



DOI: 10.22144/ctu.jen.2023.022

An insight into non-English major learners' task engagement from a sociocultural perspective

Nguyen Thi Khanh Doan*, Trinh Quoc Lap, and Pham Mai Anh

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Viet Nam

*Correspondence: Nguyen Thi Khanh Doan (email: ntkdoan@ctu.edu.vn)

Article info.

Received 29 Oct 2022

Revised 10 Dec 2022

Accepted 25 Feb 2023

Keywords

Activities, learner agency, task engagement

ABSTRACT

Under the lens of a sociocultural view, this qualitative study was conducted with 83 non-English major learners at a university in the Mekong Delta to examine English learners' task engagement. Twelve of them were further invited to be interviewed. Data were collected from class observations, learning journals, semi-structured interviews and stimulated recall. The study showed that the same task was performed differently by learners, and that the way learners implemented a given task was shaped by the negotiation between their personal and contextual factors because of their sense of agency in the situated sociocultural learning context. The study has acquired an increased insight into learners' task engagement regarding their agency in the teaching and learning context of Vietnam from a sociocultural view.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of task as a unit of analysis has been employed in many second language acquisition (SLA) studies. Therefore, SLA researchers' investigations of classroom interaction have included a significant number of studies on language learners' task engagement. However, many researchers have taken the psycholinguistic approach, considering language tasks as a construct which shapes the types of language use and information process during learners' task engagement. In this argument, teachers can control and predict learners' learning outcomes through their selection of task features. Due to this cognitive viewpoint on language task which has not well taken social and cultural factors in real teaching and learning practices, many of the problems remaining unresolved in the SLA field are less likely to be answered if approached only from a cognitive viewpoint which takes little account of context and social factors. Hence, researchers emphasise the need for classroom research that considers the

construct of language task in real classroom practice (Albusaidi, 2019; Skehan, 2007). Following this trend, an increasing number of researchers have turned to the sociocultural perspective. From such a perspective, a major insight into tasks is the fluidity and unpredictability of task processes and outcomes once learners, who have their own motives, objects and perceptions, start implementing tasks. Learner agency is taken into consideration when examining learners' task engagement (van Lier, 2008). Especially, research in the field under the sociocultural view could be helpful to reveal issues in a specific teaching and learning context (Wu, 2017). In relation to English teaching and learning circumstances in Vietnam, there has been great concern centred on teaching and learning quality. As a result, a large number of studies have been carried out, but only with the adoption of psycholinguistic perspectives. As a result, the present study was conducted with an attempt to investigate learners' English tasks from a sociocultural viewpoint, which consider both learners' personal factors and those

from the context where the learning process is situated.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The theoretical framework of the study

The framework for the present paper is the sociocultural theory by Vygotsky (1986), which is a theory showing the crucial connection between internal and external elements in the process of learning. Accordingly, language learning is a socially mediated process. In this sense, language learning is no longer a fixed construct determined by certain types of task as confirmed by psycholinguistic views (van Lier, 2008) since the theory believes that factors-related to learners themselves like histories, or motives would impact their language learning. Language learning is, therefore, seen as a process engaging learners in an activity of mind. Thus, language is not only play the tool to convey the meaning but it is also a cognitive device to make meanings (Swain, 2006). Therefore, learning is considered as a social construct as it occurs when there is the interaction between learners and teachers in a specific teaching environment. Language learning is the consequence of the interaction between the factors from the learners and those from the leaning context where they learn the language. For this paper, which aimed to understand the factors affecting non-English major learners' learning process at a university, the sociocultural theory was adopted as the framework.

2.2. Task engagement and learner agency

This section describes task engagement and its relation to learner agency.

Task engagement is defined as the way learners perform, commit or involve in a learning task (Duff, 2012). Under the sociocultural perspective, the way a learner performs a learning task is determined by learner agency (van Lier, 2008).

Agency is perceived as a person's ability to choose, control, self-regulate, and pursue his or her goals in a situated learning situation. Hence, this ability would lead to personally and socially transforming their action and activity in the learning context (Duff, 2012). Therefore, it is the participation in activity in a learning community will construct the sense of agency of a learner (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Also in this sense, van Lier (2008) confirms that there will not be any inputs transmitted to a learner by teachers or textbooks, but it is the sense agency involving the activity and the initiative of an

individual to make learning happens. Consequently, learners' responses to a task are shaped by more than the requirements of the task (Wu, 2017).

