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## **How Language Learner Identity Can Be a Helpful Construct in Language Learning and Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

The interest in learner identity within the field of second and foreign language acquisition has been garnering increased attention. This increase can be understood due to the shift from the dominance of psycholinguistic approach to a greater demand for including socio-anthropological dimensions in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). In SLA, the relationship between learner identity and language learning can provide the field with a more comprehensive theory on the link between learners and the larger social world and how it can accommodate the learner's language learning. Accordingly, this paper looks for how language learner identity is constructed through language learning and how it can eventually benefit the practice of language teaching and learning.

*Keywords:* Learner Identity, Language Learning, Sociolinguistics

## **Introduction**

In the present day, the need to learn an international language or a foreign language has become more pronounced, more specifically to learn English. Being well-equipped with English will potentially put individuals in a more advantageous position for academic or professional opportunities. However, the process of achieving such goal may not be an easy one. Sa'ad (2017) suggests that foreign language learning can be an 'overarching' experience – cognitively, mentally, and physically demanding. He further adds that it can also require language learners to fluctuatingly shift between their L1-self to L2-self. In second or foreign language learning, classrooms can act as the 'sites of struggles' of learners' identity construction and negotiation (Lee, 2014). However, it is the ones embedding themselves with a learning identity and seeing themselves as a learner who keep engaging in a learning attitude and continue seeking life experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2012).

In this paper, we will thus discuss the link between language learning and learner's identity construction. The discussion covers how a language can be used as a vehicle to construct learner's identity and the role of learner's identity in their L2 learning. Following are the approaches used to navigate learner identity and how these approaches can help assist the practice of language teaching and learning. Finally, we present the recommendations for future research in this discussed area.

## **Language and Identity**

What is identity? Identity defines who we are; it can be both avowed and ascribed (Jackson, 2012). The first refers to the one that we aspire to claim, whilst the latter is the one denoted or labelled to us by others. Identity is socially and discursively constructed; it is developed and co-constructed by an individual and others through socialisation where the individual has or is assigned with different roles according to particular situations (Bernstein, 2000). According to Norton (2006), this construction process is complex and dynamic, ongoing across time and space from the past expanding to the future. Hence, the entity of identity can be negotiable and transformable.

What is the role of language in the construction of identity? Language and identities are interwoven. Norton (2006) asserts that language can act beyond 'a system of signs'. A language has the power to create, define, and shape human experiences, a social practice where identities are developed and negotiated. Through languages, identities can be both expressed and constructed (Weedon, 1997). People may vary their language use according to particular contexts in which they relate themselves to others, signalling their membership in different groups. Also, through languages, people can constitute, define, and redefine their current sense of self or who they aspire to become. Therefore, language enables people to perform different identities.

## **Identity and Language Learning**

The shift from the predominance of psycholinguistic approach to a greater demand for including socio-anthropological dimensions in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) can be understood as the trigger of the raised interest of identity in the field of language pedagogy (Norton & Toohey, 2011). The L2 input and output are no longer the mere focus of SLA studies. Instead, it is the relationship between L2 learners and the larger social world which has been the central interest of such studies — examining diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts where language learning takes place and explored how language learners construct, negotiate, or even resist different positions within these contexts (Norton, 2013). In SLA, the identity and language learning framework is to provide the field with a more comprehensive theory on the relationship between learners and the larger social world as well

as to elucidate how the distribution of power in the social world affects learners' language learning and their access to L2 community (Norton, 2013).

As Norton (2013) suggests, language is a medium for learners to construct identity; the relationship between language and learners' identities can serve as a key concept to comprehend the process of their identity construction. It is important to understand the identities that the language learners built as the goal of their language learning is to prepare them to participate, communicate and contribute to different communities (Wenger, 1998). Coming to the language classroom, language learners are certainly embedded with a number of social attributes (e.g., nationality, gender, ethnic group, social class). However, Norton (2006) argues that these social attributes are not the only factors entirely determining learners' language learning and use. Norton points out that it is the 'human agency'. When learners perform in the target language, in the form of speaking, reading, or writing, they are not solely conducting an information exchange but also organising and negotiating their sense of self and how it is related to the social world. In such a way, language learners are engaging in a construction of identity (Weedon, 1997). In language learning, Jenkins (2007) asserts that, first and foremost, learners should be regarded as social beings and the target language users. They should be 'allowed to develop their personal selves as they learn a new language' (Preston, 2005, p. 56 as cited in Jenkins, 2007).

