Review of Research on Learner Agency in the Past Decade: Current Situation and Prospects

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Abstract: Learner agency has been a hot topic in the field of foreign language teaching in recent years, and the manifestation of learner agency is crucial to foreign language learning. This article begins with the connotation of learner agency and analyzes the characteristics of learner agency research in the past decade (2014-2023) from the perspectives of research subject, research method, theoretical perspective, and research content. It is found that the countries and populations of foreign research subjects are more extensive, qualitative research methods are predominant, and research theory mainly revolve around three major theoretical perspectives: sociocultural theory, ecological perspective, and complexity theory. In terms of research content, existing studies mainly focus on the manifestation and influencing factors of learner agency, the relationship between learner agency and identity, and learner agency in relation to information technology. Finally, this study looks ahead to the future development of learner agency, aiming to provide insights for the localization of learner agency research in China.

1. Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a "social turn" in the field of applied linguistics. More and more researchers have been exploring learner agency from the perspective of learners' interaction with society. Learner agency is a necessary condition for students to master knowledge and acquire skills, and for foreign language learners, if their agency is insufficient, it is difficult to achieve good results in language acquisition. Therefore, exploring learner agency in foreign language learning contributes to the advancement of this theory in specific domains, enriching research on learner agency in language learning.

In light of this, this study uses the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) database in the Web of Science database and CSSCI in the China Knowledge Network (CNN) database as the sources to search for Chinese and English literature in the past decades (2014-2023) related to learner agency. Through manual reading, 99 empirical research papers in English and Chinese were obtained. Through in-depth reading, the researcher found that many of these studies were not highly relevant to the topic of learner agency research. After another round of thorough reading, a final selection of 35 Chinese and English empirical research articles on learner agency was chosen as the data sample. Based on these 35 articles, this paper analyzes the characteristics of learner agency research in foreign language learning from the aspects of research subjects, research methods, theoretical perspectives, and research content, aiming to clarify the current status of learner agency research,

anticipate future trends, and provide inspirations for related research on learner agency.

2. The Connotation of Learner Agency

Agency is the distinctive feature of human subjectivity and it is crucial for individual language development. Currently, there is a lack of consensus in academia regarding the definition of agency. From the overall development trend of social ideologies, the concept of agency has gradually evolved from the Western Enlightenment to the present, experiencing a process of expansion from the individual to the collective, from consciousness to material. One of the most widely accepted definitions of agency comes from Ahearn,[1] who defines agency as "the capacity for action that is socially and culturally mediated". This paper argues that agency is closely related to the socio-cultural environment, and that it is the ability of individual learners to independently choose the goals of their language learning activities and take corresponding actions to achieve them through socio-cultural mediation, thus contributing to the development of their own language learning.

3. Research Design of Learner Agency

Most existing research on learner agency predominantly employs qualitative research methods, with case studies and ethnography being commonly used approaches. Since case studies are more operational, many scholars have chosen to use this research method to conduct in-depth investigations on learner agency. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that quantitative research methods are rarely utilized in learner agency studies. Even when quantitative research methods are used, they are not directly focused on agency; instead, they are indirectly linked to learner agency through questionnaire surveys on views, attitudes, emotions, engagement, strategies related to course or online tool usage, or language proficiency testing. [2]In comparison to qualitative and quantitative research methods, mixed research methods are not commonly found in studies related to learner agency.

In terms of research subjects, there are differences in the study of learner agency between domestic and international contexts. Foreign studies include language learners from various countries such as Finland and Indonesia, while domestic studies are limited to English learners in China. Regarding the scope of research subjects, foreign studies have included language learners from different age groups, with early research focusing on children or primary and secondary school students. Foreign scholars pay significant attention to the agency of children in literacy development and various language acquisition environments, viewing children as active and creative agents. Some studies also examine teacher reflections on the obstacles encountered in constructing agency spaces in the classroom and how they continue to modify teaching methods to accommodate diverse learners, discussing learner agency characteristics and strategies for enhancing learner agency from the teacher's perspective. Research on student agency abroad started early and has been continuous, but the specific student groups and content of the research have evolved over time. In contrast, domestic studies only focus on university students and have not extended to other populations.

