

System

Children's experiences of agency when learning English in the classroom of a collectivist culture --Manuscript Draft--

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Abstract:	<p>This paper explores agency in a collectivist culture to investigate whether, and if so how, school-children experience agency as supportive to learning to speak English in the classroom of a collectivist culture. It draws on Ryan and Deci's (2019) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to examine nine primary classrooms in three schools in Alexandria, Arab Republic of Egypt. The research involved 281 primary-school-children who completed open-ended sentences about experiences in the ELT classroom, observations of the nine participating classes and 18 individual interviews. Our findings provided support for the universality of the need for autonomy (reflecting agency) in learning to speak English within a collectivist culture, in that the sample children expressed the need for greater autonomy. They also the inter-relatedness of the three basic needs of SDT, competence, autonomy and relatedness. Our findings suggest that children were encouraged by their schooling system to develop Control or Impersonal Orientations rather than Autonomy Orientations. These were sustained through children's fear of making mistakes and teachers scolding them which inhibited their sense of agency and capacity for speaking in English. Some children found that agency was less inhibited when they did simultaneous pairwork, if their needs for competence and relatedness were also satisfied.</p>
Suggested Reviewers:	Pete Bradshaw pete.bradshaw@open.ac.uk Knowledge of Egypt and of pedagogy

REVIEWER COMMENTS: SYSTEM

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR THE HELPFUL COMMENTS AGAIN. I HAVE NOW MADE THE TWO FINAL CHANGES SUGGESTED, AS INDICATED BELOW. I HAVE HIGHLIGHTED THE CHANGES IN RED ON THE FINAL ANONYMISED TEXT – Communicating Author.

REVIEWER1: I was very impressed with the thoroughness of the revision that addressed major concerns, and some minor ones.

- 1) I would suggest moving the limitations section to after findings.

THIS HAS BEEN MOVED NOW.

- 2) I was not sure how the autonomy questionnaire was used - quantitative or qualitative?; it was not included in Figure 1, and not mentioned, that I could find, after page 11, in reported findings.

I HAVE NOW CLEARLY EXPLAINED THAT IT WAS SIMPLY AN INFORMAL PART OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS WITH THE 18 CHILDREN ONLY, WHICH IS WHY IT IS NOT MENTIONED AGAIN. [[Please note that, in the next stage of our research, we administered this questionnaire to all 271 children and analysed the findings statistically. However, this current paper was written prior to that stage and partly inspired our later adaptations to the Research Design. We have written about this elsewhere and it is under review!]]

Otherwise this is a much improved manuscript and would recommend publication with minor revisions.

REVIEWER 2: This revised version is much improved having considered the comments provided.

TITLE PAGE

Children's experiences of agency when learning English in the classroom of a collectivist culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores agency in a collectivist culture to investigate whether, and if so how, school-children experience agency as supportive to learning to speak English in the classroom of a collectivist culture. It draws on Ryan and Deci's (2019) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to examine nine primary classrooms in three schools in Alexandria, Arab Republic of Egypt. The research involved 281 primary-school-children who completed open-ended sentences about experiences in the ELT classroom, observations of the nine participating classes and 18 individual interviews. Our findings provided support for the universality of the need for autonomy (reflecting agency) in learning to speak English within a collectivist culture, in that the sample children expressed the need for greater autonomy. They also the inter-relatedness of the three basic needs of SDT, competence, autonomy and relatedness. Our findings suggest that children were encouraged by their schooling system to develop Control or Impersonal Orientations rather than Autonomy Orientations. These were sustained through children's fear of making mistakes and teachers scolding them which inhibited their sense of agency and capacity for speaking in English. Some children found that agency was less inhibited when they did simultaneous pairwork, if their needs for competence and relatedness were also satisfied.

KEY WORDS

Key words Autonomy; agency; Autonomy Orientation; Control Orientation; Impersonal Orientation; Egypt; learning; collectivist culture; Self Determination Theory; English speaking

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Article by Authors (2018) cited in text:

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Children's experiences of agency when learning English in the classroom of a collectivist culture

Abstract

This paper explores agency in a collectivist culture to investigate whether, and if so how, school-children experience agency as supportive to learning to speak English in the classroom of a collectivist culture. It draws on Ryan and Deci's (2019) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to examine nine primary classrooms in three schools in Alexandria, Arab Republic of Egypt. The research involved 281 primary-school-children who completed open-ended sentences about experiences in the ELT classroom, observations of the nine participating classes and 18 individual interviews. Our findings provided support for the universality of the need for autonomy (reflecting agency) in learning to speak English within a collectivist culture, in that the sample children expressed the need for greater autonomy. They also the inter-relatedness of the three basic needs of SDT, competence, autonomy and relatedness. Our findings suggest that children were encouraged by their schooling system to develop Control or Impersonal Orientations rather than Autonomy Orientations. These were sustained through children's fear of making mistakes and teachers scolding them which inhibited their sense of agency and capacity for speaking in English. Some children found that agency was less inhibited when they did simultaneous pairwork, if their needs for competence and relatedness were also satisfied.

