CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Conceptions of the Individual

In recent years, second language acquisition (SLA) research has been considerably influenced by cognitive psychology and has come to share certain assumptions about individuals and the learning process. In this cognitive approach, cognition is largely seen in computational terms, as a matter of receiving 'input', processing and storing information, and producing 'output' (Bandura, 2001; Edwards, 1997; Ellis, 1997; Harré, 1999; Kramsch, 2002; Lantolf, 1996; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Shweder, 1991). The learner seems to be conceived of as an autonomous individual abstracted from the environment, and the learning process is reduced to changes in the learner's "internal mental state" (Doughty & Long, 2003, p. 4; see also Gass & Selinker, 2008; Gregg, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Skehan, 1998). This representation of the individual has been problematized, not only in the field of SLA research (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Leather & van Dam, 2003; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Roebuck, 2000; Thorne, 2000; van Lier, 2000), but also in various other disciplines, including social theory (Bourdieu, 1990; Burkitt, 1998; Gardiner, 2000; Giddens, 1984; Jenkins, 2004; Marx, 1972 [1888]; Sztompka, 1993; Williams, 1977), psychology (Arievitch, 2008; Bandura, 2001; Buss, 1979; Edwards, 1997; Järvilehto, 2000; Riegel, 1979; Rommetveit, 2003; Sampson, 1993; Shotter & Billig, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978) and linguistic anthropology (Ahearn, 2001; Duranti, 1993; Eckert & McGonnell-Ginet, 2003; Irvine, 1993), for not recognizing the inherently *social*

nature of human action and cognition, and the inseparability of the individual and the environment. These researchers argue that learning is not restricted to the activities of the brain, but is seen as involving changes in organism-environment relations (Bateson, 1972; Diamondstone, 2002; Järvilehto, 2006).

How individuals are viewed has been far from uncontentious in the history of social theory (Archer, 2000, 2003; Hollis, 1977; Sztompka, 1991). At the heart of this debate is the question of how active or passive the individual is in relation to the environment, both social and natural, or in other words, "the extent to which the person is regarded as an agent directing his own behaviour" (Harré & Secord, 1972, p. 136). At one extreme, as in rational choice theory (Becker, 1976; Bicchieri, 1993; Coleman, 1990; Gambetta, 1998; Hedström, 2005), game theory (Aumann & Shapley, 1974; von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944), and social contract theory (Gauthier, 1986; Hobbes, 1965 [1651]), the individual is seen as a rational, self-directed and self-interested actor who actively shapes the environment. At the other extreme, as can be seen in the work of certain structuralist (Althusser, 1971; Durkheim, 1951; Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Parsons, 1949) and postmodern (Baudrillard, 2001; Foucault, 1970; Lyotard, 1984) theorists, the individual is thought of as a reactive, malleable being who is molded and controlled by the environment.

Both of these models have been criticized for giving primacy to either the individual or the environment, and thus misrepresenting human action and cognition (Archer, 2000; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979; Marx, 1961 [1844]; Vygotsky, 1978; Williams, 1977). The rational actor model fails to recognize the social, cultural and discursive factors that constrain and enable human action and cognition. Conversely, the view that the individual is molded by the environment, and that action is determined mechanistically by social forces, ignores the creative and active aspects of

human behavior, and according to Garfinkel (1967), treats the individual as a "judgmental dope" (p. 68). In addition, as Bourdieu (1990) notes, although both models often define themselves in opposition to each other, there is little that separates them in practice, as they both accord the individual little freedom to choose.

> "For if choices are made to depend, on the one hand, on the structural constraints (technical, economic or legal) that delimit the range of possible actions and, on the other hand, on preferences presumed to be universal and conscious – or subject to universal principles – then the agents, constrained by the self-evidence of the reasons and the logical necessity of 'rational calculus', are left no other freedom than adherence to the truth . . . or the error of subjective thought" (p. 46).

According to Long (2001), though, "however restricted their choices, actors always face some alternative ways of formulating their objectives" (p. 18). Although individuals do draw on social and cultural norms when engaging with the world, their action is not determined mechanistically by these norms, as there are always alternative discourses from which they can choose. While it is true that there are times when human beings act reactively, they also act proactively and generatively as well. They both shape and are shaped by the environment, forming a dialectical unity that leads to the reproduction and transformation of both (Bandura, 2000; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Freire, 1970; Giddens, 1979; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Marx, 1972 [1852]; Spirkin, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). This means that the individual and the environment cannot be understood abstracted from each other (Engeström, 2001; Giddens, 1979; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005; Vygotsky, 1987).

