LLT Journal, e-ISSN 2579-9533, p-ISSN 1410-7201, Vol. 27, No. 2, October 2024, pp. 780-802

LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching
http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/LLT
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

LEARNER AGENCY, ENGLISH PROFICIENCY, AND LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: LESSONS FROM TEN ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

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https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v27i2.8996
received 27 June 2024; accepted 17 August 2024

Abstract
Within the framework of sociocultural theories, this study investigated how affordances in various beyond the classroom settings supported the development of agency and English proficiency among advanced EFL learners. The participants were 10 Taiwanese college students, each with at least B2 proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Data were gathered through a qualitative approach encompassing semi-structured interviews, writing samples, and a 23-item questionnaire. A grounded theory approach was adopted to analyze and interpret the data. The findings revealed that contextual affordances were not always immediately accessible or apparent to learners and exhibited considerable variability across different locations, which could impede or facilitate the learners' development of agency and English proficiency. The mediator played an indispensable role in guiding learners toward effectively utilizing these resources. Furthermore, the development of learners' English proficiency in beyond-the-classroom settings was intricately intertwined with that of their agency, both of which were deeply rooted in and shaped by sociocultural contexts. As learners enhanced their English proficiency through the mediator's strategic engagement with contextual affordances, their agency concurrently flourished, prompting them to proactively seek additional affordances and explore further opportunities for autonomous decision-making and action.

Keywords: agency, EFL learner, English proficiency, learning beyond the classroom (LBC), sociocultural theory

Introduction
Learning and acquiring a foreign or second language (FL or SL) is a complex, life-long endeavor involving a myriad of factors and "years of sustained effort in diverse contexts" (Lamb & Wedell, 2013, p. 7). Richards (2015) argues that language learning aims to prepare learners for real-life situations; however, little is known about what happens outside the school (Reinders, 2020). Language learning and teaching, both in and beyond the classroom, complement each other by offering distinct resources and diverse interaction patterns that meet the varied needs of learners (National Research Council, 2009). When researchers merely focus on

what happens in the classroom, they limit their "academic research to a small aspect of what is going on in individuals' sociocultural and personal worlds" (Benson, Chik, & Lim, 2003, p. 38).

Recent research on language learning beyond the classroom (LBC) has garnered considerable attention due to the positive outcomes it generates (Sockett, 2014; Toffoli, 2020). Nevertheless, only a few studies have explored how agentive learners initiate out-of-school English learning activities (Brown, 2017; Chik & Ho, 2017). Additionally, the full spectrum of LBC settings remains under-documented (Benson, 2022). With the rapid advancement of technology, language learners now have access to an exponential growth of venues and affordances outside of school walls. Learners with strong agency actively explore these opportunities in both physical and virtual environments to invest and capitalize on learning opportunities. It is imperative for researchers and practitioners to examine how contextual factors facilitate the development and exercise of agency in LBC settings, thereby enabling the creation of more robust learning possibilities for future generations.

This study investigated how 10 proficient Taiwanese EFL learners developed and exercised their agency in various beyond the classroom settings. Below are the research questions of this study:

1. How do various beyond the classroom settings contribute to the development of English proficiency in these learners?
2. How do the above settings provide affordances that support these learners' agency development?

In the following section, the researcher reviewed the literature relevant to learner agency, agency in FL/SL language learning, and the relationship between learner agency and English LBC. A summary of the pertinent literature is provided below.

Learner agency

Learner agency is a perennial focus of scholarly inquiry, particularly in the current chaotic and "tumultuous times" (Larsen-Freeman, 2019, p. 61). Recognized as a critical factor in learning success (Fincham & Li, 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2019; Li, 2020; Vandergriff, 2016), learner agency is a complex and challenging concept to define. Among the various disciplines exploring learner agency, the sociocultural view has gained prominence (Li, 2020; Reinhart, 2019). The most widely cited definition of agency has been "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act in the world" by Ahearn (2001, p. 112). Biesta and Tedder (2007) compellingly argue that "the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural 'factors' as they come together in particular, and in a sense, always unique situations" (p. 137). Larsen-Freeman (2019) further acknowledges the contextual embeddedness of agency, noting that learners can adopt different orientations in developing agency. She describes agency development as a process through which learners optimize conditions for learning and orchestrate available semiotic resources to position their ideal selves in a multilingual world. A contextual definition of agency thus recognizes various conflating factors, such as relational, temporal, and spatial factors, which shape learner agency (Lantolf & Thorn, 2006; Li, 2020). This definition acknowledges that the development and exercise of agency can vary

significantly among individuals within the same context or across different contexts.

Agentive EFL learners in LBC settings

In modern times, successful language learners engage with available material, discursive, and virtual affordances in authentic contexts (Lai, 2013; Richards, 2015) both individually and collaboratively (Kalaja, Alanen, Palviainen, & Dufva, 2011). Research indicates that agentive language learners are self-sustaining and often initiate learning opportunities outside classrooms (Brown, 2017; Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2015; Nunan, 2014).

Brown's (2017) study of 79 agentive Taiwanese learners revealed their dissatisfaction with the types and amount of English practice provided in class. Consequently, they felt compelled to create additional out-of-classroom learning opportunities through online media, family members, peers, and interactions with native speakers. For these learners, English LBC is not merely a linguistic endeavor but a "treacherous socio-linguistic-ideological terrain" (p. 11) in which they navigate the tension between social norms in their learning context and personal aspirations to become proficient speakers or their ideal selves.