Key words Autonomy; agency; Autonomy Orientation; Control Orientation; Impersonal Orientation; Egypt; learning; collectivist culture; Self Determination Theory; English speaking

Collectivist and individualist cultures

Individualism in cultural terms stresses individual goals and the rights of the individual person. The UK and USA are examples of individualist cultures. In 2020, Robin Alexander described individualism as manifested in intellectual or social differentiation, focusing on divergence rather than uniformity. The view of knowledge within individualism was personal and unique rather than framed by publicly approved disciplines. For example, British and American citizens place higher value on freedom than on equality; on personal happiness than on responsibility to society. Collectivism, on the other hand, prioritised family and community over individuals, focussing on group goals and uniformity (see also Ryan and Deci 2019). Countries considered to be collectivist include, for example, China, Venezuela, Indonesia, India and Egypt among many others. Collectivism was reflected in common knowledge, common ideals, a single curriculum for all, focus on the national culture rather than pluralism, and learning altogether rather than in isolation or small groups. Rinne *et al.* (2013) have cited Hofstede's distinction between *masculine* collectivist cultures where wanting to prove that one is best dominates; and *feminine* individualistic cultures where the emphasis is on people engaging with and enjoying what they do. Ab Kadir suggested, in collectivist cultures there existed 'a deeply entrenched culture of obedience and conformity... that compels the rights and privileges of the larger society over the individual' (Ab Kadir 2017, 237).

Alexander (2020) described how in India, the collectivist culture in his five-culture study with most similarities to Egypt – the subject of this study - classroom talk tended to occur formally between the teacher and the whole class of pupils; or between one pupil and their whole class. He contrasted this with individualist cultures, where informal conversations

between individual children were frequently used in pedagogy. The use of more whole-class formal talk assumes less personal agency and creativity than informal conversations between individuals in class such as talking in pairs, especially if paired tasks are open-ended and flexible. While many curriculum subjects can, arguably, be learnt through the learner's hard work, concentration and listening, however, for learning to *speak* a foreign language, agency is considered to be a vital ingredient and creativity to be closely connected. Language mastery generally, and learning to *speak* a foreign language in particular, demands autonomy and creative learning on behalf of the learner (Ghonsooly & Showqi 2012; Liau et al. 2018; Marashi & Khatami 2017; Nosratinia & Zaker 2015; Smith, Kuchar and Lamb 2018; Swann et al. 2018; Yasmine & Sohail, 2018). Creative learning relates to a desire to construct new meanings and new ways of interacting on the basis of these. Agentic energy and dynamic cognitive effort are demanded and *divergence* of thought and openness to experience (Furnham and Bachtiar 2008). Such attributes are antithetical to the external regulation that is characteristic of collectivist culture classrooms (Policastro and Gardner 1999). Osche (in Howard-Jones 2002) described creativity as 'bringing something into being that is original (new, unusual, novel, unexpected) and also valuable (useful, good, mastery-oriented, appropriate)' (216).

This article explores the implications for learning to *speak* English in a collectivist culture where there exists an emphasis on uniformity and conformity. We question whether, and if so how, children manage to learn to speak adequately when agentic behaviours and creative learning are discouraged; and how pedagogy might be adapted for learning to speak without disrupting the basis of the collectivist classroom.

Self Determination Theory (SDT) and agency

The theoretical framework for our research was Self Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci 2019). Ryan and Deci claimed that this theory coordinated ‘evolutionary, biological, and sociocultural insights within its psychological framework’ (113). They highlighted evidence for the critical role of supports for autonomy, competence and relatedness in human development and creative learning (Niemic and Ryan 2009). SDT has been applied to and extensively researched in education and proposes ‘the importance of autonomous motivation for students’ quality of learning and engagement’ (Ryan and Deci 2019, 138). In this paper, we focus primarily on the autonomy aspect of SDT, exploring the relationship between children’s perceived autonomy (reflecting their agency) and their experiences of learning to *speak* English through pairwork (in contrast to learning English through their regular whole-class practices).

By autonomy, Ryan and Deci mean ‘a wholehearted willingness to act’ (ibid, 132) and ‘empowerment and volition’ (ibid, 123). Agency, as reflected in autonomy (and used interchangeably with autonomy for the remainder of this paper), was described by Helwig (2006) as an essential aspect of the human propensity for curiosity and creativity.

Manyukhina and Wyse (2018) defined it as ‘the capacity to act independently and to make one’s own choices’ (2018, 223). Helwig (2006, 466) also posited that constraints to agency can lead to a dampening of the child’s curiosity, creativity and overall well-being. We suggest that these negative psychological effects may be particularly acute in relation to the learning of *speaking* a foreign language, since this demands curiosity and creativity in a way that other areas of curriculum may not.

According to SDT, autonomy is inextricably connected to both competence (ie in our case, a sense that one can speak English) and a feeling of belonging (in this case, to one's pair or class). If these needs are met, according to SDT, intrinsic motivation leads to the boosting of creative learning. Studies from SDT have indicated that relatedness and autonomy are highly correlated and that they 'co-occur in the best of social contexts and close relationships' (131). Ryan and Deci explained that highest quality dyadic relationships entailed mutuality of autonomy (114), in other words, the two partners in a pair both need to sense their autonomy.

