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Language Learning Experiences and Learners' Agentic Responses: Exploring Potential Spaces for Using English

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ABSTRACT

As the mobility of young women in hard-to-reach contexts increases, there remains a lack of longitudinal systematic research documenting how the use of a foreign language influences their access to opportunities for self-growth beyond their local urban and tribal environments. This area of study is still in its early stages. Therefore, this paper adopts an ecological theorisation of language learner agency to explore the personal, academic, and professional trajectories of Rafeef, a young tribal Saudi woman, examining how these trajectories mediate her actions and choices and vice versa. Methodologically, the study introduces an innovative three-cycle analysis procedure in which data collected from interviews, semiotic resources, and field notes were analysed and spatiotemporally situated to develop templates of narrative frames. Rafeef completed nine narrative frames between October 2022 and May 2024, providing coherent accounts of her experiences. These narratives were analysed individually and synthesised comparatively to capture how Rafeef represented, interpreted, and enacted her choices and constructed her identity through her narratives. The findings reveal Rafeef's authentic trajectory of growth, where her language learning and personal, academic, and professional development are closely intertwined. The study highlights how language learners' agency is not always context-bound, linear, or entirely positive, as it can be cyclical and emotionally complex, thus making the concept of agency even more nuanced.

Keywords: Personal & Professional Growth; Authentic Choice; Rural & Urban Contexts; Language Universality

1. Introduction

The notable increase in foreign language learning and teaching professionals' use of the lexeme 'trans-' in the last two decades reflects their acknowledgement of the dynamic and intricate nature of the social practices and activities relevant to their field[1]. Recognising practices' fluidity while acknowledging historical legacies' enduring influence on present-day foreign language practices and activities could lead to a re-evaluation of English's value and universality and indicate the changes in learners' lives and verse. English has been the sole foreign language taught in Saudi schools since the 1950s, and its value in Saudi educational, sociocultural and economic contexts has increased over time[2]. English's significance might have influenced how scholars employ cognitive or social frameworks to research English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi contexts[3–7].

As a researcher, I am drawn to a unified ecological framework that promotes openness in language research and facilitates exploring how EFL learners change and transform a foreign language to suit their personal and professional goals. My chosen framework enables me to examine how EFL learners' language use is socially mediated within local contextual realities and by various sociocultural influences. In doing so, I examine the production and reproduction of EFL learners' trans-local trajectories in their professional careers while considering their sociocultural characteristics, including home region, gender, tribe and faith.

As universities in Saudi Arabia align their programmes with the needs of the future workforce[8–10], they are gradually positioning English as the de facto language of science and engineering and a necessity for professional success and socioeconomic advancement[11]. However, culture influences foreign language learning anxiety, and people's epistemological and cultural beliefs affect their learning of a foreign language[12]. The prevailing sociocultural norms in Saudi Arabia, such as a strong attachment to the country's culture and values, influence the beliefs and decisions about learning English of students, especially ones in rural areas[13]. Acknowledging the socioeconomic value of learning English may not suffice to drive students to master the language.

My study probes values and cultural beliefs to investigate how a woman who attended a rural branch of a university before moving abroad has exercised her language learner agency. I focus particularly on how she shaped her personal

and professional career trajectories to match the mobility choices of other young Saudi women. I proposed the following research question: How does a young Saudi woman exert her language learner agency when pursuing her career goals in rural, urban and transnational contexts?

2. Theoretical Framework

The Douglas Fir Group's[1] transdisciplinary model has sparked beneficial debates and heated conversations amongst scholars (mainly DFG members) who have a diverse range of theoretical views regarding questions such as how to conceptualise language learners' agency[14–20]. The DFG[1] contends that language learners should be seen as active participants in the socialisation process, with their social identities, subjectivities, and sense of agency playing essential roles in the development of their multilingual repertoires. The development of these repertoires and abilities will, in turn, shape learners' identities, as well as their roles, rights, statuses, resources, and agency. The interdependent relationship between social identity and linguistic repertoire is shaped by macro, meso, and micro social contexts, as well as by the power dynamics that are inherent in all forms of communication[16]. In its model, the DFG[1] classified ideological structures as macro-level social/societal factors (**Figure 1**), agency, power, and identity as meso-level constructs operating within sociocultural community dynamics, and action and interaction as micro-level phenomena. The different levels influence and co-create each other. No individual factor (e.g., interaction, ideology, or agency) operates exclusively on one level; instead, they change continually due to cross-level dynamics. Consequently, analysing the levels separately is insufficient for explaining how language learners enact their agency.

2.1. Language Use and the Purpose of Fitting in

Many researchers have emphasised that context and learning foster social dynamics that extend beyond the immediate context and encompass broader social, environmental, and ecological aspects of linguistic experiences[14, 16, 21].

