Bourdieu, 1977. Cited in Norton, 1995. p.18).

Bourdieu (1977) and his social theory informed much of the theorization and research on identity in the field of language education (e.g. Norton, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton and Toohey, 2003; Norton and Toohey, 2011), and provided tools for explaining the contradictions between individual person's motivation to learn a language and his/her sometimes ambivalent desire to speak it.

Further, Bourdieu's (1991) social theory and particularly notions of 'capital', 'field' and 'habitus' were very beneficial in highlighting and explaining the link between the sociological concept of 'identity' and the psychological construct of motivation prevalent in the SLA field, and namely here the self-motivational model proposed by Dornyei (2005,2009) based on the psychological theory of 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1987). In this regard, Lamb (2009, p. 231) argues that by the time they enter school, children have inherited different amounts of economic, social and cultural capital, and have developed through acquisition a habitual way of understanding the world and a predisposition to act in certain ways, i.e. 'habitus'. The existence of this combination of capital and habitus in every individual makes certain 'fields' of social activity (e.g. school) more 'congenial' than others. Success achieved within these fields influences and shapes the habitus and 'endows different forms of capital', which according to Bourdieu,

contributes in the long term to the reproduction of social classes. Accordingly, Lamb concludes by arguing that

Agency is thus constrained both externally 'by the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds him/herself in', and also internally 'by an internalized framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable, and a limited range acceptable' (Reay, 2004: 435), a formulation which neatly overlaps with the psychological notion of 'possible selves' (p.231).

Lamb's argument highlights the importance of a balanced consideration of both the psychological and the socio-cultural dimensions.

1.2. The 'self' and the influence of 'identity':

Based entirely on the theory of 'possible selves' Dornyei (2005, 2009) developed the L2 self-motivational system. This system consists of two future oriented self-guides (the ideal L2 self which is promotion- focused and the ought-to-L2 self which is prevention-focused) and a third constituent related to the student's learning environment (e.g. the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, the experience of success).

Dornyei's model represents a very advanced stage in motivation research especially in terms of reinterpreting the concept of 'integrativeness' and presenting integrativeness and instrumentality as co-existing elements in the same self-guide after they were often considered as dichotomous motivational sources (c.f. Dornyei, 2009). Yet, it still gives the impression that the learner remains sealed in in his/her own individual and self-contained subjectivity. However, with the influence of the work on the sociological concept of 'identity', researchers from within the L2 motivation field start to argue for approaching the issue of motivation and self in a different way. Ushioda (2009) argues for the need to stop viewing the learner as an individual whose context is located outside him/her as an independent variable- in the way that Dornyei's model might suggest- and to start viewing the learner as a person-in-context to capture the mutually constitutive, dynamic, and complex relationship between the person 'as self-reflective intentional agent and the fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro- and macro-contexts in which the person is embedded, moves, and is inherently part of'; and therefore to view motivation as 'an organic process that emerges through the complex system of interrelations' (p.220). In the same vein, Lamb (2009) argues that the development and motivational impact of the 'ideal' and 'ought-to' L2 selves 'need to be explored at levels of analysis beyond the self, including the situated activity in which learners engage, their home and institutional settings and the wider context of society and global regions' (p.230). Such arguments overlap with the social theory of Bourdieu and the situated learning theory of Lave and Wenger. Based on that, it can be argued that a combination of the psychological dimension expressed in Dornyei's model and the socio-cultural dimension expressed by the social and situated learning theories would enrich the analysis of students L2 experiences when it comes to the study of students' construction and re-constriction of identities and their related agentic behavior.

2. Agency

2.1. Definitions

Understanding 'agency' as a concept is far from easy, a claim strongly supported by the existence of a variety of definitions of or attempts at defining this concept in the literature of social research, education and later in the literature of language education.

Giddens (1984) defines 'agency' as the capacity to act otherwise, or to select a course of actions from a range of options. He puts an emphasis on that potential for change implied

in agency and which he describes as “the capability of the individuals to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course or events” (1984, p. 14). Candlin and Sarangi (2004) define agency as 'the self-conscious reflexive actions of human beings' (p. xiii), thus relating agency to action and putting an emphasizing the reflexive capacities of human beings (i.e. their ability to consciously choose and take courses of action that influence them and their life later). In still other definitions the focus is more on the nature of 'agency' and by implication on the complicated relation between the individual and structure, which in fact takes the wider space in the debates about 'agency'. Ahearn (2001, p.112), introducing the idea of mediation, defines agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act”—noting that “all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and in its interpretation”. However, she acknowledges that this definition “leaves many details unspecified”, namely here, what kinds of sociocultural mediation might be involved or, indeed, what we mean by sociocultural mediation. More elaboration on this issue particularly is presented by Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), Lantolf (2002), and Lantolf and Thorne (2006). Hence, Lantolf & Pavlenko (2001, p. 148) argue that

[...] agency is never a “property” of a particular individual; rather, it is a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large.

Elaborating more on the idea of social mediation which is the basis of Ahearn's definition (2001), Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 238) argue that

[...] agency is socioculturally mediated and dialectically enacted. In other words, within a given time and space, there are constraints and affordances that make certain actions probable, others possible, and yet others impossible.

However, our behavior as individuals is not totally determined by our sociocultural contexts. That is why Lantolf and Thorne (2006, pp. 142-143) emphasize that

Agency, as we construe it, is about more than voluntary control over behaviour, although to be sure this is a critical component of what it means to be an agent. The concept also entails the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events.

Being an agent means being able to make informed choices based on one's recognition of their personal needs and purposes. These choices are shaped by the individual's historical and cultural trajectories.

This dialectical relation between the individual and structure is highlighted by many other researchers in their conceptualizations of 'agency'. In this regard, van Lier (2008) argues that agency is not 'an individual character trait or activity' (p.169). Agency, according to him, is “action potential, mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors” (p. 171). However, he, interestingly enough, cautions against treating apparent action, e.g., active participation in a language classroom, as agency at work (e.g., one can express one's agency by deliberately not acting). Ray (2009) argues that human agency is an intentional act carried out by people to intentionally change themselves or their situations (p.116). He insists, yet, that “people are neither autonomous agents nor mechanical responders to the environment” (p. 116).