1.1.1 The Individual in SLA Research

Throughout its history, SLA research has naturally been influenced by the prevailing psychological and linguistic models (Mitchell & Myles, 1998). In the first half of the twentieth century, the dominant psychological approach was behaviorism (Pavlov, 2003 [1927]; Skinner, 1972; Thorndike, 1913; Watson, 1929), which saw learning in terms of habit formation in response to stimuli and reinforcements from the environment (Lefrançois, 1991). In this theory, human behavior is not caused by any mental processes, but is, instead, seen as a reaction to environmental causes. The individual, therefore, is seen as a passive, malleable actor shaped by the environment. Bloomfield (1933), the founder of structural linguistics, the leading linguistic approach at the time, was heavily influenced by behaviorism and saw language acquisition as involving the association of sounds with positive or negative responses, which, in turn, reinforced or changed behavior (Block, 2003). In 1957, Skinner, perhaps the best known behaviorist, published *Verbal Behavior*, outlining a behaviorist approach to language acquisition, in which he reaffirmed the behaviorist belief in the malleability of human behavior and the primacy of the environment over the individual.

Skinner's views on language acquisition were subject to a fierce critique by Chomsky (1959), the founder of generative linguistics, which stressed the rule-governed and creative nature of language (Mitchell & Myles, 1998). Chomsky argued that the complexity of verbal behavior cannot be explained by recourse to environmental stimuli, and although the learning process does involve reinforcement, it is important to recognize the child's ability to generalize, hypothesize and process information as well. The individual, therefore, contributes more to the learning process than is allowed for in Skinner's approach.

Due to this complexity of verbal behavior, and the abstractness of linguistic rules, Chomsky claimed that children have an innate faculty which guides language acquisition, and which he called universal grammar (UG). This approach has been hugely influential in the field of SLA and it seems to affirm the active and creative aspects of human behavior. However, as UG theorists are concerned with the mental representations of language of the "ideal speaker-listener" (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3), rather than how it is used by living human beings in day-to-day life, they tend to abstract language from the communication process (Carswell & Rommetveit, 1971; Moscovici, 1967) and fail to adequately address sociocultural, and contextual, factors (Bourdieu, 1991a; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Rommetveit, 1971; Thorne, 2000). As a result, the complexity of language, and human communication, remains undertheorized, which, in turn, leads to the individual being misrepresented.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, there was also a movement away from behaviorism in the field of psychology. Researchers such as Miller (1956) and Neisser (1967) became more interested in mental processes and started to see human beings as information processors, like computers (Bandura, 2001; Block, 2003). In this new paradigm, cognitive psychology, the object of study becomes the internal mental states of an individual abstracted from the environment, or as Shweder (1991) put it, "knowledge seeking in general psychology is the attempt to get a look at the central processing mechanism untainted by content and context" (p. 80). To its critics, this assumption that cognition can be understood without examining the context and situated activities in which it occurs is fundamentally flawed (Carbaugh, 1996; Dreyfus, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Harré, 2002; Kelso, 1982; Potter & Edwards, 2003; Shweder, 1991; Suchman, 2007). "Only persons-in-context can be said to understand, or have any other cognitive attributes or skills" (Harré, 2002, p. 122). Furthermore,

people are never confronted with tasks outside of a context (Andler, 2000), even when being observed under experimental conditions (Leather & van Dam, 2003; Shweder, 1991).

In cognitive psychology, there is an assumption that the mind should be investigated separate from the body, which, in turn, is abstracted from the social and natural environment. Both of these dichotomies, however, have been questioned. With regard to the separation of the mind from the body, a growing number of researchers have argued that cognition is embodied, that is, it is largely shaped by our body, in particular by our sensorimotor system and our everyday functioning in the world (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Pfeifer, 2003; Sporns & Pegors, 2004; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1992). The importance of the body has also been increasingly emphasized in social theory (Shilling, 2003, 2005; Turner, 1996). According to Shilling (2005), nowadays, studies that claim to be comprehensive need to take at least some account of "the embodied preconditions of agency and the physical effects of social structures" (p. 1).

As to the dichotomy between the individual and the environment, cognitive psychology has been criticized for being too individualistic and for not recognizing the social nature of human action and cognition (Bateson, 1979; Brier, 2004; Harré, 1999, 2002; Järvilehto, 2000; Sampson, 1993; Shotter & Billig, 1998). According to Sampson (1993), cognitive psychology "directs us to look *within* the individual when our attention needs to be focused *between* individuals" (p. 19). Viewing human behavior in terms of underlying traits and competencies neglects to take into account how behavior is co-constructed (Bateson, 1979; Riegel, 1979; Sampson, 1993). In the case of aggressive behavior, for example, we need to look at the interaction between the individual and the particular social context in which the behavior occurs to fully

understand it. A similar argument has been made in favor of viewing emotions (Harré & Stearns, 1995; Malik, 2004) and memory (Edwards & Potter, 1995; Harré, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978) as socially constituted rather than being situated within the individual.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in SLA in approaches, such as sociocultural theory, drawing on the work of Vygotsky and the tradition of cultural-historical psychology (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2000), and language socialization (Andersen, 1986; Ochs, 1996, 2002; Watson-Gegeo, 2004), that stress both the social nature of human beings and their active and creative capabilities. Central to these approaches is the idea that the individual and the environment cannot be understood abstracted from each other. Human action and cognition are neither socially determined nor conducted in a social vacuum; rather, they are co-constructed by social agents.