Kalaja, Alanen, Palviainen, and Dufva (2011) investigated the attitudes and beliefs of 199 Finnish college students learning English or Swedish as an SL, both within and beyond the classroom. They found that these learners were more proactive in searching for and utilizing available resources in English, perceiving it as a valuable means of international communication. By contrast, resources in Swedish, though available, were less used because the language was regarded merely as a school subject. This suggests that learners' attitudes and beliefs significantly influence their agency in organizing language learning beyond the classroom.

In their review of 28 studies, Nunan and Richards (2014) found that, unlike the hierarchical, limited, and scripted nature of classroom learning, language LBC offers authentic opportunities for both linguistic input and output. Although incidental and less predictable, these interactions are nonetheless critical for language learning. Engaging in LBC fosters meaningful communication and enables learners to practice fundamental language skills and strategies in real-world contexts. Furthermore, out-of-classroom learning allows learners to make autonomous decisions about how, when, and what to pursue in their learning, thereby cultivating their agency.

Contexts in foreign language learning beyond the classroom studies

As researchers increasingly delve into the informal and personal dimensions of learners' lives, there is a growing interest in exploring the relationship between language learners' learning contexts and their experiences (Kashwa, 2021). The context of LBC is complex (Inaba, 2019), and as Chik and Ho (2017) observe, "the more we learn about language learning beyond the classroom, the more it appears that such learning contexts are more diverse than imagined" (p. 162). Given this diversity, it is crucial to examine the various contexts that play pivotal roles in learners' English LBC.

Study abroad programs offer authentic environments where agentive learners can seek opportunities to practice the language and gain cultural insights through

full participation in daily life. These learners recognize that their linguistic gain and cultural understanding are a result of their agentive behaviors (Cadd, 2015). In Cadd's case study, an American undergraduate took part in a study abroad program in Spain, where she engaged with native speakers in public settings to learn about the culture, language, and people. Although these experiences were often anxiety-inducing, they ultimately helped the learner build confidence, fluency, and cultural sensitivity.

Kashiwa (2021) identified three critical factors that contributed to a female Japanese college student's English learning agency in a self-access center: ideal self-image, positive interactions with peers and teachers in the SALC, as well as self-reflections on learning contexts. The study underscores "the importance of having a stronger image of the ideal L2 future self and the learner's reflective practice on learning environments beyond the classroom" (p. 335).

Since the 1990s, the advent of the internet and mobile devices has enabled learners to engage in FL/SL learning ubiquitously. Virtual reality as a learning context affords various technology-assisted learning opportunities, such as social media, online gaming, or FL music to support vocabulary development (Coxhead & Bytheway, 2015; Sockett & Tiffoli, 2012); social media resources to encourage students' extensive reading and the development of learner autonomy (Righini, 2015); and tandem learning through e-mail to promote awareness, autonomy, and authentic language learning (Sasaki, 2015).

These studies illustrate how learners exercise their agency in FL/SL learning within specific settings. However, LBC can also occur in numerous other places that remain underexplored (Benson, 2022). Exploring these settings could yield a deeper understanding of the interconnections between learner agency, FL/SL learning, and diverse contexts. Therefore, the researcher aims to present a wide variety of settings, identify contextual affordances within them, and illustrate how these affordances support and shape learners' English learning and agency development in LBC settings.

Method

The researcher adopted a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of individual learners. Their individuality offers "the possibility of the account of the role of learner diversity in terms of the systematic and regular influence of contextual variables on the outcomes of the essentially invariable cognitive process" (Benson, 2005, p. 1). This approach is ideal for examining how various contexts enable individual learners to exercise their agency in English LBC contexts.

Participant selection criteria and recruitment.

To be considered advanced, proficient English learners (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2016), participants needed to possess a minimum B2 level of English proficiency, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020). This proficiency level is commonly required for non-native English speakers at English-medium universities (Carlsen, 2018; Deygers, Zeider, Vilcu, & Carlsen, 2018). Additionally, to enhance the diversity of the data pool, participants were recruited from various academic majors, varying amounts of time spent on regular English LBC activities, and diverse socio-economic statuses (SESs), determined by parents'

education level, occupation status (Ministry of Interior, 2010), and family income (Ministry of Interior, 2019). Table 1 provides a profile of each participant.

Table 1. A profile of each participant

No	Name	Age	SES (parents' level of education/profession and family income)	Length of receiving LBC Eng. Instruction	Level of English proficiency (CEFR)
1	Ginny	21	F: HS/machine operator M: A.A./service worker Below 1st quintile	12 years	TOEFL iBT 74 (B2)
2	Ingrid	23	F: HS/service manager M: JH/service manager 3nd-4rd quintile	5 years	TOEIC 900 (B2)
3	Jim	20	F: A.A./assoc. professional M: HS/service worker 2nd-3rd quintile	6 months	IELTS 6 (B2)
4	Kofi	22	F: A.S./technician M: HS/homemaker 4th-5th quintile	9 years	TOEFL iBT 76 (B2)
5	Sawyer	21	F: HS/assoc. professional M: HS/homemaker 2nd-3rd quintile	8 years	TOEFL iBT 83 (B2)
6	Shirley	20	F: MA/assoc. professional M: BA/homemaker 4th-5th quintile	8 years	TOEFL iBT 86 (B2)
7	Walter	21	GF: ES/sales worker GM: ES/sales worker 2nd-3rd quintile	2 years	TOEFL iBT 72 (B2)
8	Weston	23	F: HS/service worker M: A.A./service worker 1st-2nd quintile	4 years	TOEIC 970 (C1)
9	Willow	22	F: A.S./homemaker M: HS/service worker Below 1st quintile	14 years	TOEIC 945 (C1)
10	Xena	20	F: B.A./service manager M: A.A./service manager N/A	4 years	TOEFL iBT 72 (B2)

The researcher extended invitations via email to 16 qualified former students to participate. Of these, eleven expressed interest; however, one withdrew due to scheduling conflicts, resulting in a final count of 10 participants. These individuals had previously waived English requirements due to sufficient English proficiency. Therefore, their decision to participate or withdraw would not adversely affect them. The established rapport between the researcher and the participants contributed to a more seamless interview process. Throughout the study, anonymity was maintained to safeguard participants' privacy.