It is extremely important to emphasize here that though most of the above mentioned researchers focus on the ideas of choice and initiative this should not be understood as implying that once human agents make a choice and take a course of action the desired change in their lives or their situations is guaranteed or that agency itself always stems from personal initiative. In other words of precisely, the link between agency and control (implied in change and initiative) is not strong and stable through all cases and at all times.

That is why Biesta and Tedder (2006, p. 27)- similarly to Lantolf and Thorne's discussion (2006) of social mediation just mentioned above- make a distinction between situations and conditions that are very difficult to influence or change through agency (e.g., physical or mental disability), situations and circumstances that might be influenced (e.g., those illnesses for which there is a cure), and situations and circumstances that in principle can be influenced (e.g., economic resources). Further, according to Biesta and Tedder though agency can be understood as the ability to exert control over and give direction to the course of one's life, yet not all instances of agency that fall under this definition result from the individual's own initiative. In other words, agency is not necessarily the same as taking initiative, but can be seen in situations where people take control of their life as a result of a perceived calling or sense of duty, meaning that agency can also be understood as a response.

2.2. Agency in the field of language education:

During the last two decades 'agency' has become an important theoretical concept within the field of language education, and interest in the theorization and practices associated with this concept has grown significantly (Norton,1995; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Norton, 2000; Ahearn, 2001; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Toohey and Norton, 2003; Kinginger, 2004; Gao, 2010; Huang, 2011; Huang and Benson, 2013, Muramatsu, 2013). Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000), for instance, argue that in L2 learning agency is the very force for L2 learners to embark on "long, painful, inexhaustive, and for some, never-ending process of self-translation" (p.170). Accordingly, L2 learners are not passive participants in the process of learning but, as agents, have the power to make certain choices, initiate actions, actively resist certain practices, construct and re-construct identity/ies, negotiate the meaning of their actions, and take control of their learning in pursuit of their goals in learning an L2. Another important example from the field of language education is that of Norton (2000) who defines agency as 'investment', and argues that when L2 learners learn an L2, they do so with the understanding that "they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which in turn increase the value of their cultural capital" (p. 10). According to Bourdieu (1991), cultural capital is "knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisition, as exemplified by educational and technological qualifications" (p. 14). Norton's conceptualization of 'investment' has opened a new way for looking at L2 learners and L2 learning in SLA research.

Still, in other L2 research areas such as L2 socialization, learner agency appeared in two forms: resistance and non-participation (Muramatsu, 2013). Regarding resistance, two types have been reported in some L2 socialization studies: resistance to accepting a social role constructed by the dominant language community (Morita, 2002, 2004; Norton, 2000); and resistance to conforming to certain normative practices of a target language community (Siegal, 1996). As for non-participation as a form of agency, when L2 learners face a social reality that is undesirable for them they sometimes choose not to participate or to get involved in that reality. For example, Katarina (Norton, 2000, 2001) stopped attending her ESL class when she realized that she was positioned as a powerless immigrant woman. Instead, she decided to take a computer course to (re)gain her legitimacy as an educated individual.

To conclude this part, it is worth mentioning that reviewing the literature on learner agency reveals that, apart from Gao's case study (2010), all studies have been conducted in border-crossing contexts, and were typically about immigrants in Western countries (i.e. English as a *second* language situations).

Research questions:

The present study aims at answering the following questions:

- 1 - How can a combination of both the psychological theory of the self and the concept of 'identity' and the sociological theories behind it be useful in interpreting the life and learning experiences of the participants and explaining the impact of such experiences on their agentic behaviors in learning English?
- 2 - What kind of link is there between agency and control in the participants' learning experiences? And how does that link impact on the participants identities?
- 3 - How were/ are the participants' agentic behaviors in learning English mediated?

Research Methodology:

The present study adopts the qualitative approach to investigation. In fact, the theoretical understandings that underlie the present study impacted on the research methodology and methods of data collection chosen for the present study. Ushioda (2009) argues that in studying identity and agency there is a need not to position the central participants in any piece of research simply as language learners, since this is just one aspect of their identity, but rather to understand them as people who are necessarily located in particular cultural and historical contexts. This means that we need to understand the idiosyncrasies of those people' learning experiences which can best be accomplished by deploying the qualitative research methodology which focuses on the 'how' and 'why' things take place (Creswell, 2003), and therefore, helps in understanding the particularity of the persons, environments, and processes we wish to examine.

1. Methods of data collection:

The great part of the data in the present study was collected using two methods: semi-structured interviews and classroom observation. The two methods provide what is called 'thick data' (Geertz, 1973) which help in deeply understanding the idea under study. The semi-structured interviews were conducted twice with the participants: one round at the beginning of the course they followed at the time of doing this research and one at the end of the course. In the first round of interviews the focus was mainly on general life history and past experiences of learning English in the form of narrative. This proved very useful especially that part of the general aim of this study is investigating into development of identity and agency of L2 learners over time in multiple learning contexts. In the second round of interviews the focus was on the present learning experience in the Higher Institute of Language and the impact of the interaction between the participants and the immediate learning context on their identities and agentic L2 learning behavior in and outside classroom and the way these participants dealt with the affordances and constraints of this context. This was supported by data got through classroom observation. Each participant was observed twice a week for six weeks (the duration of the course in the institute). Field notes were taken regarding the participants' behavior in class: their participation/non-participation, moments of taking initiative in or refraining from answering teacher's questions or interacting with the teacher and other students. These notes were very useful in the second round of interviews since the participants were asked to account for these instances of behavior, which led to deeper understanding of the complexities of the participants' perceptions of themselves and their interaction with their learning context. Follow-up data were collected by telephone interviews 8 months after the end of the main process of data collection in the institute. This was of great help in understanding where they participants got with their lives and whether their agentic behaviors led to the change

they aimed at in their lives or not. In total data were collected over the period between March and November 2017.