Proponents of SDT argue that its three basic psychological needs apply across all cultures. Similarities relating to the three needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness have been explored across diverse cultures (Helwig 2006) and many studies associated with SDT have provided evidence that agency is needed for some aspects of productive learning in both collectivist and individualist cultures (Chirkov 2009; d'Ailly 2003; Jang, Kim and Reeve 2012; Niemiec and Ryan 2009; Sheldon, Abad and Omoile 2009). We were interested to see whether or how this would be manifested within the Egyptian ELT-speaking classroom where, in keeping with collectivist expectations, the emphasis is on uniformity and conformity rather than on creativity and spontaneous peer-peer interaction.

Motivational orientations

SDT was particularly useful for our analysis in relation to Ryan and Deci's (2019) observation that 'some children readily seek out opportunities to explore and grow; while other children orient to controls, reward contingencies, and powerful others; while others still seem to focus on fears of failure or needs for safety' (125). They describe these propensities as three motivational orientations and suggest that all individuals have each of these

orientations to different degrees, although situations can prime people to emphasize one over others. The Autonomy Orientation 'correlates with greater focus on learning goals, and a focus on interest and challenge ... [being] less prone to undermining effects of extrinsic rewards' (126). The Control Orientation on the other hand is indicative of conformity and control and associated with performance rather than creative learning. The Impersonal Orientation correlates with a sense of powerlessness and fear of incompetence, leading to a focus on social comparisons and low confidence. Both these latter orientations detract from a child's sense of autonomy and thereby diminish their intrinsic motivation to engage in creative learning, the kind of learning necessary for speaking a foreign language. These autonomy-weak orientations are promoted, at the expense of intrinsic motivation, by pedagogical strategies such as controlling praise, threats of punishment, surveillance, controlling language and grades and evaluations (116). On the other hand, the Autonomy Orientation can be encouraged pedagogically when meaningful choices are provided in the classroom and when learners come to perceive themselves as competent and valued.

The context and aims of this article

In this article, we investigate the use of pairwork in the collectivist culture of Egypt to shed light onto the role *children themselves* perceive agency to play in learning to speak English.

We investigated:

- How individual children *experienced* agency – or lack of agency – when learning to *speak* English within the classroom of a collectivist culture.
- How these children experienced agency when guided to speak English using flexible dialogues in pairwork.

We worked with nine English-classes at three primary-schools in Egypt to explore how children experienced the introduction of pairwork in English-speaking lessons, and their perspectives on the part that agency played in their learning. The process of paired dialogue had almost never been used in our sample schools before, reflecting Alexander's (2020) observation that in collectivist cultures, pupil-to-pupil communication was rarely sanctioned and teacher-led whole-class pedagogy was the norm. Our work was based on the assumption, supported by the language learning literature, that pairwork demanded more agency by children than traditional grammar-translation methods and that to be an efficient language user, children must exercise their agency and engage in interest-led, creative learning (García & Kleifgen 2018). For example, Zhou (2016) suggested that pair or groupwork supported children's linguistic competence 'because it maximizes the opportunities for meaningful interactions', it encouraged language practice and exposed learners to a variety of language inputs (91). Chang (2010) illustrated how agency can be supported by small group work if the other peers in the small group/pair display their own intrinsic motivation. Greenaway et al. (2015) have also shown how connection to the small group (or pair) can give learners a stronger sense of control and concurrently enhance both their language learning and their overall wellness.

Methodology and Methods

The intervention

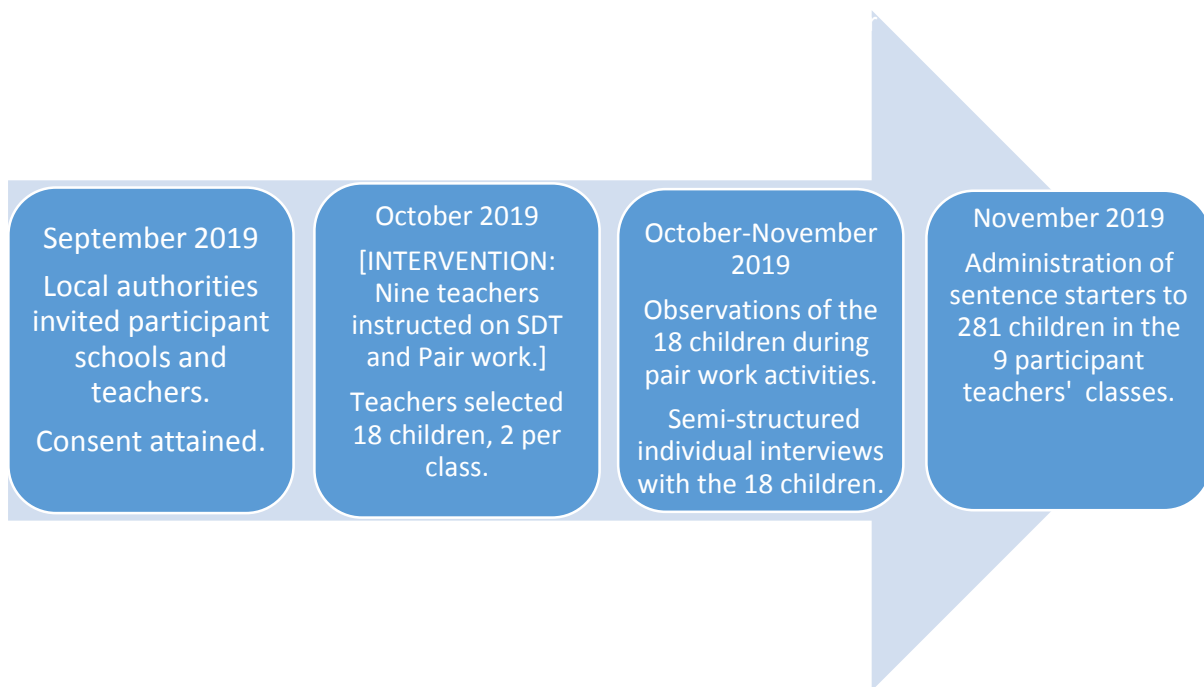
We carried out an educational intervention study (Conn, 2017; Pressley et al. 2006) with 281 children at three government-funded primary schools in Egypt. The project commenced with a two-day training session in which seven Year 4 English teachers and one Year 5 and one Year 3 English teacher participated. These constituted all the Year 4 English teachers from the three schools, which we therefore supplemented with two other English teachers from Years 3 and 5 respectively. The schools were selected by local authorities in three different locations across Alexandria. They were chosen on the basis of convenience and willingness to participate. Participants were instructed by the two authors during the training session about Self Determination Theory (SDT) and about how and why pairwork could enhance speaking skills through the promotion of children's competence, autonomy and relatedness. The final part of the training included micro-teaching in which each teacher led a lesson under observation by the rest of the teachers and trainers. Through this means, we were able to confirm that teachers had all grasped the concept of pairwork sufficiently.