Social cognitive theorists have posited that human behaviour is the result of the integration of mediation and human activity. The social aspect of language learning includes

various interactions, such as the sharing of histories through verbal communication. Such interactions occur within meaningful environments, and are influenced by the experiences and encounters that take place within them. Furthermore, these interactions are crucial for expanding language learners' understanding of their socially acquired language's social, emotional, and cognitive elements[16].
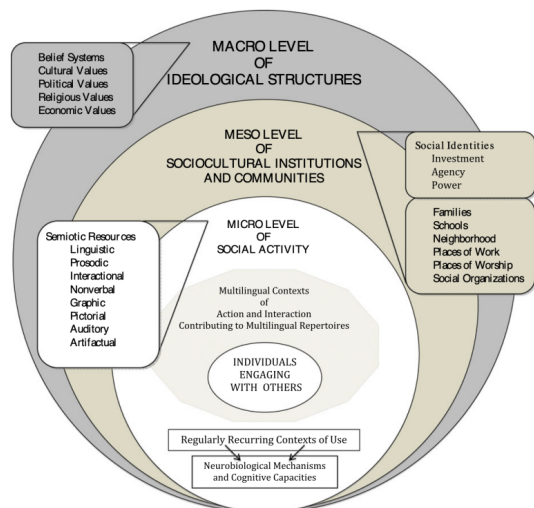

Figure 1. The multifaceted nature of language learning and teaching[1].

Theories that propose an integrative mind-body-world relationship posit that cognition is closely linked to its surroundings. Atkinson[22] employed the term "socio-cognitive" to assert that the social and the cognitive — people's external and internal worlds — frequently merged and that individuals constantly adapted to fit into their surroundings. The world includes both the learning setting and those who are part of it, and everyday events and learning reveal the social features of languages. It is important to note that learning a language involves learning how to fit in[14]. Many language learners do not simply aim to just speak an additional language, but to become part of the social and cultural environment in which that language is used. Integrating into an unfamiliar cultural-linguistic environment involves actively immersing oneself in and engaging with that environment[15].

2.2. Contexts and the Social Mind

Researchers have sought to establish a holistic view of individuals and contexts in order to integrate individual learners' social and cognitive aspects into a more comprehensive socio-cognitive approach[14, 19, 23] that examines the

self in context rather than focusing on the mind's internal workings in isolation from the context or external interactions with others[24, 25]. Recently, several attempts have been made to integrate cognition into a multiscale approach with the aim of exploring the social aspects of language learning. Duff[16] refined the DFG's[1] three-level graphic to highlight the micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors that impact language learning (**Figure 2**). At the micro level, learners draw on their cognitive capacities and other resources; at the meso level, individuals form identities in relation to wider contexts and social structures, while the third and highest level contains systems of values and beliefs.
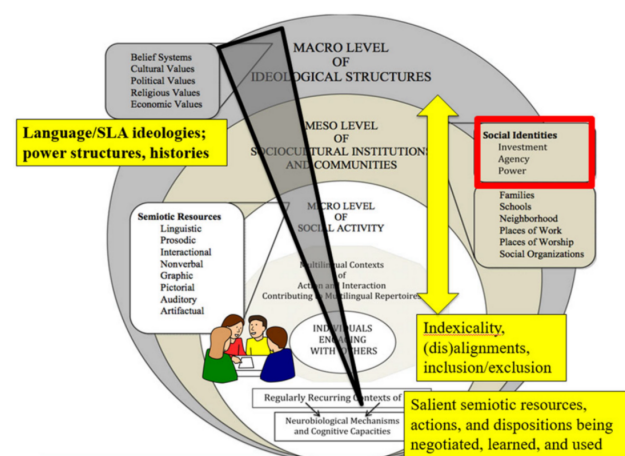

Figure 2. Language socialisation within the DFG framework[16].

Duff's[16] version of the graphic depicts a theoretical framework that "slices" across the three nested circles. This theoretical framework underscores that emerging identities, particular beliefs about a language, and specific ways of using a language can influence individual cases of language learning. Duff's conceptually modified graphic is an effective illustration of the pairing of abstract social theory with concrete social action in the real world; it shows how social values and identities are embodied, reinforced, and contested within individual instances of situated interactions. However, Duff's combination remains limited and has not been fully integrated into any framework to reflect a unified mind-body-world environment[14].

2.3. Ecological Agency and Its Ever-Changing Nature

Larsen-Freeman[18] has long been concerned about the portrayal of agency. She initially presented her concep-

tualisation of agency via the transdisciplinary framework known as complex dynamic systems theory (CDST), which posits that language is a complex adaptive system without an end[26]. Having articulated this theoretical perspective, Larsen-Freeman[18] revisited her concerns regarding theorising about agency after the DFG published its model. CDST characterises human activity as a constantly evolving interaction between individuals and their surroundings. While Larsen-Freeman[18] warned against excessively personal interpretations of agency and recognised the practical constraints that language learners encountered, her conceptualisation of agency allows for a limited but indefinite range of possibilities within individual language-learning trajectories. Learners proactively and continually respond to events in their surroundings, including pre-existing situations, and they do so assertively despite their limited range of actions.