2. Participants:

Being a lecturer in the Higher Institute of Languages for twelve years I had the advantages of an 'insider' who knows the context and people working in this context very well. This in fact facilitated the process of selecting participants for this study. When I decided to do this research I approached my teacher-colleagues and asked them to nominate from their classroom students who followed at least two courses in English to participate in my study. Though not enough, the standard of following at least two courses could provide an indication of some kind of agency in L2 learning. I got eight students who already followed two to three courses in the institute. Some of them followed these courses without time intervals; and some others followed one course, stopped for some time (in three cases for almost two years) and then came back for another course. After the first round of interviews two students (who are given the pseudo-names of Hiba and Rami) were chosen to continue participating in this study, Hiba (an intermediate level student) and Rami (TOEFL student). They were chosen because they represented quite distinct and different positions in terms of their life histories, their perceptions of their past, present and future selves, their various L2 learning contexts and their agentic L2 learning behavior. This difference will be illustrative of theoretical principles reviewed in the first part of this article.

Context of the Study:

This study was done in the Higher Institute of Languages. This institute is part of the Tishreen University, a Syrian state university located in Lattakia city. In addition to its being a research institute it provides language courses in different languages (English, Russian, German, French and Persian) for the public for relatively low fees compared with the private sector language institutes.

Being part of the national educational system, this institute is open to all kinds of influences affected by the sociocultural, economic and political discourses prevalent in Syria and the constant changes in them. The international sanctions at all levels, the withdrawal of all international companies working in Syria, the dramatic deterioration of the living and safety conditions of the majority of the Syrian people, the spread of armed conflict all over Syria and the subsequent partial or complete destruction of numerous towns and major cities and the economic infrastructure of the whole country all led to the rise of the 'refuge and immigration discourse' among the Syrians and which was nourished and enhanced by the 'open borders' policy followed by different West European countries especially Germany. This discourse peaked in 2015. The highlight of that same year has been the Russian military intervention in the Syrian conflict. Those dramatic changes at the macrolevel (the nation) left their traces at the microlevel (the institute). The number of students who wanted to learn Russian and German soared and far exceeded the number of students who wanted to develop their English. The number of students who wanted to develop their French reached its lowest level and after a while the French courses in the institute stopped (HIL Archives, 2015- 2016- 2017). The introduction of Russian language as an optional foreign language in the school stage at a national level, and the big number of scholarships offered by Russian universities to the Syrian students at both the graduate and post-graduate levels account for the dramatic increase in the number of students who wanted to learn Russian at that time. These were extremely harsh times and the majority of the Syrians would strongly hold to and invest in any chance to get away from the harsh

living conditions, no matter how much slight the hope of doing so might be. At that time though the number of students who came to the institute to develop their English hit its lowest levels, it took a steady trajectory after a while. There were 4 to 6 classes every course with an average of 23 students in each class.

Data Analysis:

1. Hiba: life and past learning experience

Hiba is a 24 years old graduate from the faculty of education. She lives in a neighborhood mostly inhabited by working class people in Lattakia city. Hiba belongs to a family of five members: her father who is an electricity technician working in a governmental post, her mother who is a primary school teacher, an older sister who is a graduate of chemistry and who has recently received a scholarship to continue her postgraduate studies in Russia, and a younger brother who is a third year student of computer engineering. Hiba describes her background as 'working class' commenting that:

[1] My father came from a poor family. My mother too. My father always reminds us that what we need to count on is ourselves and our efforts in this world.

Hiba goes on describing the living conditions she and her family have passed through saying:

[2] Like thousands of families in this country we passed through very bad living conditions especially in the last four years. My father retired last year and he and my mom could hardly bring food to the table. At times they couldn't afford the almost everyday transportation expenses for me and my siblings to our university. So we stopped going to university everyday and we tried to attend only the practical sessions and some of the lectures of the difficult modules.

Surviving these conditions and achieving success posed a big challenge for Hiba and her siblings and this affected Hiba's vision of herself:

[3] At that time I did not have big plans for my future life. I tried to be realistic and to live my life day by day. All my dreams revolved around passing my exams every semester with good marks. I never thought of what I want to do in the future. After all I am a poor girl with a very limited range of options in these conditions like so many girls and boys in this country. But I was determined to succeed in my studies.

However, after graduating with honors and a high grade average, Hiba's vision of herself radically changed and she started to see herself as a capable person with good options for her future such as getting a permanent teaching job with the government and /or going on with her postgraduate studies to travel later. By the time of doing this research Hiba had a full time job at a kindergarten, which –though a temporary one- offered her a source of income that helped her in achieving some financial independence.

For Hiba, learning English throughout the schooling stage was not a problem, being a 'hard working' and 'diligent' student as she describes herself. She recalled her excitement when she started learning English in the fifth grade at school, and how doing the 'English homework' was the first thing she always did when she got home. Hiba did not receive help in learning English from anybody at home except from her mother 'who knows some English' and who helped Hiba or supervised her while doing her English homework in the early stages of her learning. Hiba made it clear that the excitement she had when she started to learn English started to fade away after a while as English lessons turned into some kind of a routine:

[4] I remember that learning English in the first two years was a real enjoyment to me. Everyday I learnt new words. But later, the same thing continued to happen over and over

again... Grammar, vocabulary, reading. Reading, grammar, vocabulary... . But I used to study well at home and memorize the new words or grammatical rules... My marks were always high in English.

Hiba said that English was not of any special interest to any of her family members as no activities in English, such as watching movies in English or listening to songs, were done at home. However, Hiba mentioned that she and her sister were enrolled once in a summer English course, which she enjoyed a lot, to show that her parents- though they are not personally interested in English- were aware of the importance of English to their children's future. However, due to the lack of money that course was the last of its kind for Hiba. She did two other courses which were preparatory ones related to the school books of the ninth grade and baccalaureate.

At university, the experience of learning English for Hiba did not bring much difference. She described that experience as a 'repetition' of the school experience in terms of teaching style and learning content. Hiba explains that she and many others did not find English at university 'appealing' or 'challenging' so they stopped attending English lectures. Hiba says that she stopped attending lectures after the second one because attending did not add anything new to what she already knows and because of her family's financial situation mentioned above and which forced her to cut down her transportation expenses. It was enough for her, as she says, to come in the last lecture to ask about the materials covered during the course and how they are going to be examined, and the rest could be done at home through self-study which, according to Hiba, needed 'no more than two days before exam'. It was again the same story of studying for the purpose of passing exam and getting high grades. Very noticeable was Hiba's comment that 'English was not important at that stage since all education-related modules were taught in Arabic'.