Data sources and data collection methods

The researcher employed a retrospective, biographic method (Benson, 2005) to capture participants' past English learning processes and experiences. This

method allowed participants to recount their experience in their own words (Benson, 2005) and enabled the researcher to work "backward to understand how the outcome came about" (Langley, 2009, p. 737). Three types of data were collected: a questionnaire provided a contextual profile of the participants and assisted in the development of interview questions; participants' writing samples were included to provide additional insights into their English learning journeys; and interviews served as the core data source, offering the most detailed and comprehensive information compared to the other two. These multiple sources facilitated data triangulation. Each type of data is further described below.

Questionnaire on FL learning beyond the classroom

Each participant completed a 23-item questionnaire that covered family SES, EFL learning resources, learning venues, support outside of school, and attitudes toward and beliefs about English learning. The researcher designed the questionnaire, drawing on her experience with EFL learners, and it included multiple-choice, multiple-select, and open-ended questions. The responses from the questionnaire helped formulate interview questions and contributed to developing a contextual profile of each participant's English learning experience, venues, and affordances beyond the classroom.

Semi-structured, retrospective interviews

The researcher conducted a retrospective, semi-structured interview with each participant. Each face-to-face interview lasted 1 to 2 hours and was carried out in Mandarin Chinese, the shared mother tongue of the participants and the researcher, to facilitate the interview process. Subsequent interviews were scheduled when an interviewee wished to elaborate on specific questions. A total of four subsequent interviews were conducted, each for a different participant. All sessions were audiotaped with the interviewees' permission, and transcripts were returned to participants for verification.

Written narratives

Yu, Brown, and Stephens (2018) argued that "the participants' narrative is the best possible representation of what happened to individuals whose life courses have not been fully demonstrated" (p. 127). In alignment with this view, the researcher also incorporated participants' written narratives from their Freshman English class, which she had taught. These assignments, in which the students reflected on their English learning experiences, were included in the data set with the participants' permission.

Data analysis

The researcher adopted Corbin and Strauss's (2015) framework for data analysis. The process began with a careful reading of the data, aiming to "enter vicariously into the life of participants, feel what they are experiencing, and listen to what they are saying through their words or actions" (p. 86). During this initial reading, the researcher divided the materials into sections according to natural breaks, with each section corresponding to a central theme relevant to the research questions.

Next, the researcher conducted line-by-line coding within each section to identify key ideas underlying the data. All analyses were recorded in memos and organized under their respective sections. Using several strategies, mainly asking questions and making comparisons, the researcher developed these initial reflections into tentative concepts. The coding process continued as the researcher sought additional concepts related to these emerging ideas, focusing on coding around similar concepts to compare, contrast, verify, and refine the tentative concepts. Ultimately, a concept with distinct dimensions and properties emerged to address and explain a research question. This process was then replicated for the second research question. Finally, illustrative examples were selected to demonstrate the identified dimensions and properties. This process continued until all matched samples were identified, concluding the data analysis process.

Findings and Discussion

Recognizing that all learning occurs within a specific sociocultural context, the researcher examined the participants' English LBC processes and experiences through the lens of location, a key component in LBC research (Benson, 2011). In LBC studies, "location" refers to the setting where language learning takes place. The terms "location," "setting," and "context" are often used interchangeably, as they all denote the environment in which language learning happens. The participants navigated and transitioned between various settings daily. Examining these settings expands "our knowledge of the range of affordances for LBC" and contributes "to theory on the roles of learning spaces and social networks in learning" (Reinders & Benson, 2017, p. 5).

Although the term "beyond the classroom" is used, locations can still include spaces within a school, such as a debate club that students participate in as part of their extracurricular activities (Benson, 2011). It also encompasses learning outside school, yet in classroom-like settings, such as buxibans (a.k.a. cram schools or private tutorial schools) (Yung, 2022). In this study, all participants identified the buxiban as an LBC setting. Initially intended for supplementary and remedial instruction, buxibans have become a prevalent educational phenomenon in Taiwan due to low birth rates and high parental expectations for academic excellence (Liu, 2012). The participants attended various types of buxibans, ranging from large franchises with English immersion and native-speaking staff to small independent ones that foster a family-like atmosphere, as well as those focused on improving learners' academic performance on high-stakes tests.

The interview and survey data revealed that all participants attended buxibans, with durations ranging from a few months to 14 years. Given the diversity of buxibans in which the participants were enrolled, it is valuable to examine the types of affordances available in these settings and how they supported the participants' learner agency and EFL proficiency. The participants connected with certain aspects of their buxibans, and some affordances appeared to influence the extent to which they exercised and developed their agency.

One example comes from Kofi, who attended a chain English immersion buxiban from kindergarten through sixth grade, consistently taught by the same native English-speaking teacher, Frankie. In the interview, Kofi admitted that he was less passionate about English than he had been in elementary school. He

attributed his early enjoyment and agency in English learning to Frankie's teaching approach and the supportive buxiban environment.