Generally, thanks to a sense agency learners are no longer seen as passive participants in the learning process. Alternatively, they can make informed choices, so the interaction of factors in a specific learning context may support or hamper a learner's language learning opportunities. From this sense, language learners may be appeared to be conforming or disconfirming to classroom rules (Norton & Toohey, 2011). That is learners may resist or conform to the classroom regulations or teachers' expectations. In relation to the present study, learners' task performance was classified as conforming and disconfirming. The former refers to learners who performed the task in accordance to the usual standards of behaviour expected by the teacher (i.e. actively engaging in the task and sharing their answers in the end). The latter refers to those who did not well conduct the task as expected by the teacher, rarely spoke up or been silent during the task engagement.

As learners are agents of the learning process, their responses to a given task would be in alignment with their socio-historically orientation. Learning process of an individual is affected by both internal and external factors. Internal factors are the personal elements coming from learners, such as background or previous knowledge, past learning experiences, and their learning objectives (Donato, 2000; Lantolf, 2005). Regarding external factors, they are the ones coming from the learning context like teachers' teaching style, peer relation. These factors (i.e., contextual and personal factors) were the conceptual framework to analyse the data in this study. Because of the negotiation of these factors, the same task would be dealt with differently by different learners.

2.3. The view of task and activity from a sociocultural perspective

Learning tasks have been an essential focus in SLA research. In fact, Spence-Brown (2007) shows that tasks as a means through which learners' language use could be elicited, practiced and assessed so that language acquisition will occurs.

. However, the cognitive dimensions of tasks have been teased out in many studies on tasks. To illustrate, some researchers have attempted to show that task familiarity or task types affect learners' learning opportunities and task engagement (e.g.

Plough & Gass, 1993; Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997). However, these have been criticised. Duff (2007) and Breen (197) emphasised the difference between task-as-work plan (i.e. designed by the teacher), and the task-in-process (i.e. the one enacted by students).

Task-as-workplan refers to a blueprint designed by the teachers while task-as-process is seen as an activity or learners' actual performance on task (Coughlan & Duff, 1994). Seedhouse (2005) points out that various activities and outcomes would be emerged from an original design of a task. Similarly, Roebuck (2000) earlier illustrated that a task refers to what teachers expect learners to perform the task; activity, by contrast, is what the learners actually conduct the task. Thus, learning outcomes can not be controllable and predictable as being viewed psycholinguistic perspectives. From a sociocultural view, the outcomes of a task should be explained in a broader sociocultural learning context (Fahim & Haghani, 2012; Parks, 2000). As a result, learners involved in the same task are in fact engaged in different activities. The present study considers tasks as being assignments or exercises related to English learning given by the teacher, and data were collected from the real process where learners engaged in task-in-process. The tasks examined in the study were both the ones conducted in class and at home. The study attempted to find answers to the following research questions:

- (1) What are non-English major learners' various activities emerged from the same task?
- (2) What are the factors affecting learners' task engagement?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

The present study attempted to shed lights on a natural English teaching and learning context regarding a focus on learners' task performance. The study aimed to study "the reality as constructed, interpreted, and experienced by participants in their interactions with each other and with the wider social systems" (Tubey, Rotich, & Bengat, 2015, p. 225). Language learning is considered as the social construction and emergence from a situated social context in which learners engage (Creswell, 2009; Scotland, 2012). Hence, embracing an interpretative epistemological stance entails the use of qualitative designs gaining insights into the process of learning as it naturally occurs in interactive settings (Johnson, 2009). Regarding research centred on

language tasks, researchers have shown that internal perspectives or learner relevance may be better explored through qualitative designs rather than experimental research designs because qualitative researchers aim to study things in order to interpret or make sense a phenomenon in a natural setting; generalization of the research findings is not the aim of qualitative researcher (Creswell (2013). Hence, the study adopted a qualitative design.

3.2. Research participants

Participants were 83 students of two non-major English classes at a university in Mekong Delta. Convenient and purposive sampling techniques were employed in the present study. As the study occurred in the university where the researchers have been working as teachers of English, it was easier for them to access the research site. As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2006), researchers who chose research sites convenient to them have found it helpful for their data collection (e.g. finding and building a rapport with participants).