Hiba's talk throughout this interview about her past learning experience of learning English suggests that she has developed a strong sense of obligation to learn English, an ought-to L2 self. And one can argue that Hiba has had throughout her past learning experience a strong sense of reactive agency: doing what she was required to do and achieving success according to the standards of the system she was in. However, this is not the whole story of Hiba, as her sense of identity and agency has undergone dramatic changes as we will see after we have a look at Rami's (the second participant) background and past learning experience of learning English.

2. Rami: life and past learning experience

Rami is 24 years old student of medicine, and he is currently in his graduation year. Rami belongs to an 'upper middle class' highly educated family. His father is a dentist and his mother is a dermatologist. He has one sister who is a fourth year student in the faculty of medicine too. Rami and his family live in a prestigious neighborhood in lattakia city downtown. Ten years ago Rami and his family came from Abu Dhabi where they lived for about eleven years.

[5] After I finished my ninth grade my parents decided that it is better for me to study the high school stage in Syria so I get accustomed to the system here because they wanted me and my sister to continue studying at a Syrian university later on.

Rami goes on explaining that back in Abu Dhabi he and his sister learned English at an early age in special courses for kids and with the help of their parents who speak English before starting their study in a prestigious international school which follows a mixture of the British and American curricula and where teaching is completely in English. Rami studied the primary and the preparatory stages in that school. He uses phrases such as 'huge

shift' and 'big challenge' to describe his comeback to Syria and the first stage of learning in Syrian schools which was characterized by 'different modules', a lot of memorization, teaching in Arabic, and the almost total absence of English. It is very important to mention that Rami went to a private school which was better than public ones in terms of the learning conditions such as the limited number of students in class, better equipment, and supposedly better teaching.

In spite of this 'huge shift' Rami could catch up with the rest of his classmates and because of the encouragement of his parents, their follow-up at home, and his intensive efforts Rami started to excel in different modules especially math and chemistry, though he continued to face 'a problem with the huge amounts [he] had to memorize'. English was among the modules in which Rami excelled, though it required no big efforts from his side:

[6] From day one at that school, I started to shine because of my excellent English. I was far ahead of my classmates in English with almost no effort whatsoever since the textbook was so simple to me. This reduced my anxiety and boosted my self-confidence a little bit, which I dearly needed at that difficult stage. I felt that I loved English more and more.

However, this situation did not last for long. When Rami finished his first year of the high school, he noticed that he spent all his time in getting adapted to the new life in Syria, in catching up with the new schooling system and that he was overtaken by the sense of relief that came from the easiness of the English module and textbook and the sense of distinction in English. Rami remembers how one day in the summer of that year he wrote an email to catch up with one of his friends back in Abu Dhabi, and while doing that he found difficulty in recalling many words in English and that he was thinking in Arabic and trying to translate into English. Rami attributed that to the way English was taught in his new school which depended mainly on translation and of every word, to the teacher who 'spoke Arabic most of the time' and the absence of English outside the classroom. Describing his feeling at that time

[7] That was like a shock to me. I felt that I was losing what distinguished me the most, and that I was losing something I love, something related to my good memories of my life back in Abu Dhabi.

Rami explains how that sense of losing what he loved stimulated him to take the initiative and ask his mother who was fluent in English for help. Rami and his mother agreed to start talking in English at home and they were later joined by Rami's younger sister. Further, because Rami and his sister love movies, their mother started to bring them DVDs with no Arabic subtitles and she asked them to stop watching movies with Arabic subtitles on TV. Rami started reading the news of his favorite football team, Bayern Munich, on English websites. In addition, he wrote more emails in English to his friends back in Abu Dhabi. By the end of that summer Rami felt that he got back his ability to speak English well and he recalls how, consequently, all these activities became part of his daily life till the end of the high school.

Finishing high school with very high scores qualified Rami to apply for the faculty of medicine in Tishreen University in Lattakia city where he originally lived. This was a dream coming true for both Rami and his family.

However, things did not go as straightforward as Rami and his family planned. Rami's first year in the faculty of medicine witnessed the beginning of the Syrian crisis which was aggravated by the end of that year and turned into an armed conflict. He recalls how with the beginning of the second semester of that year, he and his colleagues stopped going to university for about 6 weeks, and when they came back to university they attended only the

lectures of what they considered as the main subjects in addition to the practical sessions. For Rami and many of his colleagues English was not among what they termed as 'main subjects' and he explains why:

[8] It was ridiculous. The book was so silly and simple. The teacher was not that serious. And the whole thing was a repetition of what we have tackled at school. Nothing new... nothing was worth attending.

However, Rami did not stop developing his English in his own way. Like any other Syrian at that time he was very interested in knowing the truth behind what was going on and how things got worse in the country. So he spent some of his spare time in surfing the net and reading articles about the situation on websites such as BBC and CNN. He comments on that stage by saying:

[9] It was very interesting to see how BBC news was different from that of the Syrian channels and how both were different from reality... [laugh]

What was particularly interesting to Rami was the new vocabulary he met while reading or listening to news on YouTube:

[10] I learnt many new words I haven't met before. I can remember words such as propaganda, armed militias, guerrilla war, bombshells, conflict zones... they were all new to me.

Later in his third year in the faculty of medicine, Rami continues to narrate, English starts to acquire a special status in his life for two reasons. First, medicine is taught in all Syrian universities in Arabic, and this coupled with a severe lack of references in Arabic about recent medical discoveries and developments means that as students of medicine go further in their studies they feel an urgent need to read references (articles and books) in English

[11] In order to develop more and know more about medicine you have to read references in English. Everything new is in English. Our books in Arabic are old and aren't enough.