Larsen-Freeman's[18] ecological theorisation of agency underscores that agency is relational, emergent, spatiotemporally situated, achieved (rather than possessed), changeable, multidimensional, and heterarchical. This relational view of agency emphasises the dynamic and ongoing interplay between individuals and their contexts, highlighting how agency arises and evolves in response to these interactions[27–29]. Within the realm of language learning, this perspective aligns with the concept of imagined communities, which refer to the idealised groups or communities that language learners aspire to join or identify with during their language acquisition journey[27, 30]. Imagined communities play a crucial role in shaping learners' motivation, identity, and engagement, as they envision themselves as members of these groups, which in turn influences their agency and language learning experiences[31–33].

CDST could provide a comprehensive ecological framework that researchers could use to examine how various contextual factors and their affordances shape individuals' agency in different places and at different times[18, 34]. For example, Jun and Mu[34] applied an ecological, processual, and holistic approach to language learners' agency by examining how diverse contextual factors — such as the immediate social environment, cultural expectations, and institutional constraints — combine and interact with language learners' agency during language interactions. They urged researchers to pay closer attention to the specific configurations of and learners' orientations towards these contextual factors.

Research has demonstrated that learners assess their personal, social, and material resources before investing in the pursuit[35]. Once invested, they make strategic choices, channel their efforts, and convert intention into action[27, 36]. It is important to note that the choices that are available to language learners affect the agency that they can exert and vice versa[18]. He et al.[37] adopted an ecological perspective to investigate feedback practices and concluded that EFL students' enactment of learner agency was complex and dynamic and was influenced by their beliefs, goals, and expectations for the future. The attributes of agency that Larsen-Freeman[18] outlined may explain language learners' diverse learning processes; therefore, these attributes could assist researchers to visualise and thematise learners' unique learning trajectories.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A rigorous and conceptually informed analysis of people's stories about their foreign language use and choices could help scholars understand how they interact with their surroundings from an ecological perspective[38]. Methodological frameworks that dissect language learner agency via a taxonomy of factors or linear relations neglect variability, change, and context[18, 19]. Narrative inquiry is a methodology in which stories are used as data to unravel how people think through events and how they make meanings through their experiences[39–41]. Using narrative inquiry, applied linguistics researchers have gained contextualised insights into social phenomena, such as agency, by listening to their research participants[42, 43]. This approach enables researchers to understand participants' experiences and their personal interpretations of meaning. Narratives capture information and experiences that transcend temporal, spatial, and social interactions, making them a rich resource for researchers[43]. Combined with an ecological stance, narrative inquiry has the capacity to accentuate and capture change over time[38, 42].

While narrative inquiry offers considerable benefits, it also requires managing such substantial quantities of data that they can overwhelm researchers. Managing narrative data effectively requires employing a rigorous and iterative approach informed by the research objectives. Such approaches facilitate data analysis, preserve narratives' richness, and en-

able researchers to identify meaningful patterns [39].

Researchers can use narrative frames to guide and support the narratives their participants write [44, 45]. Barkhuizen [44] noted that employing narrative frames effectively requires, among other things, a clear study purpose, a target topic for the frame, and a cohesive narrative sequence. He also examined spatiotemporal frames' utility for limiting the length of the narratives by allowing participants to convey their experiences in concise snapshots. Additionally, appropriate embedded contextual cues in narrative frames can allow researchers to intertwine past and present experiences and contexts and to connect cultural and social factors from different times and places [42]. Furthermore, designing narrative frames in conjunction with information from field observations and interviews facilitates developing rich data while avoiding de-personalising participants' narratives in the analysis process [44, 46].

3.2. Research Participant

This study conducts a qualitative narrative inquiry of a female participant I will call Rafeef (a pseudonym). Rafeef's case was one of the 35 cases examined by a large, funded project on young women's empowerment in the northern region of Saudi Arabia (2020–2023). In September 2022, I contacted three people whose cases the project examined about participating in this study. Two consented to participate in the study and share their experiences with a large audience. However, one of the two participants became my MA student in January 2023. Due to the ethical issues that would arise from a participant and a researcher having a relationship outside of the study, she could not be involved in this study. The remaining participant, Rafeef (born in 1994), lived and completed her initial education in a rural area. After finishing her first year of college at a university branch campus, she moved with her family to an urban area closer to the main campus and subsequently completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in English language in 2017. I collected data from her over a 20-month period (October 2022–May 2024).

3.3. Data Collection Instruments & Procedures

Given the study's aim, data were collected through a preliminary instrument, a reflective online journal designed with narrative inquiry frames, as well as semi-structured interviews, observation notes, and shared artefacts.

