CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine how the concept of agency could further our understanding of language, particularly as it is used in synchronous CMC, and language learning outside the classroom. It drew largely on the work of Giddens and Bourdieu, who both see agency and structure as being mutually dependent on each other. According to this dialectical approach, agency cannot be understood in isolation from structure, and vice versa, as they are internally related to each other. Agents draw on structures in their day-to-day lives and, through such action, reconstitute those structures. The advantage of this approach is that the ways agency and structure interrelate in everyday life can then be more fully examined.

Maria has engaged in many activities involving the use of English outside the classroom. Although it is unclear how much they have benefited her English, it is clear that Maria believes that activities such as chatting, reading, and watching movies have had a significant impact on her level of English. It is also clear from the chat transcripts and the interview that she has developed a sophisticated knowledge of English. With regard to chatting, although she did have a certain knowledge of English before she started chatting, the chat transcripts display a skill that seems to be at least partly due to her vast experience of engaging in English with this medium.

Her engagement with, or her ways of using, the various opportunities she had to use English seems to be central to understanding how she benefited from them. Although she has been fortunate enough to have had access to English materials and

to have had so many opportunities to use English, her fortune has, at least partly, been self-created by the ways she has integrated the use of English into her social world. She has skilfully used English as a tool to gain entry into various forms of life and to cope with the social realities that she has faced.

According to Williams (1977), "a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world" (p. 21). In their everyday lives, people need to use language to pursue, and enroll others into, various projects. In order to exercise such power, knowledgeable agents need to have an understanding of norms, which necessarily involves interpreting, and coming to an agreement with others on an interpretation of, the situation. In the chat conversations looked at in the previous chapter, the participants were able to satisfy various goals by using language, among other things, to come to an understanding of how the situations were to be defined and to refer to the prevailing norms on the basis of such definitions. In the case of Maria and Ei, the amount of time invested in defining their relationship suggests that they both attached much importance to this part of their exchange, and the way Maria managed to remain anonymous, by indirectly referring to norms which were, in turn, validated by Ei, shows some of the background assumptions that both participants brought to the conversation. In the conversations that Maria had with Ei and John, all the participants showed a keen sensitivity to the power dynamic between them, a sensitivity that, together with their understanding of norms and how situations are to be defined, was central to the success of these interactions.

5.1   Pedagogical Implications

5.1.1   Learning outside the Classroom

Much of Maria's learning could traditionally be described as being informal and incidental. As Billett (2002) has argued, though, the distinction that certain researchers have made between formal and informal learning, and the assumptions underlying the use of these terms, seems to privilege practices within educational institutions and thereby provides an unnecessarily restrictive approach to learning. Adopting a broader view of learning, one that sees it as arising from the interaction between people and the social environment in various different situations, is more conducive to furthering our understanding of learning in general. According to Eraut (2004), this belief, that formal education is necessarily superior to informal learning, seems to be shared by many laypeople as well. Many of the people that he has interviewed in his research on workplace learning still tend to equate learning with formal education and are therefore unaware of the learning that takes place at other times. Maria also seems to partly share this belief. Even though she acknowledges that chatting has helped her improve her English, for example, she still says that when she started doing it, she knew she was "wasting her time". Fortunately, this negative view of chatting did not stop her from engaging in an activity that seems to have benefited her considerably. There is a danger, though, that both learners and teachers might be unaware of the true extent of the learning that takes place if they adopt a view of learning that privileges formal education.

It is also important that learners and teachers are aware of learning that occurs as an unintended consequence of another action. This type of learning is often called incidental learning, but again, this term seems to be unnecessarily prejudicial. If it is true that "there are always unintended and unforeseen outcomes" (Giddens, 1991, p.