### **Globalization and the Increased Complexity of Language Learner Identity**

The revolutionary spread of English language across the globe due to globalization has led to the changing sociolinguistic profile of the language, resulting in the emergences of three prominent English language frameworks: 1) World Englishes (WE), 2) English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and 3) English as an International Language (EIL). The three share different foci but are overlapping in their orientations that there is no single variety and normativity of English to be used by all users (Dogancay-Aktuna & Hardman, 2018).

In 1985, Kachru developed the prominent three-circle model of WE: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. Each circle represents countries where English is spoken as the primary language, second language or official language of the country's chief institutions, and foreign language respectively. However, Kachru's model should be not characterised as fixed or unchangeable; its nature is dynamic. As for ELF, it focuses on the use of English for the interaction between speakers of two or more different English linguacultures who share different L1 and cultural backgrounds (House, 1999). This framework looks at how variations on English language are accommodated and negotiated to achieve a communicative goal (Dogancay-Aktuna & Hardman, 2018). Meanwhile, EIL emphasises on the use of English as the international communication medium involving speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This framework is generally attended by the presence of cross-cultural communication issues.

The complex use of English as an international language in various frameworks performed by diverse worldwide English users has not only made English losing its national cultural base (Canagarajah, 2005) but also risen the complexity of linguistic identity (Sung, 2014). In EFL or EIL communications, individuals can perform a wide range of linguistic identities. For example, conducted within an EFL framework, Sung (2014) explored the linguistic identity preferences of L2 learners of English of a university in Hong Kong. His study revealed that the study participants expressed varied linguistic identity preferences. Some students preferred to be associated with global identity that they resisted to use local accent in their English or to be affiliated with any particular Hong Kong local identity. They believed that being a persona of global identity is associated with positive traits and personality as well as open-mindedness. Some other students showed their aspiration for global identity but chose to maintain their Hong Kong accent in their English to index their national, cultural, and

regional identities. While the rest, they chose to be flexible and embraced both depending on contexts and situations. According to Baker (2011), L2 learners are allowed to express their range of identities (individual, local, national, and global) in dynamic, hybrid, and emergent ways in an L2 setting. As language learner identities are getting more complex, appropriate approaches are required to navigate the constructions of these identities.

### **Navigating Language Learner Identity**

#### **Earlier Approaches**

According to Jenkins (2007), the earliest attempts of studies on linguistic identity were being based on Tajfel's (1974) theory of social identity, essentialising direct correlation between language learner identities and their ethnic identity underpinned by monolingual, monocultural, homogeneous communities (e.g., ethnolinguistic identity theory by Giles & Byrne, 1982). Pavlenko & Blackledge (2004) suggest that such approach hinders the formation of new or hybrid identities and the linguistic repertoire complexity of current multilingual realities.

Moving from the earliest approach, interactional approach sees linguistic identity as a fluid, non-fixed entity constructed in interactions (Jenkins, 2007). The approach focused on language choice or code-switching, allowing language learners to perform 'acts of identity'. A study by Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985) (as cited in Jenkins, 2007) showed how individuals can create a particular linguistic behaviour pattern in order to be identified or excluded as a member of a certain group. This approach, however, garnered criticism for two reasons. First, it allows learners to construct identity by utilizing language resources which 'do not belong to them'. The other criticism argues that identity is not the sole reason for language learners to perform code-switching. Nevertheless, this approach has served as a stimulus for further studies in language learner identity.