3.3.1. Narrative Inquiry Frames

Rafeef's reflective electronic journal comprised structured narrative frames presented as incomplete stories. Each frame was 6–8 paragraphs long. Distributed throughout the paragraphs were 28–35 prompting anchor points. I carefully selected, formulated, and positioned the anchor points so that the frames would yield a coherent prose response. After each anchor point, the frames provided spaces for Rafeef to write and save her narrative responses. The journal began with frames about her initial decisions informed by her language-related experiences and beliefs. Later frames prompted her to write about her language-related perceptions, future goals, and conclusions. The nine narrative frames each addressed various topics. The frames' titles, located above the paragraphs, referred directly to their topics. An introduction above the title summarised the frame's purpose and the procedure for completing the narrative.

I used Microsoft Word and Google Docs to create two versions of each frame, one in Arabic and the other in English. I produced versions in both languages to help Rafeef understand the prompts. She could respond electronically in whichever language she preferred. I translated Arabic responses. I sent Rafeef the links to the frames, and she had a week to access and respond to them. **Figure 3** shows the narrative frame I sent to Rafeef in February 2024. It contains 8 paragraphs and 32 anchor points that guided Rafeef in narrating her actions and emotions. Anchor points like 'I believe that', 'My future plans', and 'I feel confident in saying' prompted her to explain her first face-to-face professional appearance in front of the local community after returning from the UK. The anchor points and paragraphs were arranged such that Rafeef would elucidate and expand upon her emerging narratives iteratively.

To provide Rafeef with defined spatiotemporal dimensions and elicit fully contextualised, sequential narratives, the frames identified precise situations (e.g. Rafeef presenting to her local community at the town conference hall) and times (e.g. 16 January 2024).

3.3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted both in-person and via Zoom application. They usually lasted 40–60 minutes. The interviews were purposefully designed

as brainstorming sessions to generate ideas and topical titles for upcoming frames. Furthermore, both spatial and temporal dimensions were defined during interviews to ground the frames within particular contexts. For example, the fourth frame's topic, 'What is the meaning of life?', was tied to an event Rafeef attended in her first orientation week at a British university (2021). During the February 2023 interview, Rafeef talked about the significance of that session and its impact on her during her years in the UK. Consequently, nine broad topics and their corresponding events and places were identified and temporally sequenced (**Table 1**).

Figure 3. An example narrative frame (Author's data).

The interviews were often used to check and consolidate the saved narrative frames.

3.3.3. Artefacts and Fieldnotes

Rafeef was encouraged to share artefacts (e.g. memos, hyperlinks, pictures, videos) that she believed supported her journal responses. I used these multimedia artefacts to develop follow-up semiotic resources and prompts for future narrative frames. Rafeef could thus elaborate upon what she had shared and integrate the artefacts into her journal narrative. I designed an iterative process that welcomed the use of artefacts because semiotic resources help people to tell their stories and because the act of telling and the resulting texts change people's perspectives and dispositions [46].

On two occasions, Rafeef invited me to training events where she gave presentations to her local urban community. One occurred online via Google Meet while the other took place at the town conference hall. I took field notes during these two events and used them in both interviews and journal prompts. For example, I inserted a short audio clip in the eighth narrative frame to encourage Rafeef and evoke memories of one of her presentations. **Figure 3** shows the symbol ( ) Rafeef could click on to activate the recording of a part of a speech she had given. My data collection methods are summarised in (**Table 2**).

3.4. Data Analysis

This study's narrative inquiry methodological framework necessitates reiterating its question:

How does a young Saudi woman exert her language learner agency when pursuing her career goals in rural, urban and transnational contexts?

The question embraces not only multiple contexts but also more in-between, dynamic transitional contexts. I used three cycle analysis procedures to tailor my analysis to my longitudinal study. A final comprehensive synthesis cycle followed the primary and secondary cycles.

The primary cycle served to design the narrative frames by identifying frame topics and spatiotemporal dimensions. After each interview, I uploaded the interview audio file to a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software called MAXQDA. I used its transcription tool to generate a transcript in a Microsoft Word document, which I sent to Rafeef so she could check and approve the content. I then imported, organised, and edited the Word document and audio file in the MAXQDA data analysis browser window (**Figure 4**).

Table 1. Nine topics for narrative frames and their corresponding events.