112), then it would appear to be wise to be open to any unintended learning that takes place, not only from watching movies or using the Internet, but also when learning in formal lessons. As Giddens (1984) has observed, though, it is sometimes difficult to establish the extent to which certain consequences are unintended. In the case of Maria, although she started chatting for fun, and there were many practical reasons for her deciding to chat in English, it is also true that she was aware that it might benefit her English. Although improving her English was, at least partly, an unintended consequence of her use of chat, she does seem to have been aware of some of the learning potential that it offered. Similarly, in the case of watching English movies, the effect this has had on her English seems to have been largely an unintended consequence of an enjoyable, everyday activity. However, she is also aware that the way she engages with this medium can benefit her English.

As stated earlier, it is how she has engaged with these various activities that has been central to the benefits she has gained from them. Maria had to enact the opportunities that chatting, watching movies, reading stories, keeping a diary, and listening to music provided. In other words, rather than viewing the activities as beneficial in themselves, it is the way learners relate to them that is important.

5.1.2   Motivation

All of the activities that Maria feels helped her improve her English were activities that she regularly engaged in over a long period of time, and if she had not engaged in them on multiple occasions over an extended time period, she would arguably not have benefited as much from them. If Giddens's assertion that there is a generalized motivational commitment to engaging in routine activities is correct, then language learners would find it beneficial to perform these activities on a routine basis, to develop a habit, for example, of watching English movies or reading English

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stories. It is important to note, though, that the term routine should not be interpreted as being synonymous with unstimulating. Maria's experiences suggest that how these language learning tools are used is a key element in the efficacy of these extracurricular activities. How learners engage with these media is of particular importance, a consideration that teachers need to take into account.

In language learner motivation, a particularly influential concept has been integrativeness, which refers to a desire to learn a language to "come closer to the other language community" (Gardner, 2001, p. 5). According to Dörnyei & Csizér (2002), a key aspect of integrativeness is "some sort of psychological and emotional 'identification'" (p. 453) with people who speak the L2 and their culture, with a distinction being made between integrative and instrumental orientation, the latter term referring to "potential pragmatic gains of L2 proficiency" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 16). In recent years, with regard to English learning, it has been argued that in many cases the notion of integrativeness is becoming less relevant the more English becomes disassociated from particular Anglophone cultures and identified with the forces of globalization (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2006; Lamb, 2004). In the case of Maria, although she watches English movies, reads English books, and listens to English songs, it is open to question whether this represents an identification with a global, or alternatively, a particular Anglophone, culture, and when she uses English to communicate with people, it is invariably with other non-native speakers – in the case of chatting, with other Burmese. However, there is the question of whether integrativeness can be "interpreted to also mean a desire to become a member of a local English-speaking élite" (Shaw, 1983, p. 25), and this suggests a more fruitful approach to understanding Maria's motives, although it does blur the distinction between the integrative and instrumental orientation, as it foregrounds the importance

of English in Maria's social world. It seems that at least a basic ability to communicate in English is a key skill in the social groups to which she belongs. Although it might not act as a barrier to entry into these groups, it does appear to be a skill without which social life would potentially be problematic.

5.1.3   Meaning, Norms and Power

The analysis of the use of chat by Maria and her friends seems to support Giddens's contention that meaning, norms and power interpenetrate in interaction, although the extent to which this applies to other contexts needs to be examined further. Their competent use of language depended on their ability to define situations, access norms, and exercise power, including the capability to enroll others in their projects. The importance of power is particularly notable, as there were no clear power differentials between the participants in any of the conversations. If this view of language, as being inseparable from norms and power, is accurate, then it raises three major concerns for language teachers, the extent to which current language teaching reflects this view, the choice of which norms should be taught, and the impact that norms and power, and the various participants' beliefs about them, have on classroom practice.