From a research theoretical perspective, current studies on learner agency primarily explore three major theoretical perspectives: sociocultural theory, ecological perspective, and complexity theory. The main focus is on discussing the sociocultural mediation, complexity, and dynamism characteristics of agency. Approaching agency research from a sociocultural theory perspective views agency as "the capacity for individuals to take action based on self-goals and desires," further clarifying the relationship between individuals and activities.

4. Research Topics of Learner Agency

Reviewing the literature on learner agency over the past decade, empirical studies mainly focus on exploring the manifestation of learner agency and its influencing factors, as well as the relationship between learner agency and identity, learner agency and information technology. This section will summarize the main findings of empirical studies related to learner agency from these three aspects.

4.1. Manifestation and Influencing Factors of Learner Agency

The expression of learner agency is a necessary condition for their knowledge acquisition, and how learners utilize agency to address the various challenges in learning is a focal point for researchers. For example, Ahn[3] studied learner agency in language exchange programs and found diverse ways in which learners demonstrate agency. Some learners explore language forms by switching interactive roles, while others create a comfortable environment for language exchange by building friendly social relationships, and some gain learning opportunities by exploring cultural knowledge. Knight & Appel [4]explored the performance of learner agency in two different oral interaction tasks, revealing that most learners use their agency to reconfigure tasks from spontaneous interaction to planned interaction. Agency in tasks is manifested through bodily movements and verbal behaviors, combining to execute learners' intentions. Therefore, agency is not a singular factor, but a complex element. Both studies indicate that the expression of individual agency is characterized by complexity. Foreign research has yielded rich results in exploring the influencing factors of learner agency. For instance, Kang's[5]classroom interaction study found that language games facilitate the manifestation of individual and collective learner agency. Additionally, social contexts and scaffolding as well as teacher control in the classroom all impact learner agency. In comparison to foreign studies, research on the influencing factors of learner agency among domestic learners is relatively scarce.

4.2. Learner agency and identity

Learner agency research is mostly conducted in combination with identity in the early stage, and it is found that learners are able to regulate and reshape their identities through the exercise of agency, which in turn facilitates language acquisition, for example, Park & Lee[6]explored North Korean students' experiences of learning English in North Korea, South Korea and the United States, and focused on learner agency and identity shaping. It was found that learner agency plays an important role in shaping and reshaping identities. In addition, learners were able to utilize their Korean identity as cultural capital to promote ennobling. On the other hand, identity construction plays an important role in energizing mobility, according to Diao & Liu[7] who investigated the experiences of five American science and engineering students who gave up in the process of learning Chinese. It was found that social structural factors influenced the decision of these five students to prioritize the establishment of their identities as science and engineering students. Thus, these students' energetic decisions were the result of social structure and identity construction. All of the above studies show that agency and identity construction have a dialectical and unified relationship. However, there are not many studies exploring this relationship in China, and empirical research in this area needs to be strengthened in the future.

4.3. Learner Agency and Technology

In recent years, with the rapid development of information technology, learner agency has

become an important research area in the field of education. The advancement of educational information technology has facilitated the implementation of new teaching models such as flipped classrooms, MOOC, which emphasize active learning, collaborative learning, and network-based learning. Vaughn [8] points out that agency is a key factor for students to achieve active, self-directed, and personalized learning, making the intersection of information technology and agency highly innovative. Some researchers have delved into the development of learner agency in the context of information technology or the impact of information technology on learner agency. [9]Compared with domestic research, foreign information technology has developed faster and earlier, and there is also a large number of studies related to learner agency, while the number of domestic articles exploring agency under information technology is not particularly prominent, and needs to be supplemented accordingly in the future.