Second, when Rami started his third year as a student of medicine the situation started to deteriorate in Syria at all levels and millions of people fled the country seeking refuge in safe countries (see section 5). This situation affected Rami and his family as well. And because of the economic situation that was getting worse everyday, Rami's father decided that it was time to go back to UAE and restart his career as a dentist there and wait for the rest of the family to join him later. Stimulated by the general social atmosphere and the prevalent discourse of travelling abroad, Rami had this plan of going after graduation to the USA for a clinical attachment first and then see how things might develop from there. He was encouraged in this by the fact that he has close relatives living there

[12] I wanted to travel as well but not to Emirates... I remember that every time I closed my eyes I imagined myself examining patients in a hospital somewhere in America. My aunt lives in the USA. She married and settled there. I might have a good chance of going there

It is this plan which brought him to the higher institute of languages later. But it should be emphasized here that Contrary to Hiba, Rami didn't stick to what he was required to do within the system he was in. Because of the cultural and linguistic capital that he inherited from his experience back in Abu Dhabi, English meant for him more than a school module; it became part of who he was. All this fed Rami's imagination and his vision of a future English-speaking self which is a key component of the ideal L2-self and which was very clear in Rami's vision of himself 'working in a hospital somewhere in America'.

3. Hiba's present learning Experience:

At asking her about what brought her to the HIL, Hiba's answer focused first on the general discourse, to which she might have been regularly exposed in the past, about the importance of English as a world language:

[13] English is used everywhere, and everybody needs to master it in order to work abroad. English is the most dominant language worldwide. One might feel illiterate if s/he can't speak it.

However, she added

[14] [...] UNRWA were recruiting as well. I had a chance of getting a job in my specialty with an international organization. It would be like a dream coming true if I could get this job... But I lacked one thing, which is English. The job interview was in English and I needed to be very good at that.

For the first time after her graduation, Hiba experienced a transformation in her sense of identity triggered by affordance of her context, which was the job opportunity with the UNRWA. She seemed to have a clear vision of her future self and English seemed to be an essential part of it. This might contrast with the vague vision of her future as expressed by her before. This transformation in Hiba's sense of identity is reflected in her being committed throughout the courses she followed at the HIL:

[15] My commitment was complete. I did not miss any sessions. I revised everything at home. I spoke at class and participated a lot. I started to love English and I felt that I can really speak it fluently one day.

Hiba was following her second course before the job interview. Further, Hiba asked a friend of her sister's who is a postgraduate student of English literature to help her in developing her speaking skills at home simultaneously with the HIL courses, and she insisted on paying her money for her tutoring to guarantee full commitment from her side. Hiba went to the job interview full of hope that she was capable of getting the job. Unfortunately, she failed in her endeavor:

[16] Ten days after the interview I came to know that I did not get the job. I don't know why... The competition was fierce. Some of the other applicants came with a TOEFL certificate. Some others had longer practical experience than me... I don't know. I hesitated in the interview at the beginning. My mind was blank. I could not recall the words in English to answer the interviewer's questions though they were easy.

Hiba received the news about this job in the last ten days of the course she was following in the HIL, and in reaction Hiba stopped attending classes for two days. However, she came back, finished that course and immediately applied for the next one. At asking her why she came back to that course she replied:

[17] Those were difficult times to me. But I had to finish what I had started. I am not a quitter! I was enjoying my time here in the institute. The teacher was wonderful and I benefited a lot from her and from that course. My older sister advised me also to go on and submit later to the Oxford placement test here in the institute and get certificate which could be useful if I want to apply to scholarships later.

Hiba's teacher in the second course nominated her to participate in this study. The teacher described her as 'one of the most active students in class', that 'she participated in almost every session', that 'she had an initiative' and that 'she was the first to volunteer to do a presentation in class though she was so afraid'. However, according the observation data, Hiba's performance in her third course in the institute was far from that description. Her initiative was somehow weak. She only participated three times throughout the 12 sessions

I observed, and in the three times it was to answer questions directed by the teacher to the whole class. Hiba's participation came when nobody in class gave a correct answer. Whenever the teacher asked students to work in pairs or groups- which happened in almost every session- Hiba preferred to work individually and she rarely interacted with her classmates during the lessons. In addition, she missed three sessions. At end of that course I asked Hiba to evaluate the course and her performance in general and she said:

[18] I did not enjoy my time in this course. That is why I did not participate more. The teacher was so formal in class. He just followed the book. This course reminded me of the English classes when I was at school.

Hiba elaborated on the differences between this course and the first two ones she followed. These differences were related to the teachers. She talked about how her first teacher was 'so friendly' in class and how her second one was 'so close to us' and her intimate talk about her life at home made students talk about their lives too, and how they did extra things in class

[19] R: what did you usually do in class with that teacher?

S: It was not just the book. She pushed us a lot to talk in English. Every session she asked every one of us about what we did yesterday. And in every session one of us had to volunteer to prepare a presentation for the next session. We chose the topics. We surfed the internet and some of us prepared PowerPoint slides. Some others made videos. It was fun. I really enjoyed my time and learned a lot of new words from my classmates.

The observation data of Hiba's last course shows that her description of what was going on in class was not far from the truth. Though the focus in observing that class was on Hiba's performance but notes were taken about the kind of activities done in class, the management of the teacher of these activities and the interaction between the teacher and the students which all provided a context for Hiba's performance. Very prominent in that data was the same routine the teacher followed in almost all the observed classes. He started the class by questions intended to check whether the students understood the points covered in the last sessions and then proceeded with the activities of the textbook from where they stopped in the last session. All the interaction in class between the teacher and the students revolved around the activities of the textbook and took the form of question-answer in most cases. The teacher tended to use Arabic to translate the meaning of new vocabulary especially in reading or to explicitly instruct students on grammar. Once the session was finished the teacher immediately left the classroom. How this context influenced Hiba's performance will be discussed later (see section 7.3).

Returning to Hiba's present learning experience, she made it clear that this course will be her last in the institute for now and that she can't afford 'wasting' more money and time'. She explained that she needs to focus now on her temporary job in the kindergarten and on getting a permanent job in public schools in the near future as the ministry of education is recruiting new teachers and Hiba's chances are almost guaranteed because of her graduation high grade average. Further, she is planning to apply for MA in education at the beginning of the next academic year. At asking her about whether she has any plan of going on with learning English on her own at home her answer came somehow uncertain:

[20] Maybe. I will take a break after this course. But in the future I will see. The teacher in the second course told us that there are some good courses on YouTube. I will try to watch them when I have some time. My sister's friend suggested that we can still meet at talk in English. This depends on my free time. I feel I am exhausted now and I have to secure a permanent job in the near future.