> *I loved Frankie's way of teaching English. He paid attention to each kid and walked around to see what we were doing. When he taught vocabulary, he showed us how to break words into parts and put them back together. If we got stuck on grammar, he explained why things had to be in a certain order. He used an American method, not the Taiwanese method. In Taiwan, teachers just make you memorize rules, like adding "-ing" to a verb after "is," "am," or "are," for present continuous. I hate just memorizing; I want to understand how things work.*

> *My cram school was pretty chill. They didn't push me to learn, but I worked hard anyway. We played tons of games, and there were prizes for winning and getting rewards. I like playing games and winning. All kids do.*

Kofi's narrative makes it clear that Frankie's personality and teaching strategies conveyed to him that English learning was not merely a series of rote memorization tasks but rather an enjoyable, logical, and meaningful process. The competitive yet fun games further fueled Kofi's interest in learning English. To win these games and earn rewards, Kofi had to "work hard" by independently investing additional time and effort, a behavior indicative of agency (van Lier, 2008). Learning in this context allowed Kofi to practice English, understand how it could be learned through logic and explanations, and simultaneously develop his agency.

Reinders and Benson (2017) suggest using "language learning histories" (Benson & Nunan, 2005)—narratives of language learning over an extended period—to illustrate the profound influence of LBC on learners. In her interview, Willow recounted her English LBC experience, which occurred exclusively in a small, independently-owned buxiban run by a couple whom she called "Teacher" and "Uncle". The interview, written narrative, and survey data indicated that Willow attended this buxiban daily from age four until she turned 18. She was involved in a wide variety of English learning activities and formed a strong bond with the owners and the location.

Throughout the two 2-hour interviews, Willow referred to the location as "buxiban" only once at the beginning to help me conceptualize the setting. For the remainder of the interview, she referred to it as "teacher and uncle's" or "their home," indicating a deep personal association with the buxiban she had attended for so many years. To Willow, the buxiban was a home away from home. She said,

> *Uncle and Teacher are more like family than my own parents. Honestly, they are more like my parents. At their place, we learned not just English but also other subjects too, like math and other stuff. Sometimes, Uncle had us sit in a circle and read the newspaper. He'd point out important issues… Even though I'm not a student there anymore, I still visit them during breaks. When I can't visit, I feel kinda loss. When I do visit, they give me a bunch of super hard stuff, like GED prep. I feel like if I don't do well in English, I'd be letting them down, so I study really hard.*

Willow's buxiban teacher (Teacher) and the teacher's husband (Uncle) were her surrogate parents, providing not only English instruction but also developing a

close rapport with her. While such a relationship might seem unusual at first glance, many participants in this study also developed varying degrees of close relationships with their buxiban teachers; these teachers became like friends, older siblings, or parents to the learners. Developing such relationships required time and considerable effort from teachers within the context of buxibans in Taiwan. In other words, the buxiban was not merely a physical location where the learners in this study acquired English proficiency; it was also a place where they received social, emotional, and cognitive support, much like a home. These teachers served as critical agents who motivated learners and afforded opportunities to enhance their English learning. Their explicit expectations also fueled the learners' agency, creating a reciprocal relationship between the teacher's expectations and learners' agency in their English learning journey.

In addition to caring and strategic teachers and the rapport between learners and teachers, other elements within a buxiban also supported learners' agency development in LBC settings. A significant factor is the administrative policy. To attract business and maximize learners' exposure to English, many buxibans in Taiwan implement an "English-only policy" and/or hire native English-speaking teachers who speak little, if any, Mandarin (Kao & Weng, 2012). Students are required to use English exclusively in class. Sawyer, who had attended a buxiban for eight years, described how such a setting shaped his agency development and English learning. In a reflection assignment, he wrote that his parents sent him to a cram school where "the teachers emphasized a 'no Chinese policy in the classroom' which forced students to experience life with only English." He elaborated further in the interview:

> *I think I got good at English because of the buxiban environment. Everyone had to speak English, no Chinese allowed. It was a rule, but some students still ignored it. I didn't mind. The first English sentence I learned was "May I go to the bathroom?" I tried speaking English most of the time. At first, I couldn't do it, but eventually, I stopped using Chinese there altogether because the teachers wanted us to stick to English. After a while, I made a point to speak only English for the two or three hours I was at the buxiban.*

Sawyer attributed his advanced English proficiency to the buxiban's English-only policy. By adhering to this rule, he had more opportunities to practice and be exposed to the target language, resulting in better English proficiency than his peers who did not comply. Sawyer's exclusive use of English was initially regulated by the buxiban, but as his proficiency improved, it became a self-regulated habit. His determination and self-initiation in this LBC context demonstrated his desire to participate in activities to become a proficient English learner actively. This evolution from externally enforced rules to internalized habits illustrates the crucial role of the buxiban environment in supporting learner agency.

In addition to buxibans, the home was another significant out-of-school location for English learning. Research has shown a positive correlation between learners' EFL/ESL proficiency and their family SES (Enever, 2011; Nikolov, 2009; Zou & Zhang, 2011). Parents with higher SES are more likely to provide their children with better resources, support, and opportunities than their less privileged counterparts, resulting in better English performance for these learners.

However, this correlation is not absolute. Lu (2021) studied proficient EFL learners from less privileged backgrounds. She found that the parents of her participants still strove to locate, secure, and orchestrate contextual affordances to support their children's English learning. Recognizing their parents' efforts and investments, these learners reciprocated (Kanungo, 1990; Suh, 2002); they understood the importance of English proficiency as valued by their parents and were determined to excel in the language.