First, volunteer students were requested for their participation in the study. The participants were then informed with the purpose of the study and the procedures for data collection, and they were also informed that they could withdraw their participation during the study without penalty. Two classes agreed to take part in the study. They were non-English major English learners who studied General English 2. They were between 19 and 22 of age. They are required to complete General English 1, 2 and 3 as English is a compulsory subject, and completing the subject is a prerequisite for their university graduation. The results of the subject were not accumulated to their general course result. Their majors were various (e.g., Vietnamese studies, computer science, law, etc.)

Regarding the current General English 2 course, it included 15 class meetings with three fifty-minute periods per meeting. The course book was the Life A1-A2 book (the second edition for Vietnamese learners). The General English course was expected to cover Units 7-12. The tasks selected for the data collection were listening, reading, writing and speaking tasks from the coursebook, which were required to do in class or at home. For the assignment done at home, the tasks were not central to speaking as these tasks need interactions among learners so such tasks should be conducted in class.

Learners in these classes were informed that they would be observed by one researcher, who was also their subject teacher, during a semester of 3 months.

For the study, students who appeared to be were conforming, disconfirming, and both conforming and disconfirming to the task from two classes were invited to the interview at the end of the course. 6 students from each class (2 for being conforming, 2 disconfirming and 2 both conforming and disconfirming) were selected for the interview. There were 12 students in total from the two classes (5 males and 7 females) interviewed in the end.

By adopting a qualitative research design, the present study aimed to provide a rich and in-depth understanding of English-non major college learners' task engagement from a sociocultural perspective in Vietnam. The small size of the participant population was satisfactory, as confirmed by (Patton, 2015).

Pseudonyms were applied to maintain anonymity of the participants. Physical data were only accessed by the researchers.

3.3. Study effects

Since one researcher was also the English teacher of the two classes, every effort was made to minimize her effects on the learning process of the learners and the study results. The purpose of the study was informed to them at the beginning of the course. The researcher tried to build trust with them to make sure that information given by them would not influence the evaluation of their course completion.

3.4. Research instruments

In order to achieve the research aims, the research instruments for this study were observations, interviews, stimulated recall and learning journals.

3.4.1. Observations

The researchers conducted class observations over a semester where the English lessons naturally occurred. Observation is a common method to collect data for qualitative studies (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The researchers focused on observing the manner students conducted a task. Observations involved aimed to record the way English tasks were performed by students. Students who actively engaged in the task or resisted task engagement were the focus of the observation, from which further stimulated recall (see section 3.4.3) or interviews would be further conducted to exploit more data regarding internal

and external factors contributing to students' task performance. In each class, the researchers conducted class observation in 4 units (i.e., 7, 8, 9 and 10) regarding the topics of journey, appearance, entertainment, and learning, respectively. Every unit involves four observations focusing on four skills. Therefore, there were 16 observations.

3.4.2. Interviews

Interviews are widely adopted by qualitative researchers (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Roulston, 2010). King and Horrock (2010) show that interviews provide participants the chance to share their experiences, understandings as well as perspectives in a context. The data of this study were collected by a semi-structured interview due to the fact that there is a combination of pre-determined open questions. Therefore, the researchers can leave out some questions or add others during the interview (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Yin, 2003). This type of interview suited the present study because it gave the researchers the flexibility when eliciting participants' own perspectives on their task performance.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese at the end of the English course in a classroom and were audio-recorded. The questions revolved around learners' personal factors and contextual factors.

3.4.3. Stimulated recall

Some stimulated recall in the form of informal talks was conducted after the class meeting. In these talks, students were asked questions such as, "Why are you performing the task this way at this point of time?", with an attempt to understand their actual task engagement at a specific time. Lyle (2003) suggests that stimulated recall is a useful research tool to uncover participants' cognitive processes which are hard to grasp through class observations.

In relation to the present study, the stimulated recall focused on students' thoughts about what way they conducted a task at particular moments. Hence, students who were conforming or disconfirming were invited to the recall right after the class meeting. There were 15 recall sessions in total in each class. While conducting the recall sessions, the researchers showed their role of an insider sharing with their learning beliefs, experiences, or concerns with the learners so that learners might share anything regarding their task engagement.