The nine teachers each then attempted to apply pairwork in their classrooms. The authors observed them as they implemented pairwork and provided feedback. They based the pairwork on written dialogues in their textbooks; but also built in opportunities to extend and/or adapt these. They all used the model of children practising a dialogue as a pair while other pairs were doing the same.

Data collection

The data collection process is indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Diagram to show sequence of research



Sample

Our research sample included:

- 18 children, two from each participating class, chosen through convenience by the class teacher from among those attained low scores [less than 60%] in their English examination the previous school year. This was because of research evidence indicating a correlation between low agency and low attainment (Helwig 2006). There were ten girls and eight boys. Children consented to take part in the project willingly. Interview participants are referred to below using pseudonyms.
- 281 children who attended the seven Year 4 classes and one Year 5 and one Year 3 class respectively (see Table 1). There were four classes of boys and five of girls. The children's words are reported below by Sentence-Starter number [SS].

SCHOOLS/CLASSES	No of children who completed Sentence-Starters
School 1.1 GIRLS	23
School 1.2 BOYS	23
School 1.3 BOYS	25
School 1 TOTAL	71
School 2.1 GIRLS	45
School 2.2 GIRLS	36
School 2.3 GIRLS	45
School 2 TOTAL	126
School 3.1 GIRLS	32
School 3.2 BOYS	36
School 3.3 BOYS	16
School 3 Total	84
ALL SCHOOLS TOTAL	281

Table 1. Number of girls and boys who completed Sentence-Starters in each class

Research instruments

The use of the Sentence-Starters and semi-structured interviews acted as complementary data sources for our study. Sentence-Starters allowed for collection of perspectives from a large number of participants, while data from interviews provided in-depth explanations of views triggered by Sentence-Starters. These also provided triangulation and ensured reliability of findings. The observations provided contextual information.

Our instruments included:

- Observations of 18 children in nine classes during the first lesson in which pairwork was implemented. One researcher (Author 1 or Author 2) observed each child intensively during pairwork, sitting close to the child but causing minimal disruption. These observations provided first-hand evidence of how an individual child responded to the pairwork intervention. The schedule for these observations was based on the child's: seating in class; participation; apparent feelings; and interactions with other children.
- Semi-structured individual interviews with the same 18 children from Year 4 following observation. Interviews were conducted in Egyptian Arabic by Author 2 in a private room. Interviews lasted 30-50 minutes and were audio-recorded using a dedicated audio-recording device and transcribed. Transcriptions were cross-checked with another native speaker of Arabic. A short game was also played during the interview in which children had to place a sentence written on card under an *agree* or *disagree* categorisation. The sentences explored beliefs about how children become proficient in language learning.

During interview, the child was invited to reflect on the pairwork they had experienced and how it supported them to learn to speak English. We asked:

What did you think of the lesson we saw?

How was it different from normal?

What was better/worse about the new-style lesson?

Which style lets children participate/feel at ease more and why?

How did you feel about having to actually speak?

A short version of Jang, Kim and Reeve's (2012) autonomy questionnaire was then verbally administered, during the interview, to each of the 18 interview children, with the interviewer reading each question to the child and awaiting their full verbal response, before moving on to the next question. This was an informal exercise that was used to promote the children's thoughts rather than to measure these. This questionnaire investigated their beliefs about agency: whether their English teacher provided them with choices; understood their needs; believed they would do well; wanted them to ask questions; listened to them; and saw their point of view. It also inquired whether in English lessons, they felt free; did things they liked doing; and had choices. Jang, Kim and Reeve had summarized these aspects of classroom learning as indicating autonomy.