Topics	Events	Spatiotemporal Dimensions
1. My first career	Completing BA in English	A university branch campus in the northern region (2013–2017)
	Signing a one-year contract as an English teacher	A private technical training institution in the northern region (2017–2018)
2. An opportunity for exploring	Enrolling in a master's degree programme in applied linguistics	A university main campus in the northern region (2019–2020)
3. Exploring a potential career	Rejecting an offer to work as a college teaching assistant	Hometown (2021)
	Applying for an MBA in tourism, hospitality, and event management programme abroad	
	Receiving acceptance to an MBA programme in the UK	
	Obtaining a scholarship from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Scholarship Program	
4. What is the meaning of life	Studying abroad	UK (2021–2022)
5. Changing scenery	Returning home	Hometown (December 2022)
	Moving to the capital city	Capital city (February 2023)
	Signing a one-year contract to work in a five-star hotel's HR department	
6. Not afraid of change	Attending graduation	UK (May 2023)
	Resigning from five-star hotel job	Capital city (May 2023)
7. Financial support	Presenting at a training event sponsored by the Saudi Tourism Society	Online (July 2023)
	Signing a contract to work part-time as a lecturer in a public university's tourism department	Capital city (September 2023)
	Launching her own business as a professional trainer	Capital city (November 2023)
8. Connecting the dots	Returning home	
	Presenting at a training event sponsored by her business	Hometown (January 2024)
9. Exploring again!	Moving back to the capital	Capital city (April 2024)
	Ending her contract with the tourism department	Capital city (May 2024)
	Submitting a proposal to a PhD programme abroad	
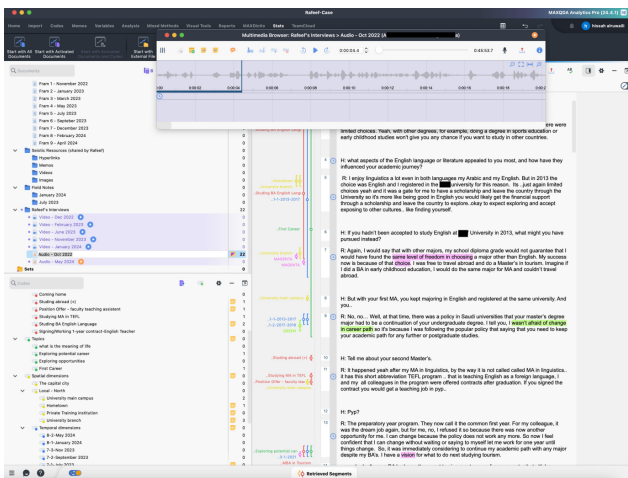
Figure 4. Interview coding used to create narrative frames (Author's data).

During the primary analysis cycle, I focused primarily on identifying time- and space-specific codes. I annotated the transcripts and inserted timestamps linking to the corresponding portion of the audio files (**Figure 4**). I also generated detailed descriptive codes related to topics and events Rafeef mentioned. I then connected the topic and event codes to the time- and space-specific codes to create the skeletons of the narrative frames (**Table 1**). When Rafeef later shared multimedia artefacts, they were included in the primary cycle analysis and purposefully integrated into the frames (**Figure 3**).

The secondary and final analysis cycles served to investigate the meanings of Rafeef's experiences and how she represented and constructed her world[47]. The secondary

Table 2. Summary of the data collection instruments used from October 2022–May 2024.

Data Collection Instruments	Date(s)	Data Type
Structured interviews		
In-person interviews	October 2022, May 2024	Voice recordings (100 min.)
Online interviews via Zoom	December 2022; February, June, & November 2023; January 2024	Video recordings (296 min.)
Shared multimedia artefacts		
Memos, hyperlinks, pictures, and videos shared via email, WhatsApp, and Google Docs	October 2022, May & November 2023, January & May 2024	Semiotic resources
Field notes		
Rafeef presenting online via Google Meet	July 2023	215 words +18 min. voice recording
Rafeef presenting at town conference hall	January 2024	183 words +23 min. voice recording
Reflective electronic journals designed with narrative inquiry frames		
Frame #1: Text	November 2022	432 words
Frame #2: Text	January 2023	471 words
Frame #3: Text & inserted semiotic resource	March 2023	509 words
Frame #4: Text & inserted semiotic resource	May 2023	584 words
Frame #5: Text & inserted semiotic resource	July 2023	626 words
Frame #6: Text & inserted semiotic resource	September 2023	641 words
Frame #7: Text & inserted semiotic resource	December 2023	685 words
Frame #8: Text & inserted semiotic resource	February 2024	638 words
Frame #9: Text & inserted semiotic resource	April 2024	677 words

analysis focused on each frame individually. I imported each frame into MAXQDA and analysed it as a complete story, connecting it to its various contextual 'local' data collected from various resources. I thus arranged each frame's data such that it meaningfully mirrored its micro and macro contexts. The coding process started with thorough readings of each frame. While reading, I focused on Rafeef's uses of the English language and her related choices. I used initial descriptive coding to identify how she represented, interpreted and enacted her choices and constructed herself through her narratives. I revisited these initial descriptive codes as I refined my concept of agency and thus created thematic codes. I continued iterating and applying new and existing codes to the data until no new descriptive or thematic codes emerged. The final cycle of the analysis procedure addressed the research question longitudinally by focusing on the connections between the codes across the nine frames. Initially, I used the MAXQDA memo tool to record and categorise my questions, ideas, and theories and then attached these memos directly to either codes or narrative data depending on whether the memos served to contextualise the narrative data or contributed to the development of theoretical constructs linked to the codes. The memos were grouped into analytical categories based on commonalities where possible.