The following examples illustrate how parents from various family backgrounds supported their children's learner agency development. Ginny recalled in the interview that her home environment was filled with English even though her mother "was not good in English." Ginny's mother constantly emphasized the extreme importance of English and kept repeating that, "you don't need to get good grades in all subjects except English. English is the most important subject." This belief was not unique to Ginny's mother; other parents shared a similar view. In the questionnaire, 70% of the participants' parents regarded English as the most essential subject, whereas the remaining 30% considered it a critical, if not the most important, subject. For these parents, English was seen as a means of enhancing career advancement (90%), academic prospects (80%), and 70% wanted their children to develop a love for learning English.

The survey also revealed that participants' parents appropriated financial resources to find quality English programs (80%), encouraged their children to engage in English-related activities (70%), monitored and inquired about their children's learning situations (60%), and obtained learning materials (50%). The extent of their parental involvement and interaction styles varied widely. Parenting approaches ranged from authoritarian (10%) to authoritative (60%), with some parents employing a combination of both styles (30%). Despite these variations, the participants' agency in English learning was influenced by their parents' beliefs and actions.

As previously mentioned, Ginny's mother stressed the critical importance of English in life and continuously reinforced this concept with her daughter. This parental influence significantly impacted Ginny's decision-making process and the development of her agency in English learning. She said,

> *If you ask me what helped me nail English, it's definitely my mom and my fear of failing. In third grade, I begged my mom to let me quit the buxiban because the teacher was mean and I kept getting punished. I was fed up and tired. Mom finally gave in but wasn't happy about it. She kept persuading me and telling me how important English was. After a year off, I went back to the same place and stuck with it.*

The excerpt above underscores the multifaceted roles Ginny's mother played in her English learning process. She not only firmly believed in the significance of English but also actively advocated this belief, closely monitored Ginny's English learning process, and intervened when necessary. For instance, when she observed that Ginny might need a respite from a particularly harsh teacher, she temporarily withdrew Ginny from class. However, she continued to encourage Ginny to return to learning English. Her persistent persuasion and support ultimately helped Ginny regain her learning momentum and learner agency.

Families have unique dynamics, which lead to diverse approaches to fostering children's learner agency. While Ginny's mother employed a somewhat coercive approach to encourage her daughter's English learning, Weston's parents adopted a more supportive method. In a reflection assignment, Weston described his parents' approach and elaborated on this experience in the interview:

> *Whenever my dad and mom drove me somewhere, I'd look for billboards along the road. When I saw one, I'd try to pronounce the English words on it. No matter whether I got them right or wrong, Dad and Mom always praised me. It gave me a big sense of pride. That's when I began to love learning English.*

The environmental prints in this parent-child joint literacy activity served as contextual affordances, allowing Weston to practice his newly acquired English reading skills and fostering his initial learner agency. In a subsequent interview, Weston reflected, "the pleasant early experience was a key reason I maintained a proactive attitude and strong agency in English learning."

In addition to supportive parents, other competent adults, such as tutors, can also nurture learner agency. Ingrid spoke in an interview about her English tutor, Elsa, with whom she developed a close bond. Elsa worked with Ingrid from grade 3 to 5. Ingrid noted, "the foundation of my English ability was completely built during those two years," and added, "Elsa was pretty like my big sister. We'd chit chat when we had lessons. We also hung out together." This close relationship left Ingrid with vivid memories of their interactions and tutoring sessions.

> *My tutor was super serious about my speaking and pronunciation. She'd record a passage and highlight important parts, like linking and stresses. She told me to really focus on those details if I wanted to sound like a native speaker. I had to record myself reading the same passage at home. For a 30-second recording, she wanted me to finish it in under 40 seconds. She'd check my recording first and then time me reading it again. She wanted me to read fast and sound like a native. I practiced a lot and worked really hard. She spoke so well, and I wanted to be just like her.*

The interview data reveal that Elsa's rigorous training not only improved Ingrid's English proficiency but also fostered her positive attitude and agency toward English learning. Despite the repetitive drills and practices required by Elsa, Ingrid's desire to match her tutor's proficiency sustained her motivation and agency. The one-on-one tutoring sessions enabled Ingrid and Elsa to develop an individualized action plan to achieve their co-constructed ideal L2 self-image as a learning goal (Bleistein & Lewis, 2015).

Critical adults in both home and buxibans are essential for promoting learner agency and English proficiency. In addition to these settings, schools can serve as key locations for LBC by providing supplementary learning opportunities beyond formal classroom instruction (Benson, 2010). The following excerpt illustrates how one-on-one tutoring sessions with his elementary teacher transformed Walter's agency in English learning.

Walter grew up in a rural area with his grandparents. The teachers at his elementary school adopted a traditional approach to teaching English, which did

not engage him, resulting in his lack of enthusiasm and poor grades. The constant nagging from his grandparents further reinforced his negative attitude toward English. However, in the fifth grade, his teacher began to tutor him after school.

> *My teacher was all about mixing encouragement with a bit of tough love. She made me do repetitive tasks, like copying words over and over until they stuck. Lots of drills and practices! At first, I wasn't too keen on it, but I was kinda stuck. My grands were busy, so I had to hang with her from 4:00 to 6:00 every day. Well, after a while, my quiz grades weren't as terrible as before. And my teacher was like, "Keep using my methods and put in more effort, and you'll catch up with the others."*

Despite the less enjoyable learning approach, the daily two-hour tutoring sessions gave Walter additional opportunities to work on his English. His effort eventually paid off: his grades improved, and so did his confidence and interest in English. His attitude shifted from reluctance to tolerance, and eventually to acceptance and enjoyment, as illustrated in the interview excerpt below.