- Sentence-Starter Activities with all children in the nine classes.

The following Sentence-Starters (SS) were presented on a sheet of paper to 281 children, written in their native Arabic, checked for accuracy with a second native-speaker. Using Sentence-Starters as a means for collecting data from children is a technique that we have developed ourselves and have found highly productive in different contexts (see Authors,

2018). The process is similar to a questionnaire but children are supported personally by the researcher to complete each sentence; and the child can ask questions immediately for clarification. However, the open-ended nature of each question ensured that all the data were qualitative in nature, to meet our purposes of investigating children's diverse experiences and perspectives. The Sentence-Starters included:

1. When we do English speaking in class, I like it best when we...
2. Speaking English in class is difficult when...
3. What I can do to help me to speak English better in class is ...
4. What the teacher can do in class to help me speak English in class is...
5. When I am told to talk in pairs during English lessons, it makes me...

Author 2 read through each Sentence-Starter out-loud with the whole class, one Starter at a time, making sure that every child understood, but without giving clues or examples. We emphasised that there was no right answer and that we wanted their honest thoughts. A few children could not write properly, in which case Author 2 sat with them individually and wrote their responses with them later that day.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues were central since we were engaging with potentially vulnerable people. We had to meet their needs and engage with them in ways that suited them (Alderson & Morrow 2020; O'Neill in Bourke & Loveridge 2018). We therefore made sure that the task we presented to them was enjoyable and attractive by piloting the Sentence-Starters with

children in advance. For the interviews, as these were one-to-one, we could adapt our approach *in situ*, depending on the needs of the child.

We emphasised that participation was entirely voluntary and that children could leave at any time. We gained pupils' verbal consent for interviews by giving them the genuine alternative of staying in the classroom or joining us in a private room. No children chose to stay in class although one boy asked to leave the interview early. We gained children's written consent for the Sentence-Starters in that the children did not have to submit these unless they consented; and no names were given. We explained in writing, using information sheets, and verbally, what the project entailed; and answered the children's questions about the research. Each School Principal offered consent on behalf of the children's guardians, as appropriate in the Egyptian setting in accordance with the British Sociological Association's ethical guidelines. Ethical clearance was given by our university for all instruments used.

During the interviews, since we were inviting children to reflect on and critique their classroom, we made sure that participants were completely convinced of privacy and anonymity in relation to data.

Data Analysis

We approached all responses from an interpretivist perspective (Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba 2007). That is, even when dealing with 281 written responses, we were most interested in the sense-making process of each child rather than the statistics. We looked for patterns across the 281 responses, but we also sought to ascertain how the children each individually experienced their classrooms. The 18 interview transcripts and 281 Sentence-Starter transcripts were fed into NVivo 12 so that we could analyse them inductively, letting codes emerge from the data (Elliot 2018; Hodgkinson 2016). The two authors sat together to analyse the first eight interview transcripts collaboratively, in order to construct codes together. They also analysed Sentence-Starter 5 together, drawing on and adding to the same list of codes used for the interviews. This assured a high rate of reliability for the coding process. The remaining analysis was carried out by Author 1 in conversation with Author 2. There were 33 codes which emerged. The most highly populated codes overall included the following, in size order starting with the largest: Learning through hard work [167]; Specific strategies for learning to speak English [138]; Control/Impersonal Orientation [49]; Peer relationships/support [38]; Agency [36]; Competence/confidence evident [36]; Teacher as dominant [33]; Obstacles to learning [31]; Passive compliance [27]; Anxiety about speaking English [27]; and Lack of competence/confidence [27]. These codes were used as the starting point for developing themes, currently laid out as subtitles in the Findings section:

1. *'The dominance of a Control or Impersonal Orientation in the collectivist classroom'*
embraced codes: Learning through effort, Teacher as dominant, Passive compliance and Control/Impersonal orientation. This theme focused on the ways some children

experienced the classroom through a Control or Impersonal Orientation.

2. *'Children were aware of their restricted autonomy and sense of competence'*

embraced codes: Obstacles to learning, Anxiety, Lack of competence/confidence and Competence/confidence evident. This related particularly to children's expression of lack of fulfilment of competence and autonomy; and its implications.

3. *'Children's experiences of relatedness to peers during pairwork and its influence on*

autonomy' embraced codes: Agency, Peer relationships/support and Specific strategies. This focussed on the basic psychological need of relatedness in connection with autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2019).

Findings

The dominance of a Control or Impersonal Orientation in the collectivist classroom

There was evidence in our findings, as expected, that a Control or Impersonal Orientation was dominant in this collectivist classroom. According to Ryan and Deci (2019), the Control Orientation is indicative of a need for conformity and control and associated with performance rather than learning goals. The Impersonal Orientation correlates with a sense of powerlessness and fear of incompetence, leading to social comparisons and low confidence. Both of these depress intrinsic motivation, which then hinders agentic learning, such as that needed for learning to speak a foreign language. There were multiple indications of these Orientations in our data. For example, in interview, we asked Rami what was advantageous about pairwork. He replied with reference to a performance goal, focusing on writing rather than speaking English:

It's good because you think correctly. And when you get a conversation in the examination, you find it easy to answer it right [INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT].