The interviews and stimulated recall were conducted in Vietnamese, which is the native

language shared by the participants and the researchers, due to the fact that the quality of the data is expected to increase if the participants are permitted to use their native language during interviews (Tran, 2015).

3.4.4. Learning Journals

Learning journals is defined as the records of participant experiences in their natural learning contexts and this is a quite common instrument in qualitative research as this type of research instrument provides findings which are based on the experiences of the research participants (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017). Regarding this study, participants were asked to record activities they had done to complete home assignments for every unit (i.e., one listening task, two reading tasks and two writing tasks). Each of them was required to complete 15 entries during the course. However, quite a few of them failed to complete the journals. Ultimately, ten students in each class submitted the 15 entries.

3.5. Data transcription

Since the purpose of the present study was the content of the data, some paralinguistic features (e.g. hesitations or facial expressions) could be excluded while transcribing the data as confirmed by Keith (2003). Thus, the present study used a basic transcription and ignored the paralinguistic features. The audio-taped data were transcribed into Vietnamese and English translations of the data were supplied where necessary in this paper.

3.6. Data analysis

The thematic approach was utilized to analyse the data in this study. This analysis approach is perceived as a method for “identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The approach could be defined as “data-driven coding or theory-driven coding” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). The former refers to themes emerged from the data themselves; it is named as an inductive approach by Patton (2015). In contrast, the latter is themes coming from the theoretical framework of the study (Patton, 2015). Some qualitative authors (e.g., Hardy, 2011; King, 2009; Stirling, 2001) have suggested the combination of the two approaches to analyse a data set. In fact, each approach may bring weaknesses if being conducted in isolation. As a result, an integrated approach of both inductive and deductive coding approaches was employed in the present study. The data from the interviews, stimulated recall was initially coded based on the themes

distilled from major concepts of personal factors (e.g., learners’ learning objectives, learning history, etc.) and contextual factors (teaching style, teachers’ objectives, etc.). After that, more themes emerging from the data were searched for.

Data from observations and journals were summarised and identifying patterns of being conforming and disconfirming task performance. Data from the journals were summarized and then matched to the task performance of being conforming or disconfirming among learners from the observations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. What are non-English major learners’ various activities emerged from the same task?

Data collected from the interviews, stimulated recall, journals and observations showed that there were two groups of task performance with two distinctive ways of engaging in the same given tasks: conforming and disconfirming task performance. The conforming group (22 of them) and disconfirming group (61 participants) of learners dealt with the tasks differently. Particularly, some (11 out of them) appeared to be both conforming and disconfirming to the task engagement.

Regarding the receptive skill tasks (i.e., listening and reading tasks, learners in the conforming group dealt with receptive skills task through the top-down process of inducing the meaning form context while the disconfirming ones were most likely to decode the meaning of the task by direct translation or a bottom-up process. Take listening task as an example. The conforming learners conducted the tasks through several steps. They tried to read the questions carefully, and try to find the keywords of the questions. If the task was done at home, they would keep listening to the text or reading the text several times. They took notes of the listening text while listening to understand the general meaning of the text. Then, they found answers to the questions. Also, in conducting the reading tasks, they first read the questions and then underlined the keywords. Next, they read the passages and answer the questions. While reading the texts, these learners attempted to use context clues in order to understand the meaning of a reading section. For instance, learner D said that “*I think looking at the words and sentences surrounding the word that I am not familiar with may help. I also try to look for nearby*

words that are synonyms or antonyms of the word I don't know." (D, female, stimulated recall)

Noticeably, conforming learners treated the listening and reading texts and input to learn other language components such as writing, speaking, grammar and pronunciation. For example, some of them worked with the transcripts after checking the answers to the listening tasks. In simulated recall sessions with these learners, they said that they needed the transcripts to check for any problems on the audio that challenged them. Also, they said they wanted to learn more about more lexical items, structures and discourse markers from the listening text. For instance, B said *"I looked at the transcript to note new words, grammatical points, or how speakers pronounce words and link sounds together which made the listening so hard for me. I can also learn the way foreigners start and end a conversation"*. (B, male, stimulated recall)