> *After the experience, I figured if I put in more effort for English, it could really pay off. No more nagging, and my teacher wouldn't be on my back all the time. So, I started to study English more in my free time. After a couple of semesters, my English really improved. By the time I finished elementary school, I wasn't into most subjects except English. It kinda became my thing, and I felt pretty confident about it.*

Without his teacher's support, Walter might have ended up like those who initially fell behind and gradually lost motivation, interest, and agency in English learning altogether. Despite her method, the teacher provided essential assistance that helped Walter rebuild his foundation, excel, and develop a genuine interest and agency in English learning. Walter's agency emerged as he recognized the positive relationship between his study time and test scores, as he tried to "convert the time spent on studying English" to "better test scores."

In Walter's and Ingrid's cases, significant adults—the homeroom teacher and the tutor—provided contextual affordances that facilitated their agency in learning English. Walter benefited from drill and practice sessions, while Ingrid engaged in recording activities and other assignments. Despite their different motivations—Walter aimed for high scores to avoid negative consequences at home and school, and Ingrid sought to emulate her tutor—both demonstrated determination and persistence. Their investments led to positive outcomes, enhancing their agency and creating a virtuous cycle that improved their English proficiency.

When learners actively engage in English learning and exercise their agency, they seek out affordances in various locations, thereby further enhancing their English proficiency. The following interview excerpts from Jim illustrate his proactive approach to securing affordances outside of school.

> *I used to participate in the Model UN club. Everyone there pretended to be a delegate from a different country. We discussed international issues using the UN's parliament procedure, all in English and made decisions together. At the end, we voted to wrap up the session.*

> *Once I volunteered at an international science fair. Students from all over the world brought their projects to Taiwan, and local professors and teachers came to interact with them. Since the foreign students spoke English, I helped out by translating what they said to Taiwanese professors and teachers.*

Jim described his involvement in two events, demonstrating how his strong agency in English learning drove him to maximize his opportunities. The diverse settings he engaged with exposed him to different genres of English, which helped him practice and refine his skills.

In addition to formal venues, such as the Model United Nations and the science fair, Jim also assisted non-Mandarin-speaking residents in his community with communication. He recounted, "We've got this foreign family in our community. When their relatives came to visit, they were clueless about talking to anyone around here, so I stepped in as their interpreter. It felt awesome, like I really achieved something."

In the Model UN, English was the medium of communication, allowing Jim to express his ideas and interact with others. As an interpreter at the science fair and in his community, he needed to understand and translate ideas between English and Chinese, adapting his language use to different contexts. This varied use of English across multiple settings not only enhanced his proficiency but also demonstrated his active agency in English learning.

The researcher explored locations within learners' immediate environments, such as home, buxiban, school, and community. However, the scope of learning locations can extend to include business establishments, foreign countries, and virtual reality.

Some participants took part-time jobs where they occasionally interacted with English speakers, using these affordances to practice English. Xena, in particular, proactively engaged with native English speakers at her resort job, enhancing her English learning opportunities. Xena explained how these interactions contributed to her incidental learning.

> *Most of my coworkers weren't great at English, so they avoided talking to foreigners. But, I figured chatting with foreigners would help me level up my English. So, whenever I spotted someone who might need help, I'd just go up and talk to them. I did it to sharpen my English skills.*

The less structured nature of workplace interactions allowed Xena to practice English and exercise her agency. She said, "I've been learning English since third grade. Once I knew some basics, I just wanted to give it a shot and have some conversations with foreigners." Xena's strong agency enabled her to maximize her English LBC, applying what she had learned in school. The interview excerpts revealed that her classroom experience provided her with the confidence that further fueled her agency in pursuing English LBC (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

Family SES often influences the resources available for children's education. While some parents meticulously save for educational purposes, others can easily afford opportunities abroad. This transition from an EFL environment to an ESL setting significantly enriches the English learning experience. Shirley's story exemplifies this shift.

> *Back in fifth grade, my parents sent me and my little sis to Canada for a month. We stayed with their friends. We called them "Uncle" and "Auntie". During the day, we went to the summer camp and hung out with local kids. There were loads of activities, like art, baking, swimming, and stuff like that. That trip had a big impact on me. I loved it there; it was super cool. In the summer, the sun set late, so we could still take evening strolls. That's one of the reasons I want to get good at English because I want to live abroad someday.*

Immersion in an ESL environment for a short period might not drastically improve one's English proficiency. Still, it provides learners like Shirley with valuable opportunities to engage in real-world communicative tasks with native speakers (Macalister, 2015). Such experiences can be memorable, offering a glimpse into different cultures and broadening learners' perspectives (Cadd, 2015). Shirley aspired to master English because she saw it essential for achieving her ideal life. The decision stemming from her short-term overseas experience allowed her agency to germinate and continue growing.

All participants in this study were born around the turn of the millennium when the internet became pervasive. Consequently, these learners frequently interact with virtual environments, adding another context to English LBC. English is prevalent in virtual reality, making strong English proficiency advantageous for online learning and entertainment. Some participants, who were avid gamers and played with teammates worldwide, found that virtual interactions influenced their development of agency. The following is an account from Kofi.

> *I've picked up loads of English from online games, like LMAO and GTG, got to go. I learned these back in junior high, and they really stuck. The thing is, if you are not in an English-speaking country, you won't learn much of the language. When I played RPGs, there were tons of stories in English, so it felt like reading an English book. Whenever I hit something I didn't know, I'd look it up online. During summer and winter breaks, I spent most of my time gaming and talking to foreigners. My English kept getting better. English is awesome for making friends. I learned English because I wanted to play games and chat with my friends online.*

Kofi's online gaming experience aligns with the observations of Sykes and Reinhardt (2013). The online gaming platform functioned as a location where Kofi and his international playmates communicated through English, which facilitated his English development. Immediate feedback from his playmates kept Kofi engaged and supported his progress in English learning. Furthermore, the relationship between Kofi's English learning agency and online gaming is interconnected. Engaging games and practical tasks in English immersed Kofi and his playmates in an environment that fostered agency, a sense of belonging, and meaningful learning. Kofi made significant efforts, such as consulting dictionaries and utilizing online resources, to understand the game content. Interacting with online teammates allowed Kofi to see the practical value of English and increased his enjoyment of the language.