Correct performance in the bi-annual (written) exams appeared to be a dominant goal for children. The 281 children who completed Sentence-Starters tended to consider hard work for examinations – not intrinsic motivation - as the means to do well in English. Out of 281 responses, 151 children referred to the need to study hard and memorise correctly as the best means to improve their English; however, they did not suggest how studying hard and memorising would enhance their *speaking* of English (which was anyway not assessed in the examinations). Among the Sentence-Starter comments, several [n=14] referred specifically to English mastery in terms of proving one's worth rather than as intrinsically worthwhile:

If I study hard, I will learn how to speak, and I will be a top student [SS3].

Yasser and Youssef in interview both admitted that they felt proud to be called to the front of class to demonstrate their paired dialogue as this was a public display of their superior competence. The interest of the actual topic included in their activities appeared less important. In some children's Sentence-Starter responses [n=23] we encountered their belief that, rather than being interested, being obedient was an important component for improving speaking English, clearly reflecting the Control Orientation. For example, one child wrote:

I listen carefully to the teacher while they explain the lesson. I should not get distracted during the lesson because if I do so, I will fail in the examination. I have to study hard and not to be playful [SS3].

For this child, representing many others in the sample, learning to speak English was not about interest or engagement but about passive compliance, perhaps reflecting the emphasis in collectivist cultures on uniformity and conformity. However, it appears that these children were focusing on written English and had not differentiated between pedagogies suitable for learning written English and those for learning to speak. Amel noted in interview that learning to *speak* English was challenging when most emphasis was on writing: 'It's hard when I just write and don't speak, and it's easy for me when I write *and* speak with my friend' [INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT].

Children were aware of their restricted autonomy and competence

A striking feature of our findings was the extent to which children *perceived* a need for more autonomy. For example, they told us that they felt afraid to make mistakes because they feared being punished by the teacher. Fear of punishment would clearly obstruct a willingness to try out new words or to speak aloud at all. When asked what the teacher could do to help them learn to *speak* English better, 125 out of the 281 pupils stated that they needed the teacher *not* to shout at them or hit them - as the most helpful act. Yacoub put it succinctly: 'I can't understand and learn from a teacher who hits me' [INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT]. There were 93 out of 281 children who mentioned their fear of reprimand if they made mistakes. For example:

I cannot read [aloud], and this makes me afraid that the teacher will get angry with me... Fear is the biggest obstacle. Fear that the other pupils in the class will laugh at me or that the teacher gets upset with me [SS2].

This child perhaps recognised that fear was the antipathy of agency; and this would be particularly so for learning to *speak*. There were 25 other children who specifically mentioned how the focus on right answers restricted their sense of competence in speaking and restricted their agency. For example:

When I have to speak in front of someone whom I feel afraid of or who is unkind to me, when this happens, I forget everything [SS4].

Sometimes the teacher does not give me time to say the answer in English, though I know the words and sentences but need the time [SS4].

These examples clearly illustrate the children's discontent with the restraints on their autonomy when it came to speaking. A further 19 children commented that their sense of

competence and agency was curtailed by fear of other pupils laughing at them when they made mistakes, which eroded their sense of competence. Amel explained how she did not feel confident to speak in class:

I do not like to speak a lot in English because I make mistakes. I do not like English. I feel upset because my classmates can read, and I cannot. My classmates laugh at me and tell me that I cannot speak English [INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT].

Amel seemed to be aware that her agency was overly restricted in this context ridden with fear and judgement. The dislike she developed for English would likely impede her intrinsically-motivated learning. When asked how they could help themselves speak English better, the children seemed aware that they needed to break through this fear. For example, representing others too, one child wrote:

I should not feel afraid and should have self-confidence when speaking and I should trust myself [SS3].

However, the climate of the classroom did not encourage them to exercise agency and the children expressed discontent with this situation. Most interview children described how, in general, teachers did *not* welcome being interrupted by an individual's questions during lessons, reflecting the collectivist emphasis on the good of the whole over the individual:

The teacher might be annoyed and get more annoyed... Sometimes the teacher is angry. His work is being delayed, so he feels angry [Khuwaila, INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT].

There were 63 out of 281 children who indicated an Impersonal Orientation in that they felt at least somewhat overwhelmed by English lessons and believed they could not speak or understand English sufficiently. Interviewee Amel, for example, commented:

The teacher reads a lot and speaks a lot in English, and sometimes I don't know what she is saying.

The participants therefore requested teachers not to overload them with too many words or tasks at once as this gave them a sense of powerlessness rather than competence or autonomy. One child expressed their eroded sense of competence and agency as follows:

When I have so many things to study, my head hurts and I can't do it and the teacher shouts at me [SS4].

In the performance-oriented classroom, those who performed least well were constantly reminded of their lack of competence. However, without a sense of competence, these children were unlikely to act agentially and learn creatively. We asked Rami, in interview, when he felt *least* anxious in class, and he replied, 'When I understand' [INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT]. Similarly, Amel told us that the best aspect about speaking a dialogue during pairwork was that, thanks to the support of her partner, she 'knew how to say the words' [INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT]. Clearly, lack of perceived competence caused anxiety which obstructed the children's exercise of agency.