#### **Poststructuralist Approaches**

Globalization has raised the interest in linguistic identities since global communities are more confronted with multilingual and multicultural exposure. For investigating the relationship between identity and language learning, poststructuralist approaches have increasingly become the approach of choice among identity researchers (Block, 2007; Norton & Morgan, 2013). This contemporary approach seeks to see the language learner identity from a larger social world perspective. In addition, poststructuralist approach has introduced some concepts which were not covered in the earlier approaches such as power relations, the sociological construct of *investment* (complement to the psychological construct of motivation in SLA), and the identification of *imagined communities* and *imagined identities*.

In poststructuralist perspective, language has a significant role regarding the relationship between individuals and the larger social world. Weedon (1997) states that language is the place where we construct our sense of self, our *subjectivity*. She further adds that the term's base word, the word '*subject*', has significant implication because a language learner can be the *subject of* a relationship (in possession of power) or the one *subjected to* a relationship (having less power). Hence, this can illustrate the inequitable relations of power which contributes to the dynamics and complexity of identity construct. This led Norton (2006; 2014) to define identity as changing, multiple, non-unitary, and 'a site of struggle' which are negotiated within unequal relations of power.

Other concepts in poststructuralist approach are the sociological construct of *investment* and the identification of *imagined communities* and *imagined identities*. The construct of *investment* (Norton, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton, 2012) refers to the meaningful relationship between the learners' eagerness and commitment to learn and practice a target language in the

classroom or target community. A motivated learner does not always mean that she or he invests in their L2 learning. However, by investing in the target language, learners will gain larger L2 resources, which will ultimately allow them to gain more value on their social power and cultural capital (Norton, 2013). Meanwhile, the *imagined communities* and *imagined identities* theoretical constructs (Norton, 2001) can be useful for investigating the learner's identity construction process because these constructs are dealing with learner's concerns for the future. Norton (2014) suggests that, for many language learners, the target language community is not only the actual reconstructed one. It can be the desired, assumed, imagined one that they aspire to achieve through their current *investment* in language learning. The manifestation of learner's *investment* is expected to result the actualisation of both *imagined communities* and *imagined identities*.

### **How Language Learner Identity Can Be a Helpful Construct in Language Learning and Teaching**

As the construct of language learner identity can be complex and dynamic, the purpose of language education should not thus solely focus on the transaction of knowledge. The identity construction of language learner also deserves attention because it is expected to serve learners positively throughout their language learning journey. Norton (2014) suggests that the poststructuralist approach of identity can be useful for classroom language learning and teaching. To illustrate this, Norton takes an example from a language learning experience of an immigrant in Canada (coded as Mai). In this example, the poststructuralist perspective used illustrated the role of *investment*, *imagined communities* and *imagined identities* in Mai's language learning.

#### **Figure 1**

*A vignette of an immigrant language learner in Canada from Norton (2000) (Reproduced in Norton, 2014)*

#### **Vignette #3: Identity and classroom resistance**

The third vignette, drawn from Norton (2000: 143), describes the experience of a young adult immigrant woman in Toronto, Canada, who grew increasingly unhappy with her English language class, and eventually withdrew from the course. As the student, pseudonymously called Mai, noted:

I was hoping that the course would help me the same as we learnt [in the 6-month ESL course], but some night we only spend time on one man. He came from Europe. He talked about his country: what's happening and what was happening. And all the time we didn't learn at all. And tomorrow the other Indian man speak something for there. Maybe all week I didn't write any more on my book.

Mai was a highly motivated learner of English. After finishing her 6-month ESL course, she took another English night class program to increase her language learning opportunities. As she worked in a factory all day, she made a huge effort and many sacrifices to enrol in the class. However, over the time, Mai got dissatisfied with the class. Mai narrated that her teacher instructed the students, who came from different countries, to talk about their experiences in their home country. Despite being highly motivated, the activity only made Mai listen to her peers, meaning that she was not invested in the target language practice during the class. Mai was an immigrant struggling with her new life and anxious about the future. Hence, from the poststructuralist perspective, she was highly motivated taking the English class in order to

achieve her *imagined identities* in her *imagined communities*, Canada. Mai might expect to engage in the discussion of their ‘current-and-here’ life, instead of the past, as she was hoping to get significant impact on her *investment* in order to construct her future in the new place (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

For this case, it is clear that Mai’s *imagined identities* and *imagined communities* have appropriately directed Mai’s *investment* as a language learner. As for the teacher, Norton (2014) suggests that it would be practical if the teacher asked and checked to Mai whether the class language practices have addressed her daily challenges and anxiety about the future or not. Norton adds that teachers have the responsibility to ensure that language learning has to engage students in meaningful activities.