Hiba seems to be preoccupied with concerns related to her life in general, and developing her English further is not among them or essential for any of them.

4. Rami's present learning experience:

In spite of the fact that Rami has developed an ability for self-regulation in English learning based on affordances of his context as we have seen in section (6.2), and which seemed to work well, at least according to Rami, regarding the development of his English yet he came to the HIL to follow a course. Rami knew that he needed a TOEFL certificate with a high score to be able to travel to the USA and he was aware of some linguistic weakness he had in one skill. At asking him about the reason that stimulated him to do so he:

[21] I know that my English is good in every skill but writing. I even started to prepare for the test on my own. But I felt that I need help with writing. So I came here for some professional help in developing academic writing. They asked me to take a proficiency test first. My level was advanced. So they told me that I can follow either the IELTS or the TOEFL preparation course and here I am.

Rami decided to follow the IELTS course because the TOEFL course was delayed for some time. Though he came to the institute with a specific aim in mind, Rami found out throughout that course that taking such international tests requires not only good language but also the development of strategies for dealing with various questions in different skills and for time management as well:

[22] That course was so useful. I learned about skimming and scanning and how in reading we should read the questions first before reading the text to save time. I learned also how to attend to details while listening. I used to listen to various things before but I always focused on the general idea. In that course I learned that details are also important.

Regarding the development of his writing skills, Rami found out after a while that he can go faster in developing his writing and that the writing exercises in class were not enough. So he approached the teacher and asked for advice. The teacher told him that he can write at home and brings whatever he writes for feedback. And the teacher supplied him with various topics to write about. So in addition to that course, Rami initiated his private learning course at home and every week he brought two essays to the teacher for feedback. He brought to the interview some samples of his writings to show me how much effort he has put in developing his writing skill and the progress he achieved in doing so which was clear in the difference in the amount of feedback from the teacher between Rami's first essays and his last ones. Rami wrote twenty essays on his own throughout that course.

Three months after finishing this course, Rami was told that the TOEFL preparation course is going to start. Rami decided to follow it though the timing of the course was not appropriate for him since he was doing clinical training at the university hospital and preparing for the National Medical Test (NMT) which is essential for graduation from medical colleges in Syria. Rami was motivated to join the course by the fact that his friends who were medical students joined the course as well. Rami was forced by his other preoccupations to miss some of the classes in this course. However, in most classes which he attended and which I managed to observe, Rami showed a strong initiative in class in trying to interact with the teacher in English all the time, in interacting with his friends whenever there is a speaking activity, and in helping his friends with the activities done in class, especially the listening ones. He made full use of the time he spent in class and he was more like a resource to his friends than just a classmate. At the end of the course and when asked about his evaluation of the course and his performance, Rami said:

[23] I missed some of the classes. You know... Sometimes I felt exhausted. But I managed... the course was not a priority. I have much more important things to do... the clinical training and the graduation test. They take much of my time... After I finished that IELTS course I immediately bought the TOEFL book and started preparing on my own at home. It was similar to the IELTS though different in structure... The class was so useful to me especially in speaking and more training on writing.

Even though the course was not a priority at that time for Rami, English was always there in other activities he did at home especially in his preparation for the NMT

[24] I listen and watch medical lectures in English on YouTube almost every day. There are wonderful. They help me a lot in my preparation for the NMT. It is a good practice for the TOEFL as well.

Very interesting to note that in contrast to the case of Hiba, the teacher did not appear in Rami's evaluation of the course. Further, Rami's agency in learning is not restricted to following teacher-supervised courses. An important implication of this is that for Rami the teacher is a resource rather than a director of learning. Rami seems to be capable of curving his own space, making use of different resources, and trying to get optimum benefit out of any learning activity he undertakes towards achieving his vision of his future self in which English is essential.

Discussion:

1. The psychological 'Self' and sociological 'identity'

What do these two stories of Hiba and Rami tell us? Self-guides and agency can't be understood apart from the multiple life and learning contexts in which they evolve and with which they interact and develop. As we have seen before, Hiba and Rami followed two different life trajectories and one clear manifestation of such difference was the formation of two different self-guides with two types of agency, an ought-to L2 self with Hiba with an agency as a response and an ideal-L2 self with Rami with an agency as an individual initiative. However, these self-guides were not stable all the time and they experienced changes as a result of the interaction of both Hiba and Rami with the affordances and constraints of their multiple life and learning contexts, which brings us closer to the sociological concept of 'identity'.

Until she graduated from university Hiba was the 'poor girl with a very limited range of options' and no clear vision of her future. Yet simultaneously she was the determined girl who wanted to fulfil herself and move up the social ladder through education affected in this by the encouragement of her family. Amid all this, English did not have any place in Hiba's life beyond the school classroom, and affordances to develop her English informally were almost nonexistent. English was not there in any family activity at home, and Hiba's parents were incapable financially to support any informal English learning process. In short, and to use Bourdieu's terms, Hiba did not have the chance to develop an L2 linguistic 'habitus'. However, Hiba presents an example of how the power of the context is not deterministic and how individual agency could sometimes take unexpected routes. Hiba's determination in her studies paid off and her graduation enhanced her sense of power and made her believe that she can change the course of her life for something better. She was capable at that time of identifying options for her future and she chose to 'invest', to use Norton's terms, in the option that needed English (i.e. the job chance with the UNRWA) since the return of such an investment in terms of 'symbolic and material resources' could be higher than the return of other options for her. Hiba seemed to capitalize on qualities such as determination, persistence and hard working- which are