5. Future Research Prospect

Based on the analysis above, this paper suggests that future research can be expanded in the following six aspects:

Firstly, future research on learner agency needs to increase the quantity of empirical studies. Sample data shows that the number of empirical studies on learner agency has been relatively low in the past decade, especially with a lack of relevant research domestically. Recent agency research has focused more on teacher groups rather than exploring learners. Learners are the main participants in learning activities, and the manifestation of their agency is a necessary prerequisite for engaging in learning activities. Therefore, exploring learner agency is of significant importance. Future research should focus on learners as the main participants in learning activities, emphasizing the crucial role of agency in various stages of learning activities, and utilize a variety of research methods to conduct empirical studies related to the topic of learner agency.

Secondly, future research should explore the use of diverse research methods. Currently, most scholars tend to use case studies and narrative research methods to investigate issues related to learner agency. In comparison to these mainstream research methods, some scholars opt for more innovative research methods such as action analysis, discourse analysis, and data collection methods like retrospective oral reports to study learner agency. Future research can delve into innovative research methods to enrich the study of learner agency. Additionally, utilizing ethnographic research methods for longitudinal studies on learner agency can explore the developmental changes and influencing factors of learner agency, better illustrating the process of changes in learner agency.

Thirdly, future research needs to explore the study of learner agency from an interdisciplinary perspective. From a theoretical standpoint, existing research has mainly explored the social-cultural immediacy, complexity, and dynamics of agency from the perspectives of social-cultural theory, ecological perspective, and complexity theory. However, second language acquisition is a complex process intertwined with emotions, cognition, and social factors. Therefore, it is necessary to draw on theories from other disciplines to interpret and investigate agency from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Fourthly, future research needs to enhance classroom context studies. The classroom is the main site of learning activities, where classroom interactions provide learners with primary opportunities for language use and learning. Future research can explore how learners demonstrate agency in the process of interacting and collaborating with others (including teachers and classmates) and how agency changes during this process. Additionally, it is worth delving into questions such as how teachers in the classroom environment help learners perceive opportunities from vast learning resources and leverage agency to achieve learning goals, the identity changes experienced by teachers and learners in the classroom, and the relationship between these changes and agency.

Fifthly, future research should focus on emotional factors. Emotional factors play an important role in second language acquisition. Emotions have an impact on learning motivation, attention,

memory, and cognitive processes. Positive emotions can enhance learners' confidence and motivation, thus improving their learning outcomes. However, currently only a small number of studies have examined the relationship between teacher emotions and agency, and research on the relationship between student emotions and agency is scarce. Therefore, future research could investigate the impact of emotional factors on agency in second language acquisition.

Sixthly, future research needs to enhance the focus on collective agency. Social cognitive theory suggests that interactions and mutual support among group members can promote individual development, and also help transform collective agency within a group into individual agency. Future research can explore the interaction between collective agency and individual internal and external factors in group activities.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, starting from the essence of learner agency, the characteristics of learner agency research in foreign language learning over the past decade were analyzed in terms of research subjects, methods, theoretical perspectives, and content. The following conclusions are reached: in terms of research design, compared to domestic studies, foreign research covers a wider range of countries and populations; in research methods, case studies and narrative research methods in qualitative studies play a significant role in empirical research on learner agency; currently, research on learner agency mainly unfolds from the perspectives of social-cultural theory, ecological perspective, and complexity theory. In terms of research content, both domestic and international empirical studies focus on exploring the manifestation and influencing factors of learner agency, the relationship between learner agency and identity, learner agency and information technology. Drawing on these research results, the paper points out the deficiencies in learner agency research both domestically and internationally over the past decade and suggests the future prospects of empirical research on learner agency.

It is important to note that while the sample data selected for this study covered empirical articles from the CSSCI database, the number of selected international journals was relatively limited (10 journals), and the time span was confined to 2014-2023. To contribute to the localization and continuous development of learner agency, future review studies can broaden the scope of literature search and analysis to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the research progress of learner agency both domestically and internationally.

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