Similarly, reading passages were exploited by this group of learners. Most of them stated they tried to access new words and structures in the reading texts after completing the task. To illustrate, learner E said *"I mark the words and structures that I am not sure of the meaning of the words or the usage of the words. Then, I may underline the words with a pencil or a highlighter so that I can work with the words later. Then, I use a dictionary or an online one find to check for the meanings of the words. I may also ask the teacher for help with the grammar structures."* (E, male, stimulated recall)

They think that reading is a great way to effectively expand their vocabulary and grammatical structures. Learner B explained that *"learning vocabulary and structures from the reading is an effective way as we can learn them from the exact context of the topic where words and grammar are being used. Thus, we can write and speak (English) better."* (B, male, stimulated recall).

Particularly, learning journals showed that some of them even wrote a summary of what they had read. Learner A explained, *"Writing a summary is a great way to increase the knowledge of what I have read. Summarizing requires readers the ability to decide what is important in the text and then put it in my own words. So, I can improve writing as well"*. (A, male, stimulated recall)

Unlike this group, the disconfirming group dealt with the listening tasks and reading tasks differently. Class observations showed they relied on Vietnamese translation so that they could

understand the task requirements and the texts. Some of the students in this group requested their classmates' help with the meaning of the task requirements or questions. However, most of them used the translation devices, which helped them to translate the questions (i.e., the task requirement) into Vietnamese. Particularly, during the while-listening stage, some used the translation apps to provide the meaning of audios to which they were listening. Moreover, learning journals revealed that they conducted the listening and reading tasks at home in the same way they did in class. They looked up all new words in the task and, and they then relied on Google translation tools helping translate the listening texts or the reading passages into Vietnamese. Learners E and F similarly stated that most of the words in the task were new for them and they could not identify the keywords of the questions. Hence, grasping the Vietnamese meaning made them feel more comfortable to complete the task.

In terms of the productive skill task, speaking and writing task, conforming learners showed their effort to generate English language and use the language while the other group appeared to be resistant to language production and language use. Regarding the speaking tasks, the disconfirming group of students rarely showed they discussed with partners. They typed in their ideas in Vietnamese and the translation apps were used to translate the ideas into English. In the stimulated recall, they said that they did not know how to construct a correct English sentence. For these students, they seldom volunteered to speak English in the class. Some of them said that they were not confident in their speaking skills. In the same way, writing tasks were completed by the use of machine translators, which helped provide the direct English translation. Due to the use of translating apps, there were hardly ever been any questions regarding new words or grammar raised to the teacher. They stated in the stimulated recall sessions that translating was the best way for them as there was so much vocabulary they did know. Also, they failed to construct an English sentence in a grammatically correct way.

In contrast, the conforming learners made their attempt to use English during the discussion. They discussed in groups to find ideas based on the guided questions given by the teacher. They took turns to talk about the topic in the group discussion. For these students, they usually asked for help from the teacher with new lexical items about the topic or phonological features. In the end of the discussion,

they were more likely to share their discussion. Most of them said that they wanted to take the advantage of this class to practice the English-speaking skill.

In terms of the writing tasks, the conforming learners dealt with the task through several steps. First, they generated ideas by answering the guided questions about the topic. They then tried to write the complete paragraph. While writing, they might use dictionary for help with new words. One of them explained that dictionaries would be useful for looking up the meaning in the context so that they could use the words correctly. Some of them also used translate apps to look for new words. For example, A said that *"I think using Google translates is fast to find out the words I need at this point of time, but I then double check with the English-English dictionary as I understand that words from Google translates sometimes are not contextually correct"*. (A, male, stimulated recall)

Data from learning journals showed that some might reference the answer from Google translates, but this just happened once they had finished the writing task as they then could learn something from the translated paragraph to improve his own writing.

Interestingly, most of them worked on their writing after being given the feedback by the teacher. This did not happen in the group of disconfirming learners. Some of them at least look back at mistakes or comments given by the teacher. Others would, in fact, make adjustments on their writing and give it back to the teacher for further comments. In contrast, comments on the writing were totally ignored by the disconfirming students. They said that they did not have time to look at the teacher's feedback.