Other children recognised that enhanced relatedness between teacher and child would support them to learn more agentially [n=35/281]. They advised teachers, for example, as follows: 'give me time to try and say answers myself'; 'try to understand what the children need'; and 'learn why they do not like English'. They suggested that cooperation between teacher and pupil would support their competence and agency:

Teachers should not make us feel that we are failures and instead they should cooperate with pupils to make us better [SS4].

In pairwork, the partner could play the part of the supportive, understanding teacher. However, other children reported instances within the existing system which they perceived to offer opportunities for their exercise of agency. Even before pairwork was introduced, a few interview children reported that their teacher would *sometimes* be open to being told when the children did not understand. Rami told us, for example, 'I will stand up and tell him the lesson was hard and I didn't understand it... He will accept it' [INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT]. Several children indicated their own sense of competence and autonomy by referring to their desire to teach others English. Nagwa even believed that she could correct her teacher when she made mistakes in class. This confidence and capacity to initiate learning reflects an Autonomy Orientation whereby intrinsic motivation to learn for the sake of learning seems to be the key driving force. And across all the completions to the Sentence-Starters, many children spoke of the value of loving English in order to excel in it.

Children's experiences of relatedness to peers during pairwork and its influence on autonomy

Any pairwork or groupwork is likely to illuminate existing issues in relationships and can potentially exacerbate these if not handled carefully (Greenaway et al. 2015). In our study, teachers had received guidance on the need to promote relatedness among their pupils for successful pairwork. However, problems with relationships were provoked by the pervading emphasis on reaching correct answers and proving oneself better than others, even during pairwork, when it was not implemented with great care. Yacoub, for example, was indignant at how his own agency was restricted by competition pervading pairwork:

One time in class I stopped at a word, and I was about to read it, but I found my friend saying it. The teacher was saying [to the friend], "You're better than Yacoub"

[INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT].

It seems that the teachers, contrary to how they had been trained, sometimes monitored and assessed the pupils even as they engaged in pairwork, thereby continuing to inhibit their agency. One child described:

I am afraid that I may say something wrong while the teacher is passing next to me and that the teacher will shout loudly at me [SS5].

On the other hand, some children acknowledged feeling that pairwork allowed them to exercise their agency more readily and this enhanced their learning to speak English. There were 153/281 Sentence-Starter respondents who told us that they liked speaking in pairs and that it made them happy: which would provide a healthy grounding for intrinsically motivated learning. For some children, it seemed that pairwork was an antidote to the otherwise controlled and silent classroom and therefore particularly appropriate for learning to *speak* English. One child expressed her relief and how her competence and agency were allowed to flourish, within the anxiety-free relatedness of the pair, and this helped her to learn:

I feel relieved because I can learn the words ... in a good way, and this way nothing is difficult for me. Then I have self-confidence [SS5].

Another described how her partner helped her to feel more competent and therefore less constrained:

[During pairwork] I feel a little bit afraid, but I also feel happy because I speak in English. I do not feel anxious because my classmate helps me and does not make me feel anxious [SS5].

However, one's partner needed to be someone the children trusted, in which case the fear of

comparison with others could be overcome and agency exercised, regardless of the regular classroom environment:

Sometimes I do not feel anxious when I speak with a loyal friend who will not tell anyone about us [SS5].

One child, representing several similar responses, specified freedom during pairwork that supported her competence and relatedness, allowing her to approach the challenge of speaking more agentically:

My partner knows things I do not know, I ask her for help and I thank her. I do the same for her. We become better friends, we learn better and we will do better in exams. Choosing roles makes us happy. I choose what is easy for me to start with and then I can move to the more difficult bit. Feeling free is a good thing [SS5].

Pairwork clearly offered some children opportunities for feeling competent, agentic and related and thereby enabled them to learn to speak English with greater intrinsic motivation. Some children [n=99] were additionally able to think analytically about which processes during pairwork actually helped them most, thereby also reflecting agency in their thought processes and their motivation for self-improvement. For example, one child reflected:

[The best partners] listen to conversations in the right way. They try to imitate [TV] dramas. All this helps them to speak in English [SS6].

Another told us:

I spell out the difficult words for myself and get used to saying these words to make them easy for me [SS3].

These children had clearly sustained some aspects of the Autonomy Orientation, albeit within the uniformity of the collectivist classroom, which allowed them to drive their own learning forward when the opportunity for pairwork arose.

Limitations of the study

Given the findings presented above, we wished that we had focused more on 'anxiety' in our initial research questions, since our findings demonstrate a clear link between anxiety and reduced agency. We have put in place further investigations to explore this link more fully with the same children. We would also like to look for a statistical correlation between anxiety and agency among these children.