In this study, the researcher investigated how affordances in various beyond the classroom settings contributed to advanced EFL learners' agency and English

proficiency. The following summarizes the conclusions drawn from the research questions.

The first research question

The first question examines how various beyond the classroom settings enable learners to develop their English proficiency through affordances. Affordances vary by location and can overlap across different contexts. Structured settings, such as buxibans and schools, provide scripted and planned affordances, for example, textbooks, worksheets, and practices. By contrast, less structured contexts, such as business establishments and virtual reality, offer incidental learning opportunities, often through conversations. These affordances may not be readily accessible or recognized by learners (Lindstrand, 2021). Mediators identify, create, organize, or modify affordances based on socially and culturally sanctioned beliefs and attitudes about what best supports learning. Learners capitalize on these affordances, with mediators providing scaffolding during interactions to enhance knowledge, skills, and proficiency. The intensive and sustained involvement of mediators in LBC settings supports the long-term development of learners' English proficiency.

In this study, many participants credited vital figures, such as parents, tutors, and teachers, for their advanced English proficiency. For instance, some mediators offered explicit instruction (Kofi, Ingrid, Walter, and Willow), some emphasized learning attitudes (Ginny), and some demonstrated an ideal identity in English (Ingrid). In some cases, mediators played indirect but crucial roles, such as Shirley's parents arranging and financing her ESL learning opportunities abroad and Weston's parents encouraging his practice of newly acquired English skills. Additionally, specific mediums, such as English-only policies and online platforms, offered Sawyer and Kofi specific guidelines or structures. Conference organizations and routine work in business establishments also mediated and facilitated incidental and practical English learning opportunities for Jim and Xena, respectively.

The mediator's sustained involvement with learners through socio-culturally endorsed affordances enables them to develop English proficiency gradually. As learners internalize mediated affordances, such as routines, values, and strategies, they begin to seek out and utilize additional affordances, such as contests and new online games, further enhancing their FL development. This process demonstrates that English learning in LBC settings is initially social before becoming internal, aligning with the sociocultural view of language learning (Vygotsky, 1986).

The development of learners' English proficiency in LBC settings and their agency are interrelated, both originating from and dependent on sociocultural contexts. Agency, as a capacity to act, does not emerge instantaneously and cannot exist without contextual affordances. As learners engage with English through the affordances provided by mediators, their agency also develops in tandem. This process is central to addressing the second research question.

The second research question

The second question examines how various beyond the classroom settings furnish learners with affordances that support their agency development. In this study, these Taiwanese learners developed their agency in a Confucian society (Ma & Ouyang, 2020). The interviews and questionnaires revealed that human

mediators exerted their influence by emphasizing the importance of English through contextual affordances. This notion is in agreement with the Confucian heritage culture, which values academic learning (i.e., the learning of English in this case) and achievement (Huang & Gove, 2015). Additionally, the recent promotion of English proficiency in Taiwan highlights its role in enhancing the nation's future and citizens' career prospects (National Development Council, 2018). Therefore, the high value placed on English proficiency in Taiwan is socially, culturally, and historically endorsed.

Sociocultural affordances both support and constrain learners' agency development (Palfreyman, 2011). The learners in this study knew that they were expected to excel in high-stakes English tests, which motivated them to study diligently. They initially engaged in a series of repetitive practices and drills organized by mediators to develop basic English proficiency, especially evident in the cases of Walter, Sawyer, and Ingrid. Their responses to these mediated affordances (e.g., repeated tasks and routines) influenced their capability to act. Walter was reluctant and held a negative attitude towards agency, Sawyer remained neutral, and Ingrid was rather enthusiastic. At this stage, their agency was other-directed, formed, and shaped by the mediators' guidance.

As their English proficiency advanced, these learners began to explore additional affordances, making more independent choices and actions. Their agency evolved from being externally regulated to self-directed, resulting in "proactive, intentional, and constructive" contributions (Fletcher, p. 956) to learning tasks. This process resonates with Vygotsky's (1986) "zone of proximal development," where the mediator provides scaffolding to support learners' initial agency development. As learners gain proficiency and competence in English LBC settings, they begin to explore affordances independently. They find learning English purposeful and meaningful. Over time, as their proficiency grows, they develop or reaffirm this understanding. They actively seek out affordances outside of school, such as competitions, talking to strangers, volunteering, or chatting with English speakers online. This engagement extends beyond textbook learning and structured lessons, leading to a deeper sense of achievement and further enhancement of their agency in English learning.

Conclusion

This study reveals a dynamic interplay between mediators, their involvement, sociocultural factors, and affordances in supporting learner agency and English proficiency in LBC settings. The researcher uses two figures to explain this relationship. Figure 1 depicts a multi-directional relationship among the mediator and their involvement with learners, the affordances, and sociocultural factors, all within an LBC setting. These elements interact with each other, creating opportunities to foster learners' agency and FL development. Initially employed by mediators—such as competent adults, administrative policies, and rules—these affordances are shaped by sociocultural factors, including values, attitudes, and beliefs. These factors influence the involvement patterns between the mediator and learners. As learners engage more deeply with the mediator, they become increasingly agentive and competent, eventually transforming into mediators themselves. They begin to seek and develop their own affordances, which may, in turn, influence sociocultural factors and modes of interaction with these affordances.