In particularly, the study showed that some learners appeared to be both conforming and disconfirming. For example, student G showed to be so active in reading and writing tasks, but they resisted to do speaking and listening tasks. Furthermore, some students appeared to be resistant to groupwork but active in class discussion such as, learner D who appeared to be silent during group discussion, but always raised his hand to speak in class. Similarly, learner A, a very active student, preferred to work alone though all students were required to work in a group in most of the tasks. Some were be silent during the discussion of in-class tasks, but the stimulated recall sessions and journals revealed they engaged in the task internally. For example, K said that *"I like to take notes of the guidance and the*

answers given by the teacher and attempted to complete the assignments under the teacher's expectation. I, in fact, think I make some progress." (K, male, stimulated recall)

The learner might attentively concentrate on task though they appear to be passive or silent. That is, some learners tend to be internal participation during task. This is similarly shared with Skinnari (2014) indicating attentive listening and concentrating on the task that silence among EFL learners.

4.2. What are the factors affecting learners' task engagement?

The present study reveals that the learner' internal factors (e.g., learning objectives, learning beliefs, learning history or past learning experiences) and external factors (e.g., teacher teaching objectives, English course regulation, and partners) result in differences in the task engagement between the conforming and disconfirming groups.

4.2.1. Internal factors

First of all, the study shows that the differences in learning objectives lead to different task engagement among learners. Three out of four learners in the disconfirming group admitted that focused on short-term learning purposes such as passing the final exam or completing the task as required by the teacher.

"I'm too busy with my specialized subjects, so I have little time for English. I want to pass the General English course, and this is enough for me". (E, female, interview)

In fact, some of them understood the vital role of English, but their majors were much more important for them.

"Everyone keeps saying English is so important. I think this is true, but I would spend more time on it after I finish my major" (J, male, interview)

The conforming group tended to pursue the long-term learning aims so that they can develop English skills for their future job. They understand the significant role of English in the workplace. For example, A who was working part time as a receptionist in a hotel where he used English every day, admitted that *"when I work, I've realized that English is very important and other foreign languages are too. I'm now learning another one. But English may be a bit more vital as most people*

use it. The better English people are, the more job opportunities they will get". (A, male, interview)

Also in this sense, B said "the general English is vital for my specialized English course so I want to study it well so that it can support my majored English. Thus, I can work well in my field after graduation". (B, male, interview)

Also, in this sense of learning objective, the study shows that their fields of study (i.e., majors) would lead to their short-term or long-term English learning objectives. Learners of majors like Vietnamese studies or law are more likely to recognize the significant role of English in their future job.

"If I am good at English, I can introduce Vietnamese cultural values to people around the world, and I will probably find good jobs" (C, male, conforming).

In contrast, a learner majored in Computer technology said "English won't very much affect the salary in my field where people just look for employers good at computer skills" (F, male, disconfirming). Learners related themselves with the imagined community of which learners want to be a member would or would not motivate them to learn (Norton & Toohey, 2011). The community of the future job which required some identities (e.g., the necessity of being good at English or not) resulted in the choice to learn English. Also, in this sense, learners might engage in some tasks and resist conducting other tasks. For example, learner G disconfirming the engagement in speaking and listening tasks because he thought that writing and reading were useful for his job in computer science, so he would like to be good at those skills.

Second, two out of four participants showed that learners' task performance could be the consequence of their learning beliefs. For those who think that a good language learner is someone who can perform a language skill well are likely to actively engage in certain tasks. They only conform to the class requirements in these tasks.

I've never done assignments. They just feel like speaking in the class where they have teachers and friends to interact to". (D, male, both conforming and disconfirming, interview)

"I think being good at speaking skills are enough to learn English. I don't like doing English exercises at home. I just want to speak it" (J, male, disconfirming, interview).

The next factor is learner's learning history or last English learning experience. Most of disconfirming learners (3 out of 4) show that they had ever had bad experiences (i.e., the English teacher's attitude) in English classes at high schools. For instance, both F and M revealed in the interview that they've lost my fundamental English knowledge since high school English teachers did not care about them. The teacher grouped them with other classmates who were very bad at English, and they never called on one of us in the class. Since then, they hated English classes.

For conforming learners, some of them (2 out of 4) also badly experienced in high school English classes, but they then were motivated to learn when they understood the significant role of the language.