This process facilitated identifying unifying themes, which provided a comprehensive understanding of Rafeef's experiences. The meanings and functions of Rafeef's narratives, particularly those related to her English use choices—such as demonstrating English proficiency at the workplace and positioning herself as an open-minded language learner—reflect broader social themes like Saudi women's mobility, freelance careers/entrepreneurship, and overcoming local job market limitations. These connections were best understood through an ecological and dynamic theorisation of agency, which allowed for the integration of Rafeef's situated narratives with other locally and globally produced narratives and artefacts.

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Before starting data collection, I provided Rafeef with a signed informed consent form, ensuring that I would protect her confidentiality and personal information, which I would use solely for research purposes. Throughout the process, I maintained her anonymity and secured all personal data before uploading it to MAXQDA. I modified or removed any locations, names, and personal references to further safeguard her identity.

I committed to reciprocity, and Rafeef openly shared her narratives. During the data collection process, she ac-

tively validated and evaluated my interpretations, ensuring that her stories authentically represented her perspective. I extensively utilised the MAXQDA memo tool to document my reflexive questions and comments during analysis, highlighting any potential biases I might have as an insider and any influences resulting from my long-term engagement.

Over a 20-month period, I maintained regular contact with Rafeef through various data collection methods, which strengthened the study's trustworthiness. However, I remained mindful of the potential impact my sustained presence in Rafeef's life might have on our relationship and the influence it could introduce[48]. Finally, the longitudinal study design and the contextualised data provided a deep and multifaceted understanding through a three-cycle analysis procedure, which helped me address any discrepancies in the data.

4. Research Findings & Discussion

The three-cycle qualitative analysis of Rafeef's nine spatiotemporally situated narratives, which were collected between October 2022 and May 2024, enabled me to identify two main themes that were used to answer the research question.

4.1. The Duality of Agency and Its Tension in the Mind-Body World

This theme pertains to the complex interaction between Rafeef's cognitive world and her social one. The analysis of this interaction depicted the enactment of agency as being achieved rather than possessed, as well as being changeable and having an indefinite range of possibilities within her language-learning trajectories. She struggled to fit in when she realised that her goals, certificates, and the language that she had mastered did not fit in her hometown. She seemed to resolve this tension when her language use extended her cognitive world to her local one:

> For me, English is my passport to explore my choices (Frame No. 2).

Thus, she could access new opportunities in ecosocial worlds through language-mediated experiences.

Moving to the big city, my career doesn't belong to this small area. It is just that they are limited. And there is nothing wrong about people. But their environment is limited. Even the language you learnt, you can't use it (Rafeef, Frame No. 3).

Rafeef's narrative underscores how language serves as a mediator of agency on multiple levels, which could characterise agency as being multidimensional[1]. For example, in the following extract, Rafeef's decisions about her linguistic repertoires, namely code-switching and switching to English, indicated a high degree of cognitive and personal agency operating at a micro level; she engaged actively and strategically with her language environment using language to influence how others perceived her. Her cognition played a critical role in how she navigated social interactions while navigating amongst identities — tribal, professional, and urban — according to the context. Her ability to steer the conversation in this way shows how individual cognition and identity operate dynamically to assert control over social interactions.

> In big cities, having a tribal name is more of an advantage. It can spark interesting conversations... you can steer the discussion as you like — code-switching or even shifting the dialogue entirely to English, leaving people curious about what it means to be that person. Imagine that; [changing her voice] Oh she is from the ruler area of some Bedouin northern tribe. Suddenly, you are giving them an opportunity to reconsider their categorising of you when they hear your English pitching about star gazing idea (Rafeef, Frame No. 7).

On the meso level, Rafeef's account highlighted how agency is constructed in the local interactional context, the big city, in which her tribal name — which might have different connotations in rural or traditional contexts — became a tool for initiating meaningful dialogues. Her agency could be constructed through these localised social practices, and her ability to shift the dialogue to English reflected her engagement with these practices to reposition herself in different social roles. At the macro level, the use of English in this

extract represents broader societal and historical dynamics. English, particularly in Saudi Arabia, is considered to be both a necessity and a guarantor of professional success and socioeconomic advancement. Rafeef's shift to English aligned her with these socioeconomic values, particularly in urban settings in which the language serves as a gateway to wider social networks and more professional opportunities. The ability to navigate between her tribal identity and a more cosmopolitan, English-speaking identity also reflected the larger sociopolitical structures that shape language hierarchies and social mobility. The DFG's emphasis on the interconnectedness of the individual, local, and societal levels becomes clear in this context. Rafeef's agency was not solely a product of individual choice, but was a negotiation of local interactional contexts (e.g., city life) and broader societal dynamics (e.g., the global status of English). She navigated these multiple layers of experience through language by using her agency to mediate amongst identities and to position herself strategically within various social contexts.