Additional discussion for this section is the language pedagogic implication resulted from the use of English as an international language in various contexts (particularly ELF and EIL). Within these contexts, the global practice of English is attended by English users of various English L2 variations, L1 as well as multicultural backgrounds. It means that this interaction accommodates language users with diverse linguistic identities. Within an ELF or EIL context, McKay (2002) asserts three main points for language pedagogic practices:

- 1) providing students with various purposes of English use intended for actual practices in multilingual communities,
- 2) the unnecessary and impracticality of striving for achieving native-like English competence, and
- 3) awareness to view English variations as a language natural phenomenon.

As Dogancay-Aktuna & Hardman (2018) points out, this practice is also generally attended by the presence of cross-cultural communication issues. Therefore, the English pedagogical practices are to include and equip students with varieties of English accompanied by the attention to develop students’ intercultural competence and strategy. Canagarajah (2014) adds that the practice should advocate students’ pragmatic competence over grammatical one as well as focus on process over product.

However, despite of what have been suggested by McKay (2002) and Canagarajah (2014) above, Ur (2010) gives us a reminder that before English teachers can teach L2 pragmatics and raise students’ awareness on English variations, they first have to make sure that their students master basic lexical, phonological, and grammatical features of English. What Ur has suggested holds true, especially for learners of English originating from the Expanding Circle countries where English is learned as a foreign language.

### **Future Research Directions**

In this era of globalization and virtual sphere, the English dominance as the main lingua franca or as an international language has become more amplified. As the participants of global interactions originating from diverse multinational backgrounds, this globalization phenomenon has served as one major reason of the increased complexity of English speakers’ linguistic identities. However, despite the growing interest and number of studies in identity and language learning (Norton, 2013), studies in this area were still mostly conducted in the Inner Circle country such as Canada (Morita, 2012; Norton, 2014) and in the Outer Circle countries such as Hong Kong (Sung, 2014) and South Africa (Norton, 2014; Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995). Jenkins (2007) points out that the countries of the Expanding Circle have significant potential for this current situation. Groups of English speakers from East and South East Asia, South America, and some parts of Europe are numerically and economically large and powerful. They have the potential to affect the global language identity landscape when they finally decide to fight for global linguistic recognition or influence. Therefore, language identity researchers are directed to conduct more identity studies within ELF or EIL context

taking place in the Expanding Circle countries. It is to further deepen the exploration on the diversity of global linguistic identities, enriching the current theories of the field.

In addition, Norton (2014) claims that poststructuralist approaches are able to enhance the language pedagogic practice by helping both teacher and learner to become a good teacher and learner in a classroom setting. Exploration on language pedagogic practices where learners' identity constructs are explored to help the classroom practices are still underresearched. More explorations in this area are encouraged, more specifically the ones conducted in the Inner Circle or Outer Circle countries which can be used as references for the future practices.

### Conclusion

This paper has discussed about the relationship between language learning and learners' identity construction - how language can index language learner identity, why it is important to explore learner identity in language learning setting and how learners can use their identity to direct their language learning in order to achieve their ideal future L2-self. The construct of language learner identity does exist, its existence can be navigated through poststructuralist approach. This approach sees the language learner identity from a larger social world perspective across time and space. Hence, learners' identity can be complex and dynamic. Within the poststructuralist approach, learners' language learning *investment* as well as their *imagined communities* and *imagined identities* can be identified. Hence, it can serve information for the practice of language learning and teaching in order to achieve meaningful and successful language learning.

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