essentials in the make up of an identity developed in another context (i.e. her family)- in her attempt to achieve success in developing her English and consequently in getting that job. This was clear in a number of agentic actions by Hiba to overcome 'her lack of English' such as investing a lot of time, energy and money in following courses at the HIL, in taking all the affordances by her new community of practice (i.e. her classroom in the institute) which was clear in her enthusiasm and active participation in class, and in simultaneously developing her English at home with the help of a private tutor. A significant result of this agency and experience was that Hiba's self-guide underwent a change and it seemed that she started to develop some kind of an interface between her ought-to-L2 self which she developed throughout her past learning experience and an ideal L2 self which was clear in her expression of her newly-born love of English and her vision of herself as the girl who can speak English fluently and works at the UNURWA. In fact, Hiba expressed in both interviews that she was obsessed with that job opportunity and that she was ready to do whatever it takes to get that job, which is a strong indication of an internalization of instrumentality. Dörnyei et al. (2006, Cited in Kim, 2009. p, 289) argue that one of the immediate antecedents of the ideal L2 self is instrumentality. They state that 'depending on the extent of the internalisation of the extrinsic motives that make up instrumentality, the instrumentality can be either ideal L2 self or the ought-to-L2 self'. In other words, if an L2 learner really hopes to use the L2 for practical reasons (e.g. getting a job, academic advancement), the instrumental disposition becomes closely linked to the person's vocational or academic identity, which leads into a brighter future image of him/herself. In such a case, the instrumentality is internalised into the L2 learner and reflects a promotion-focused self-image. However, we still need the sociological concept of 'identity' and its fragmentary and sometimes contradictory nature to understand why Hiba went on learning English after losing the job opportunity with the UNURWA and although English was not essential for any of her other life options. One interpretation of this could be that Hiba wanted to protect her image of herself as a girl who can achieve a lot through her determination, persistence and patience and which was summed up in her instant reply to my question about her comeback by saying that she is not a 'quitter' (see extract 17).

In contrast to Hiba, Rami started his school life in Syria with a considerable linguistic, economic, and social capital that he inherited from his past experience in Abu Dhabi and his family. His linguistic capital helped him in gaining a membership in his new community of practice (his class in his school in Syria) and thus became a defining feature of who he is. However, maintaining and enriching that capital was not a priority for Rami who was preoccupied with adapting to the new learning system and life in general in Syria and he even developed a learning behavior- in terms of learning English at school- very indicative of the ought-to-L2- self which Hiba developed throughout her past school experience (doing what is required to avoid any negative consequences). By time, Rami found out that he lost parts of that linguistic capital due to the fact that his new context in Syria was predominated by Arabic and that the use of English- if there was any at all- was restricted to the confines of the classroom at school. This was in contrast to his old community of practice back in Abu Dhabi where using English was a daily routine in the classroom, in the breaks and in hanging out with friends. However, Rami's love of English- partly due to its helping role in his distinction- and the 'habitus' he developed since his early childhood and throughout his school life in Abu Dhabi along with his desire to keep in touch with members of his old community of practice, all stimulated Rami to

compensate for what was lost in his linguistic capital and to seek help in another community of practice (his family). This community of practice offered Rami the material and human resources necessary for him to initiate an informal learning process parallel to the formal one at school and targeting all the linguistic aspects not covered in the formal learning process. It was that combination of the habitus that Rami developed since his early childhood and the considerable amount of linguistic and cultural and economic capital inherited from his past experience in Abu Dhabi and his family that enabled Rami to further the activities that he did throughout his informal learning process, such as reading the news of his favorite football team in English, watching news reports about the Syrian crisis in English, reading medical references in English and joining yet another community of practice, that is, the HIL with the aim of improving his academic writing. It was again that combination that motivated Rami to aspire to a membership in some imagined community of practice in the USA. This combination and/or its absence could account for the major differences between the trajectories that English learning took in the stories of Hiba and Rami.

2. Agency and control:

It is very important to re-emphasize what has been discussed in section (2.2.1) that individual agentic behavior, whether it comes as a response or out of personal initiative, doesn't guarantee that the desired change the human agents seek in the course of their lives is going definitely to take place. Hiba and Rami represent the two types of agency just mentioned above respectively. Unfortunately, the change aspired to by both of them did not happen for different reasons. Concerning Hiba- who failed in getting the job with the UNRWA while doing this study-, her agentic response to that affordance (i.e. the job opportunity) came a little bit late and she did not have enough time to develop her language to the level that other successful applicants had. Rami- whom I contacted eight months after his participation in this study to get some information about whether he achieved what he aspired to do- graduated, took the TOEFL test in Beirut and got a high score. But he couldn't get a visa to the USA due to long term changes in the visa regulations in the USA according to which Syrians are prohibited from travelling to the USA on any visa category. So it was something related to global politics and beyond the ability of any individual to influence or change through agency. However, he followed his friends and immediately started a course in German language. He then got an admission to a hospital in Germany to specialize in cardiology and the visa to travel there. Rami told me that his excellence in English in addition to the course in German that he did speeded up the whole process. Hiba, whom I contacted at the same time to see where she got with her life choices, started her MA studies in her faculty and got a permanent job at a governmental school. Interesting enough was that Hiba came back to the institute after a short break but this time to learn Russian and that she reached level three (equaling pre-intermediate in English). She said that she was following the advice of a friend of hers who finished all the levels of Russian language taught at the institute and then started to privately tutor school pupils in Russian which meant a good source of income. Hiba invested again but this time in learning something highly valued in her macro context at that time (i.e. learning Russian) hoping to have more access to the material resources of her community. Both Hiba and Rami could not achieve what they aspired to, renegotiated their identities and ended up investing in socially highly valued practices at that time (i.e. learning German/ Russian) and which are associated with discourses prevalent in their sociocultural context (see section 5). However, there is still a difference between the two

cases. The habitus that Rami developed since his childhood is still at play and prevents him from total submission to the power of the context. This is best illuminated by Rami himself when he said in that final contact with him that going to Germany is just a step on his way towards achieving his old dream of travelling to the USA, and that a change in the regulations could happen in the future and allow him to fulfil his dream.

3. Agency as 'mediated action potential':

Mediation could take the form of affordances facilitating the exercise of individual agency and thus turning action potential into a real action or constraints limiting it altogether. In this sense, Rami would not have been able to develop his language to that advanced level if his agency had not been mediated by the needed familial, economic, institutional and other contextual factors, which came in form of affordances at different times of his life in different places. Such mediation is clear in the case of Hiba whose agency as a language learner was mediated (constrained in this case) by familial, economic, institutional factors as well. Here, we wonder how far Hiba would have been able to go with certain choices in her life had she had an environment supporting leaning English informally at home or had her family been able to spend money on an informal English learning process by her at an early stage of her life. This mediation is at the heat of life-changing situations like the ones just mentioned and in small-scale activities such as classroom activities.