Nonetheless, I could argue that these multidimensional aspects of agency could mask or conceal areas of struggle and emotional tension, and that language mediated the tension between Rafeef's cognitive self and her emotional self, as well as her physical environment and the sociocultural contexts that she navigated [14, 19, 23]. Thus, this could demonstrate a duality of language-learner agency. This duality of agency between wanting to leave and yet feeling a connection to her community highlighted the tension between fixed identities and fluid aspirations. Rafeef's sense of agency did not pertain to choosing one identity in preference to another, but to navigating the space between her emotional ties and her desire for professional growth. This was evident when she explained her future plans, which included bringing her professional identity to her hometown:

> I still come back to this area. Even my future PhD project is related to this local area because I believe in empowerment. I feel attached to the land and the people… I talk about it and share stories with the foreigners I encounter (Rafeef, Frame No. 9).

She expressed tension between stability and change throughout her narrative, particularly in relation to her career and her language use. After completing her MA, she experienced societal pressure to secure a stable job, yet she chose to embrace uncertainty and exploration instead:

> Everyone signed [the contract], but I refused. And that wasn't easy. You go to an unknown path! (Rafeef, Frame No. 2).

By using English as a tool for crossing both social and geographic boundaries, Rafeef exemplified how language allows individuals to exercise agency in different ways depending on the context. Her narrative also challenged the notion that agency is a straightforward negotiation between the self and the environment by revealing that it is often shaped by emotional motivations, resistance to societal norms, and the dynamic interplay between stability and change.

4.2. Authenticity of Choice and Self-Growth

Rafeef's story is one of authentic personal growth, and her journey of self-discovery is a core theme. For instance, she questioned her career path after completing her first MA in 2020 and later realised that her true passion is exploring and challenging the typical career path in her hometown. Rafeef's development is unique in that it is an authentic product of – and inseparably intertwined with – her choices, values, objectives, and language use and contexts. That Rafeef's choices are authentic expressions of her will is evident from the earliest narratives. Her decisions to pursue a BA and an MA in English and her rejecting a university contract in 2021 to pursue an MBA in tourism were driven by her expectations and aspirations. Moreover, her decisions to pursue MAs were pioneering within her personal and familial context as she was the first person in her family to pursue education beyond a BA. The authenticity of her values and beliefs is also evident in the speech she delivered at the training workshop that she held in her hometown in January 2024:

> You can be the change. It doesn't matter how old you are, what certificate or skills you have, or where you come from. It's never too late or impossible to make a change. You can find ways to bring your passion and your career together and do what you love. (Rafeef, Frame

No. 8)

Rafeef's experiences are also authentic in that she uses English not because it is imposed on her but due to a genuine need to express herself, explore new opportunities, and challenge the societal norms she grew up with. She integrates English into her professional and personal development as a medium through which she navigates and shapes her experiences, explaining that she feels:

> more open when speaking in English, especially in business meetings and job interviews." (Frame No. 5)

The authenticity of her use of English depends on the spatiotemporal context in which she uses it. Her goals, whether short-term (e.g. conducting a training workshop) or long-term (e.g. pursuing a PhD), drive her engagement with English. She explained:

> If I want to continue my PhD, I know I need to work on my English academic writing. But right now, I'm satisfied with my English level because improving my English was not an academic target when I worked at the hotel or as a freelance trainer. (Rafeef, Frame No. 9)

Rafeef's account highlighted how her language skills, social identity and career ambitions intersected, thus shaping her access to both present and imagined professional communities.

> When my German professor recommended me to the director of learning and development, who is Canadian, it was not because she was my professor. No. It was because she knew me, and I worked with her voluntarily on a project about tourism's effect on minorities in Mexico. This project is about keeping people's heritage the same instead of changing it to develop tourism. We call it community engagement. (Rafeef. Frame No. 6)

The recommendation from her German professor, which was based on Rafeef's demonstrated commitment through her voluntary work rather than due to a formal aca-demic relationship, demonstrates how language facilitates connections within broader professional networks. In this case, language served as a bridge that enabled Rafeef to participate in projects that were driven by values and which reinforced her professional identity. Her involvement in a cultural preservation project reflected her dedication to 'community engagement', with language playing a central role in conveying and preserving cultural heritage.

Rafeef's proficiency in English enabled her to envision and actively pursue roles in her 'imagined' future communities [29]. Engaging in multilingual settings strengthened her agency by allowing her to envision a professional path that was aligned with her values. By navigating between languages and cultures, she constructed a professional identity that was rooted in both her current community and in the future communities that she aspired to join, and to position herself within inclusive, socially responsible spaces that reflect her idealised career trajectory. For Saudi EFL learners such as Rafeef, agency is often exerted in relation to an imagined English-speaking community, the native speakers and cultural values of which drive their motivations and aspirations [27, 29, 49]. Investing themselves in these imagined international communities allows language learners to envision themselves as English speakers and to negotiate access to both practical and symbolic resources. This dynamic supports their right to communicate effectively within a global society in which power is often controlled by native English speakers [1, 16, 17].