4.2.2. External factors

The first external factors is the English course rule that could be the behind reason for learners' task performance. All the is conforming students (4) stated that the result of the 3 General English courses are just the condition for their graduation, and the result did not accumulate in the result of their BA program. Therefore, they had invested little time in it.

Next, the teacher's teaching aim or teaching style may also lead to different task performance among learners. 2 out of 4 learners form the conforming group stated they felt so motivated to learn English in the present course as the teacher was so friendly, caring and enthusiastic, which made them feel confident, less anxious. The teacher never showed her disappointment with the learners' mistakes. They comprehended that the teacher had been trying to help them learn English better, so I followed her instruction.

However, some (2 out of 4) said that they were more active in the previous general English course as the teacher of that course more focused on English grammar exercises.

"In fact, I studied English very well last semester. I always volunteered, and the teacher was quite happy with me. I love to learning grammar which I will help me read materials in my field. This class requires us to talk a lot more, but I am so bad at English speaking. Thus, I lost my confidence in this class" (K, male, both conforming and disconfirming, interview). This means that more focus on the speaking skill may seem meaningful in the eyes the teacher, but it does not have any personal significance to some learners. Therefore,

learners will not participate in the learning process unless they realize it and will accept its significance, as confirmed by Wu (2017).

Last, 3 out of 4 indicated that partners who worked with them were also the factor affected the way learners engaged in a task. Learner A, for instance, had difficulties when working in groups. He revealed that *"I felt other learners did not like to work with me because I always used English during discussion. Therefore, I worked alone and asked for the teacher for help"* (A, conforming, stimulated recall).

In summary, the study shows that learners perform the same given task differently, and there are many factors leading to the variations in activities among learners.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study illustrates that when learners jointly complete a task, there is the negotiation between internal factors of an individual and external factors in the learning context, leading to a learner's unique task performance.

With respect to a pedagogical perspective, teachers may take these factors into consideration to enhance learners' task engagement. First, teachers should focus on more personally meaningful English actions for different learners because learners are in the same class but each has their own learning purposes or learning objectives, as shown in this study. Teachers should learn this at the beginning of the course through surveys or interviews. The teaching tasks and supports will be assigned properly for different learners' learning needs. Informative evaluation such as interviews with students should be conducted during the course so that teachers could adjust their teaching aims or styles to fit learners. Also, teachers may consider grouping learners in group discussion as partners may lead to the resistance to the task engagement among some learners.

While the English language evidently plays a crucial role, the study points out that the role of imagined community would motivate learners to learn English. In application to English teaching, teachers

should learn who the learners are to define their imagined community to raise learners' awareness of English learning. Teachers should integrate English into their imagined community to show how English is important for them to mingle with the community (i.e., future workplace or upper academic environments). This could be conducted when learners start their first General English course. Especially, the significance of English should be raised among those whose majors in the fields of technology (e.g., computer science) because these learners are less likely to concern about English. As a result, they may gradually form the imagined community from which they have to reform their imagined identity (i.e., the English proficiency they need to achieve).

In addition, the result of the General English courses could be accumulated to learners' overall courses so that learners may learn it more intensively.

From a sociocultural perspective, the learning process of a second or foreign language is described as a construct attributed to the participation of an individual's activities in a social context, instead of their mental processes solely. However, the study shows that some learners relied on translation apps like Google translates to perform the task instead of generating the language through interactions with partners or the teacher. Using these tools may limit social interactions among learners, so it may hamper the language learning process. Thus, teachers may encourage learners not to use such tools too much when doing language tasks.

Finally, intent participation was also revealed in this study. Some learners appear to be silent but they actually internally observe or listening during the task engagement. Therefore, teachers should reposition these learners and change the assessment of those learners because such learners are often equated to not learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would be grateful to the journal editors and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback. We would also like to express our gratitude to the students at Can Tho University for their support in conducting the study and writing this paper.