If the goal of language teaching is to enable students to communicate in the 'real world', then current pedagogical practices need to be examined to see how much they prepare students for communication that involves the framing of situations, the accessing of norms, and the exercising of power. In task-based learning, for example, there has been a debate about authenticity (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004), which usually centers around the extent to which input data need to come from the real world. As Nunan (2004) notes, though, there is also the question of "procedural authenticity" (p. 53), that is, how much the tasks offer students the opportunities to rehearse real-life

communicative events, or prepare them for such events. If a task is meant to be authentic, then it needs to be examined to see if it does sensitize students to the use of norms and power, and also to see if it involves the use of language to enroll others in one's projects, or in other words, to perform actions that depend on the agency of other people.

According to Crystal (2003), there are now far more non-native speakers of English than native speakers. He estimates that, if we combine the people who speak it as a second language with the people who speak it as a foreign language, then the ratio of non-native to native speakers is around 3:1. Many English learners, like Maria, communicate mainly with other non-native speakers. If norms and power are inseparable from the use of language, then what norms should learning and teaching materials reflect, and how will the exercising of power be achieved linguistically in different situations? A negotiation between two Asian businessman, for example, would probably be quite different from a negotiation between two American businessmen. In this case, if the Asian businessmen are taught with materials that reflect American business norms, then the language they are learning might not be in accord with the normative framework with which they are familiar, leaving them unprepared for the task at hand.

Giddens (1984) describes power, in the broadest meaning of the term, as "transformative capacity" (p. 15). In much social life, such transformative capacity would depend on the agency of others, which, in turn, would depend on the use of language and norms. It would also depend on the beliefs that actors have about their power vis-a-vis other social entities, or in other words, their perceptions about their capacity to enroll others in their projects. In his discussion of participatory development, Long (2004) makes the important point that actors sometimes have

reified views of other social entities, such as the 'state', which, irrespective of their dealings with individual officials, can shape their behavior and have an impact on their expectations regarding the outcomes of their actions. When we look at the language classroom, then, we need to examine not only the extent to which students are able to pursue their projects in their dealings with other students and the teacher, but also the extent to which they believe they are. This, in turn, raises the question of what the norms are for various classroom activities, such as asking a question or participating in a discussion, and if these norms are shared by the other students and the teacher. In addition, if there are differences in their normative approaches to these issues, who has the capacity to decide on what norms are to be used and how would this be negotiated? This relates to the previous point about what norms are to be taught in the classroom and how this decision reflects the students' needs.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

In the study of language learning in this study, the focus has been on the learning that takes place outside the classroom, including the learning that occurs as an unintended consequence of other actions. The learning, including that which is unintended, that takes place in formal education is also clearly of interest and warrants investigation. In such research, adopting a broad view of learning, one that looks at how students learn by engaging with the environment and includes how they come to terms with classroom life, would highlight some of the learning that might not otherwise be noticed. In addition, the way that formal learning and learning outside the classroom interrelate needs to be researched further. One aspect of this is the extent to which the language learned in formal classes relates to, or differs from, that learned outside the classroom (see Sjöholm, 2004). Finally, as this study was a retrospective examination of learning, I was unable to look at several aspects of the

process whereby learning took place. A concurrent study, on the other hand, would shed light on how a learner's engagement with the environment develops and how beliefs and feelings change.

As stated earlier, the extent to which meaning, norms, and power intertwine in other contexts, especially in the classroom, needs to be examined further. In classroom-based research, the extent to which teachers and students invest time in defining, or framing, situations, and the extent to which norms are accessed need to be researched together with how they relate to each other and with the exercising of power. Seeing power as 'transformative capacity', the capacity to enroll others in one's projects, can provide us with a view of how important power is in classroom life and the extent to which the participants are sensitive to this dynamic. A key element in such research would be the beliefs that the participants have about their own agency, which would include any reified views that, for example, students might have about teachers, or that teachers might have about administrators or bureaucrats, and how these beliefs shape their behavior. In this kind of research, as Giddens (1984) has observed, it is important that power, rather than being seen as a noxious phenomenon which is to be transcended in a future society, is viewed as an essential part of social life and logically implicated in action.