The concept of 'imagined communities', often viewed as distant or abstract, refers to future-oriented communities or communities that are only partially realised [29–33]. However, Rafeef actively 'inhabits' this imagined community, from which she draws inspiration to develop her professional networks, language practices and experiences with the intention of introducing these transformed insights back to her hometown.

Both the theory and methodology I employed contributed significantly to examining the authenticity of Rafeef's choices and the depth of her growth. I employed CDST to construct a comprehensive ecological framework that enabled me to explore how Rafeef subjectively interpreted events and contexts and connected their meanings to her choices and goals. Methodologically, I used narrative frames, whether individual or connected, to probe Rafeef's

experiences over time in detail. I thus captured her authentic processes of reflection, exploration, and self-assertion that underpinned her personal and professional development. My theoretical framework and methodological choices facilitated highlighting that Rafeef's choices were not simply reactions to external circumstances but deliberate, self-authored steps towards a more authentic self. Since every aspect of her authenticity is intricately linked to her evolving experiences, understanding the depth and trajectory of her development requires exploring them together.

5. Conclusions

The rapid sociocultural changes and increased mobility—driven by socioeconomic shifts, immigration trends, and political reforms—affect women globally and highlight the need to redefine the role of foreign language learning in supporting these transitions. In the context of EFL, these dynamics of young women's careers, as illustrated in Rafeef's case, emphasise the importance of collaboration among language researchers within a transdisciplinary framework. This collaboration aims to explore language learner agency and identity across various environments, including rural and hard-to-reach areas.

One of the key insights from this research is that theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, and analytical insights significantly influence the "living data" collected and analysed. These elements shape our understanding of how EFL learners navigate their personal and professional development, offering a nuanced perspective on their growth trajectories within diverse sociocultural contexts. This perspective underscores the consequence of interdisciplinary approaches that capture the dynamic nature of language learning and identity formation. Furthermore, these frameworks not only guide the scope and depth of research but also co-construct our interpretations of learners' development of agency, identity, and adaptability across various sociocultural contexts.

Moreover, the multi-framework analysis—drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives such as Larsen-Freeman's CDST, Duff's sociocultural framework, and Atkinson's socio-cognitive approach—establishes an ecological perspective with broad implications for researching language learners' agency in relation to their career trajectories. Similarly, qualitative narrative inquiry values the individuals holistically rather than limiting them to the role of EFL student in educational contexts. This approach considers individuals' past, present, and future aspirations, providing credible representations of their lived experiences and illustrating how they form and transform their identities across rural, urban, and transnational settings.

While this study examines how theoretical and methodological frameworks contribute to understanding the emergence of agency, its dynamics, and the social interplay within learners' unique trajectories, it acknowledges that the connections between these approaches remain tentative. This invites further debate, refinement, and adaptation. For example, even as Larsen-Freeman[18] emphasises dynamic adaptability, the analysis reveals moments of fixed behaviour and emotional language choices, as Rafeef compartmentalised her use of English and Arabic. Future research should explore the nuances of agency, specifically how personal emotions, cultural ties, and fixed identities influence a learner's ability to engage with different languages in various contexts[23, 28–30].

Rafeef's resistance to familial and societal expectations—such as traditional career paths or the role of English—challenges the notion that agency always involves negotiation between the self and the context[1, 16, 17, 27]. Her experiences reveal that agency can manifest as resistance or opposition rather than collaboration or negotiation. Future research could examine how this form of resistance shapes learners' identities, educational pathways, and career choices. Additionally, Rafeef's emotional connection to English, which she used to express independence or during emotionally charged moments, challenges the socio-cognitive approach by demonstrating that language use is not always a rational or socially constructed act; emotional motivation plays a significant role in shaping language choices[14, 23, 27].

Rafeef's narrative reveals that language learner agency is not always straightforward, context-bound, or positive. Instead, it can be cyclical, emotionally complex, and involve selective focus on specific skills, adding nuance to the concept of agency. This study highlights the necessity for future research to engage in a collective rethinking of language learning that leverages interdisciplinary collaboration, ethical commitment, and transdisciplinary flexibility. By doing so, researchers can more thoroughly engage with the com-

plex sociocultural challenges language learners face, gaining broader insights into how individuals like Rafeef navigate their identities across diverse social and professional landscapes.

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The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of Jouf University (protocol code JU-REC/3/41/24094, approved on November 17, 2019).

Informed Consent Statement

Written informed consent has been obtained from the participant to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement

Due to privacy and ethical considerations, the data underpinning this study's findings cannot be made publicly accessible. Participants provided consent solely for use within the scope of this research. For additional information or inquiries, please reach out to the corresponding author.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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