REFERENCES

- Albusaidi, S. (2019). How a student learn in an internationalised classroom from a sociocultural perspective. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6(6). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1006.02>
- Bashan, B., & Holsblat, R. (2017). Reflective journals as a research tool: The case of student teachers' development of teamwork. *Cogent Education*, 4(1), 137-152. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2017.1374234>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Breen, M. (1987). Learner contributions to task design. In C. Candlin & D. Murphy (Eds.), *Language learning tasks*: Prentice-Hall International and Lancaster University.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative and mixed methods approaches*. London: SAGE.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Dicicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education*, 40(4), 314-321. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x
- Donato, R. (2000). Sociocultural contributions to understanding the foreign and second language classroom. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 27-50). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Duff, P. A. (2007). Problematising academic discourse socialization. In H. E. Marriott, T. Moore, R. Spence-Brown, & E. I. (Eds.), *Learning discourses and the discourses of learning* Clayton, Vic: Monash University, Matheson Library.
- Duff, P. A. (2012). Identity, agency and second language acquisition. In S. M. Gass & A. Mackey (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 410-426). London: Routledge.
- Fahim, M., & Haghani, M. (2012). Sociocultural perspectives on foreign language learning. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 3(4), 693-699.
- Guest, G., Namey, E. E., & Mitchell, M. L. (2013). *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*: SAGE Publication, Inc.
- Hardy, J. W. (2011). *An activity theory interpretation of university ESL students' experiences of classroom group work*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. The University of Texas.
- Johnson, K. E. (2009). *Second language teacher education: A sociocultural perspective*. New York: Routledge.
- Keith, R. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- King, D. T. (2009). *Teaching and learning in a context-based chemistry classroom*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Queensland University of Technology.
- King, N., & Horrock, C. (2010). *Interviews in qualitative research*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Lantolf, J. P. (2005). Sociocultural and second language research: An exegesis. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 335-353). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Associates.
- Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford: OUP.
- Lyle, J. (2003). Stimulated recall: a report on its use in naturalistic research. *British Education Research Journal*, 29(6), 861-878. doi:10.1080/0141192032000137349
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research (4th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.z
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language Teaching*, 44(4), 412-446. doi:10.1017/S0261444811000309
- Parks, S. (2000). Same task, different activities: Issues of investment, identity and use of strategy. *TESL Canada Journal*, 17(2), 64-88.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods: Integrating theory and practice (4th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, California SAGE.
- Plough, I., & Gass, S. (1993). Interlocutor and task familiarity: effects on interactional structure. In M. G. Crookes, S. (Ed.), *Tasks and language learning: integrating theory and practice* (pp. 35-56). Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.
- Roebuck, R. (2000). Subjects speaking out: how learners position themselves in a psycholinguistic task. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roulston, K. (2010). Considering quality in qualitative interviewing. *Qualitative Research*, 10, 119-228. doi:10.1177/1468794109356739
- Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research: Relating ontology and epistemology to the methodology and methods of the scientific, interpretive, and critical research paradigms. *English Language Teaching*, 5(9), 9-16. doi:10.5539/elt.v5n9p9
- Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(1), 36-82.
- Skehan, P. (2007). Language instruction through tasks. In J. Cummins & C. Davison. (Eds.), *International handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 289-302). New York: Springer.
- Skehan, P., & Foster, P. (1997). Task type and task processing conditions as influences on foreign language performance. *Language Teacher Research*, 1(3), 185-211.
- Skinnari, K. (2014). Silence and resistance as experiences and presentations of pupil agency in Finnish elementary school English lessons. *Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 8(1), 47-64.
- Spence-Brown, R. (2007). Learner motivation and engagement in a pedagogic and assessment task: Insights from activity theory. In H. E. Marriott, T. Moore, & R. Spence-Brown (Eds.), *Learning*

- discourses and the discourses of learning*. Clayton, Vic: Monash University, Matheson Library.
- Stirling, J. A. (2001). Thematic networks: an analytical tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1(3), 385-405.
- Tran, G. N. (2015). *Investigating teachers' implementation of the task-based curriculum from a teacher cognition perspective: A case study of a Vietnamese upper-secondary school*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of Wollongong.
- Tubey, R. J., Rotich, J. K., & Bengat, J. K. (2015). Research Paradigms: Theory and Practice. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(5), 224-228.
- van Lier, L. (2008). Agency in the classroom. In J. P. Lantolf & M. E. Poehner (Eds.), *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages* (pp. 163-186). Oakville, CT: Equinox.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wu, H. (2017). Imagined identities and investment in L2 learning. *Taiwan Journal of TESOL*, 14(2), 101-133.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: design and methods (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.