Discussion

Our research explored how individual children experienced agency – or lack of agency – when learning to speak EFL in the classroom of a collectivist culture. It investigated whether/how their experiences changed when guided to speak English in dialogic pairwork, rather than by listening within the whole class as was usual practice. As discussed at the start of this paper, collectivism is reflected in uniformity and learning-altogether rather than in isolation or small groups or pairs (Alexander 2020); and obedience and conformity to the larger society are privileged over individual rights or happiness (Ab Kadir 2017). However, while uniformity in whole-class teaching may be efficient ways to help children memorize words and write English, we have argued that creative learning, demanding the exercise of agency, is desirable for learning to *speak* English (Ghonsooly & Showqi 2012; Liao et al. 2018; Marashi & Khatami 2017; Nosratinia & Zaker 2015; Smith, Kuchar and Lamb 2017; Swann et al. 2018; Yasmine & Sohail, 2018).

Our study has illustrated how some children in our collectivist classrooms displayed a Control Orientation or Impersonal Orientation, indicative of their tendencies towards conformity, performance and social comparisons. While some of these characteristics are likely to be found within classrooms ruled by conformity and obedience, they may be particularly unhelpful for learning to *speak* a language. Children in our study described needing to keep quiet and work hard, rather than interacting, when trying to learn to speak English. The focus on written examination performance, rather than individual, creative learning and speaking is also clear from the children's emphasis on attaining correct answers and doing well in the final examination. However, learning to speak English was not assessed in the examination and a different pedagogy seemed to be called for, given the importance of individual agency for children's learning to speak a language. As Amel told us, above: 'It's easy for me when I write *and* speak with my friend' [INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT].

It is striking that many of the children were acutely aware of their need for competence, autonomy and relatedness. For example, interviewees Rami and Amel explained that they could learn more agentically when they felt competent. Many of the other children too, among the 281 who completed Sentence-Starters, described feeling fearful of making mistakes and they advised teachers to change their ways to allow them more freedom. As one respondent phrased it, 'Fear is the biggest obstacle. Fear that the other pupils in the class will laugh at me or that the teacher gets upset with me' [SS2]. Some children seemed aware that lack of feeling competent, and their fear of being reprimanded, interfered with their creative learning and encouraged them to continue to act with passive compliance. Many of them seemed aware that learning to *speak* a language cannot occur without the exercise of agency or 'a wholehearted willingness to act' (Ryan and Deci 2019, 132) and 'the capacity to act independently and to make one's own choices' (Manyukhina and Wyse 2018,

223). The practice of pairwork offered them more opportunity for acting independently and making choices and made them more willing to engage with learning to speak. As one child wrote: 'Choosing roles makes us happy... Feeling free is a good thing' [SS5].

For some children, operating agentially seemed to come more easily since they already had an Autonomy Orientation, that is, they tended to focus more on their own learning goals, rather than performance; and describe their enjoyment of interest and challenge in their English learning. For example, children indicated their desire to teach other people English; and across all the Sentence-Starters, many children spoke of loving English, suggesting an intrinsic motivation for learning to speak. The majority of respondents described becoming intrinsically motivated by speaking when pairwork was introduced, which they said, made them happy and helped them feel competent and less anxious. Even children who did not seem motivated by the Autonomy Orientation acknowledged the discomfort of their situation and implied that, given the right partner and a teacher who did not assess them during the work, pairwork held potential for them to feel more related to their peers; and this could lead to further competence in speaking English. Our findings suggest that while the relations of control in schooling persist for other subject areas, the use of pairwork might provide a welcome opportunity for children to learn to speak the language of English. Pairwork might provide the ingredients necessary for creative learning, through the experiences of increased competence, autonomy and relatedness; yet within the parameters of a collectivist culture.

However, the introduction of pairwork was not straight-forward. Pairwork only worked successfully in certain circumstances such as when the child trusted her/his speaking partner and they helped each other, in other words, where agency *and* relatedness were

high. Our findings reinforce the conclusions from the many Self Determination Theory research projects (Chirkov 2009; d'Ailly 2003; Helwig, 2006; Jang, Kim and Reeve 2012; Niemiec and Ryan 2009; Sheldon, Abad and Omoile 2009) in that the children in our study indicated that within a collectivist culture, many children *seek* a sense of autonomy in order to learn better; and thrive both in terms of learning to speak EFL and in more general social ways when given opportunities – such as pairwork – to exercise their agency.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that the children in the situation of a collectivist culture were aware of their need and desire for more agency, particularly in their endeavours to *speak* English. They exemplified the claim of SDT that they felt the need for more autonomy - reflecting their agency - when learning to speak. This need was not always met, but it was felt. The links between their need for autonomy and for competence and relatedness were also highlighted. These findings lead us to conclude that, despite well-rehearsed and preferred pedagogical practices in collectivist classrooms – founded in uniformity and conformity – there may be exceptional occasions when a small adaptation would be helpful. If the aim of learning to *speak* English is valued by schooling and by the children themselves, then pairwork may be one mechanism by which speaking can be encouraged, within the normal constraints of the collectivist classroom. However, our project has shown that rigorous training in the purposes and methods of introducing pairwork were essential. It has also indicated that children's feedback on how to make the practice work smoothly – ie by being careful with how children are paired and avoiding judgements during pairwork – was useful in dealing with some embedded habits which counteracted fulfilment of their needs. The need for children to feel competent among their peers and teachers was a prerequisite for

their exercise of agency during pairwork; and their relatedness to their partner was crucial in facilitating this sense of competence and agency.

Declaration of interest statement

There are no conflict of interests.

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