At the level of classroom activities it becomes particularly important here that shift which happened with Hiba from full and overt participation in her first two courses to passivity and silence in her last course though she was following what was going on in class and was capable of participation according to the observation data (see section 6.3). Some might argue- based on motivational theories which see motivation as the property of the individual- that this passivity could be caused by Hiba's lack of any motivation to work in class after losing her job opportunity which was her primary motif when she came to the HIL and that her existence in that final course was not for the sake of learning but to prove to herself that she is not a 'quitter'. This could be true but it doesn't account for the whole situation, especially if we take into consideration that Hiba was capable of identifying the difference between that final course and the preceding two courses she followed in the HIL. This implies that Hiba chose deliberately not to participate in class which is reminder of Van Lier's argument (2008) that one can express one's agency by deliberately not acting. But what mediated such deliberate non-acting? Very interesting in this regard is Hiba's focus on two points related to the teacher as a mediator, namely here, the relationship between the teacher/s and her students and how the teacher/s dealt with the textbook. It seems that Hiba was resisting being locked in the invariable identity position of the language learner which was created by the formality of the teacher and his heavy dependence on the textbook. This position seems to have silenced Hiba and may be others in a class run by a teacher who can be described as following a communicative methodology. These practices by the teacher failed to engage what Richards (2006) calls the 'transportable identities' of the students- who they really are outside the classroom- and which if invoked, as one finding of Richard's study reveals, would stimulate a higher level of personal involvement and effort in the interaction on the students' part than in the traditional teacher-student talk, where students are invariably positioned as language learners. This was the main difference between Hiba's last course and the one that preceded it where the teacher by being friendly and by departing from the textbook and by bringing variety to the class was successful- as a mediator- in offering her students a range of more powerful positions to occupy than that of the language learner, as speakers, presenters,

readers, writers, researchers, documentary film makers...etc. Thus, this teacher offered her students more possibilities for in-class social interaction in which her students were personally involved and more space for their agency in their learning inside and outside the class. This is extremely important for students like Hiba whose agency in language learning could be described as 'frail'- to use the term of Holland et al (1998, p.5. Cited in Norton and Toohey, 2011, p,427)-, in contrast with Rami whose agency in language learning was enhanced by opportunities, affordances, and resources mediated by family, friends, economic and other contextual factors since his early childhood.

Theoretical and pedagogical implications:

The following are some points that could be of usefulness to researchers in the areas of identity and agency in language learning and language educators in general and the HIL in particular.

Theoretically speaking, the present study offers an evidence that a combination of both the psychological and sociological constructs and the theories underlying them and which were reviewed in the first part of this article can offer researchers an analytical framework for deeper and more holistic understanding of dynamics of the interaction between the individual and context/s in life in general and in language learning in particular. Self-guides, though they are psychological regulatory systems, are shaped by the context/s in which individuals live and learn. In this regard, it is important to reemphasize Reay's argument (2004. Cited in Lamb, 2009. p. 231) that our human agency is constrained both externally 'by the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds him/herself in', and also internally 'by an internalized framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable, and a limited range acceptable'. However, the emphasis by researchers that self-guides are formed in the social domains in which the individual moves (Markus & Nurius, 1986: 954), that the effects of such self-guides are far from being uniform or predictable (Boldero and Francis, 1999) and that, therefore, human agency is always unpredictable (Norton, 2000; Lamb, 2009) means that the individual's view of himself/herself, how s/he understands the world and his/her relation to the world, his/her vision of the future are far from stable. Rather, they are dynamic and shaped by a dynamic, multilayered context, which brings us much closer to the fragmented, more fluid concept of 'identity'. In short, such a combination allows for the study of learners' self-guides at levels beyond the self, and therefore, allows for the depiction of the language learner more as a human agent with dynamic, changing-over time and place- and sometimes contradictory tendencies than as an abstract individual with stable psychological traits. Simultaneously, such a combination allows for the depiction of individual learner more as an agent with choices than as an individual whose behavior is determined by his/her context/s.

Pedagogically speaking, language educators in general and those working at the HIL in particular need to be careful that certain identity positions and classroom practices might limit opportunities for language learners to listen, speak, read, or write while other identity positions and classroom practices may enhance possibilities for social interaction and human agency, meaning that 'pedagogical practices have the potential to be transformative in offering language learners more powerful positions than those they may occupy either inside or outside the classroom' (Norton and Toohey 2011. p.417). Therefore, it is of great importance for language educators to recognize that diversity in terms of classroom practices offer students a range of positions from which to listen, speak, read, or write. Further, they need to explore with students which identity positions offer the greatest

opportunity for social engagement and interaction. At certain levels, in terms of language proficiency, students could have a degree of confidence that enables them to be participants in achieving diversity in classroom practices, which might take the form of out-of-class activities chosen by them and the result of which could be presented to and discussed with the teacher as well as other students in class for those who want to. It is this kind of practices that engaged Hiba in her first two courses and offered Rami an opportunity to develop his writing skills. However, this kind of practices needs two things from the teacher: some readiness to treat the textbook as guideline rather than as manuscript to be followed word by word, and creating a close relationship with the students which could be essential for them to feel that they are not in a powerless position and that they are in secure environment.

Conclusion

It should be emphasized that the present study does not claim in any way to cover all the aspects of the dynamic and changing nature of both 'identity' and 'agency' in foreign language learning. This topic is much more complicated than to be covered in one article. It gets more complicated with every new case we might investigate. This is due to the different, and in many cases, unique routes that individuals take in their lives and the contradictions within the individuals themselves, meaning that further research is needed in this relatively new area, that is, identity and agency in learning English as *a foreign language*. Finally, there are two points that might be important for any future research on this topic. First, the researcher needs to be careful in the choice of the cases to be studied. There are students who have a lot in common with many others in terms of their life trajectories and learning experiences and such cases could give the findings of any future research a degree of generalizability. Second, seeking balance in the consideration of both the internal and external influences, of the individual and the context is something that researchers might need to take on board in any future studies in this area.

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