1.2 Learning outside the Classroom and the Language Used in Chat Seen through the Lens of Agency

Central to the notion of social individual is human agency (Long, 2001), which, in general terms, "attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion" (p. 16). According to this view, action cannot be fully understood divorced from the social and material conditions in which it occurs, and vice versa. Any study of action, therefore, needs to also take these conditions into account. In this study, I have examined how this view of agency can inform our understanding of the learning that takes place outside the classroom and the language that is used in Internet chat.

In addition to formal language lessons, learners of English have many opportunities in their day-to-day lives to improve their English. In many parts of the world, English movies and songs are becoming increasingly available, and with the growth of the Internet, English learners are able to read, and listen to, a wide variety of authentic English material. The Internet also offers English learners with many opportunities to communicate with other speakers of English, thereby broadening their exposure to English. A particularly popular way of interacting with other people on the Internet is chat, or synchronous computer-mediated communication.

1.3 Research Question

How can the concept of agency further our understanding of the nature of language, in particular as it is used in synchronous computer-mediated communication, and language learning outside the classroom?

1.4 Significance of the Study

As stated earlier, in mainstream SLA research, largely due to the influence of cognitive psychology, the individual is first reduced to what is within the 'skin', and then further reduced to what is in the mind. Such reductionism leaves many phenomena unexplained and fails to recognize the dialectical relationship between the individual and the environment. In the language classroom, recognizing agency and the sociocultural factors that mediate action can help teachers move towards an understanding of the complexity and dynamism of human action.

At first sight, the learning that takes place outside the classroom might not seem to be a primary concern of teachers, especially for those who view themselves as 'transmitters' of knowledge, in line with what Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chávez, and Angelillo (2003) refer to as "assembly-line instruction" (p. 176). If, on

the other hand, teachers see themselves as guides, facilitators, or in the words of Vygotsky (1997b), as "director[s] of the social environment" (p. 49), the benefits of these extracurricular activities are particularly relevant. As a guide, the teacher's influence can more easily extend beyond the classroom, and if he or she is going to advise learners competently, an understanding is needed of how they engage with the many English learning opportunities that exist in their social world.

The analysis of the use of language in chat examined some of the opportunities and constraints that chat offers and showed how people can use this technology proactively and creatively. Computer technology offers teachers a rich resource that can supplement existing pedagogical practices. However, adopting a technocentric view of this resource, one that sees action as being determined by the nature of the technology, will not reveal its full potential, which needs to be enacted by knowledgeable and capable agents.

Finally, as social conditions are central to an understanding of agency, the ways they interrelate with language were also examined. Of particular interest was the way meaning, norms and power interpenetrate in interaction. This raises the question of how central norms and power relations are to the use and understanding of language, a question that should be of interest to both language learners and teachers.

1.5 Scope of the Study

With regard to the study of the learning that took place outside the classroom, evidence was collected, by interview, from one participant, who I will call Maria, a successful learner of English who comes from Burma. As for the study of the use of language in chat conversations, transcripts from nine conversations, between Maria and various interlocutors, were analyzed.

1.6 Definition of Terms

Agency: according to Ahearn (2001), "agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). This term will be described in more detail in the next chapter.

Chat: in this thesis, the term chat is used to refer to synchronous computer-mediated communication over the Internet with one or more other persons. It includes chat in chat rooms and instant messaging.

Chat room: a virtual environment, or 'room', in which users can converse with one or more other persons synchronously.

Dialectics: a relational way of thinking about reality that emphasizes the interconnectedness of things and challenges the notion that anything can have an isolated, independent existence. This term will be described in more detail in the next chapter.

English: in this thesis, the term English, in its adjectival form, refers to the English language and does not denote any nationality or race.

Feel for the game: a metaphor that Bourdieu (1990) uses to describe the practical logic that agents use in their day-to-day lives. This term will be described in more detail in the next chapter.

Instant messaging: a form of chat in which users can converse with one other person, for each conversation, synchronously. Instant messaging enables users to engage in multiple dyadic conversations simultaneously.

Structure: a central concept in social theory. Structure is usually seen as an external reality confronting the individual and constraining action. Giddens (1984), however, defines it as rules and resources that agents draw upon in their day-to-day lives. This term will be described in more detail in the next chapter.