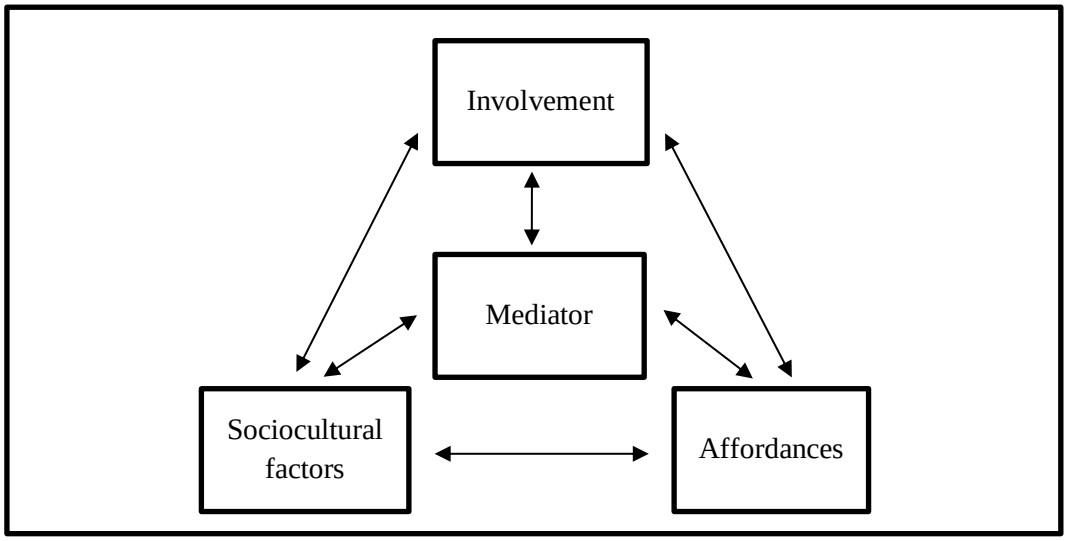

Figure 1. The relationship between mediator, involvement, affordances, and sociocultural factors in LBC settings

Figure 2 further illustrates that, through affordances, the mediator enhances the learner's agency and FL development within an LBC setting. This agency development, in turn, sustains and strengthens English proficiency development and vice versa. The larger square encompassing both "mediator" and "learner" signifies that when learners attain sufficient FL proficiency and agency, they can evolve to mediators themselves, taking control of their own learning process, as depicted in Figure 1.

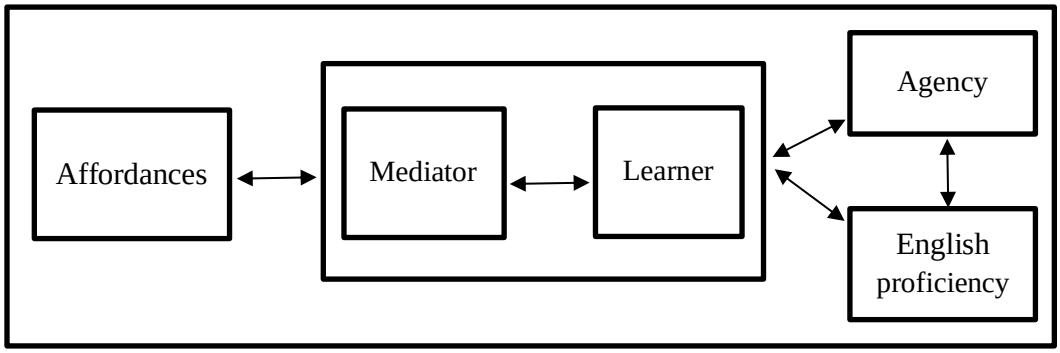

Figure 2. Affordances in LBC contexts in supporting learner's agency and English proficiency

English learning within and beyond the classroom can complement each other or create tensions. The study findings reveal a positive relationship between learner agency and English LBC. Nevertheless, the transferability of agency between LBC and classroom settings varies. Some learners were agentive both in and beyond the classroom. For example, Weston, encouraged by his parents, willingly demonstrated the pronunciation skills learned at school by sounding out words on billboards during family trips. Conversely, others, like Kofi, experienced tension between the two settings, showing more enthusiasm in buxiban than in school.

These examples demonstrate that when mediators identify, bridge, or create similar affordances between different learning locations, learners benefit from English proficiency and agency development. Mediators' open, flexible, and encouraging attitude enables learners to seize affordances to support their English learning in all locations. By contrast, when mediators set boundaries or sever connections between the classroom and beyond the classroom learning, learners suffer from this discontinuation, and their agency in English learning at school may stagnate or decline. This implication sheds light on EFL teaching and research. The learners in this study developed agency and English proficiency through affordances mediated by critical figures, administrative policies, and various venues. Maximizing opportunities and creating connections for affordances across various locations enhance learners' ability to act and master a foreign language (Reinders & Benson, 2017; Toung & Pham, 2021).

While conducting this study, the researcher encountered several limitations. First, the participants' English proficiency levels presented a constraint. Although all participants possessed at least a CEFR B2 proficiency, which is considered advanced, only two were rated at the C1 level, and none were at the C2 level. The inclusion of more learners with higher proficiency in future studies could provide a more holistic understanding of learners and learning contexts.

Another limitation is related to family structure. All but one participant in this study came from nuclear families, excluding other family structures, such as single-parent households. Since family structure and dynamics can affect learners' development in various ways, including participants from more diverse backgrounds in future research could provide a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

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