Investigating teachers' role in the process of identity construction in language learners

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Much of social research in language learning in the past twenty years has been devoted to exploring issues of identity construction and its sociological implications in terms of mobility and inclusiveness. The purpose of this research is to explore how language and culture shape a learner's identity as they immerse themselves into the world of second language learning, and how teachers can assist learners in the process of identity construction within a classroom setting. It first provides a rationale for the study; it then provides an overview of the literature in the areas of identity construction and learner culture and finally, it presents the reader with the research question the study will attempt to answer and the conclusions reached thus far. This is a working paper and as such it does not claim to provide a full overview of these issues but merely to present the findings made up to this point.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

How the notions of identity and culture are linked to learners' sense of investment and empowerment, especially in contexts where a sense of an autonomous self can be suppressed for social, religious or cultural reasons, form an important part of this thesis. There are a large number of studies on these areas and how they relate to language learning: Norton (1997, 2000, 2013, 2015), Norton and Davin (2015), Ushioda (2011), Dörnyei (2005), Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011); some of these have been pivotal in the development of identity research for the past twenty years and have laid the foundation upon which further research has been done: and yet, what's missing is the HOW. Norton (1995) proposed her 'Classroom-Based Social Research', in which learners become ethnographers of sorts under the encouragement of teachers; Brunton & Jeffrey (2013) examined some of the factors that might lead to empowerment with foreign students in New Zealand (2013) and more recently Diaz, Cochran & Karlin (2016) conducted a study in American classrooms to investigate the impact of teachers' behaviour and communication strategies on students' achievement and feeling of empowerment. Such research has provided a wealth of insight and suggested remedies, but they have come short in providing any definite answers as to how to implement them or as to the outcomes they might yield.

In light of the above, this research seeks to understand issues of socio-cultural identities and thus make a significant contribution to knowledge in this area by attempting to provide some answers to the above through investigating the type pf pedagogical interventions needed to assist language learners in the process of identity construction in order to achieve further social inclusion. It will also have applied relevance for those working with diverse student groups, especially taking our present social context into consideration: we live in a highly mobile world, with large communities of migrants relocating to wealthier, more developed countries which are also culturally different and, each posing their own particular set of challenges for these communities.

1.2.Why language learning in particular?

In his book *Language and Identity*, John Edwards (2009) suggests that identity is a summary of all our individual traits and characteristics, and that it defines our uniqueness as humans. Unlike others after him, however, he also suggests that this uniqueness does not come arise from possessing components that are strictly our own, but rather from he called 'a deep and wide of human possibilities'.

Amongst these possibilities, and because it is central to the human condition, we find language. Some researchers have deemed it of such importance so as to call it inseparable from identity and intrinsically linked to the human condition and self-development, while others have found evidentiary support to link language learning and the construction of one's identity (Norton, 1997; Joseph, 2004; Edwards, 2009). What is certain is that as arbitrary as languages are, they provide individuals with a sense of belonging and community; since the early 20th century researchers have noted how certain groups use their language to protect themselves from outside influence and even to be able to maintain their traditions and culture (Morris, 1946; Steiner, 1994). It follows then that a common language (a lingua franca) serves as a means by which to bridge a gap between communities that might be otherwise isolated from each other. Not only English is at play here as the international language for business and diplomacy, but there is also the case of Arabic all across the Middle East and North Africa, and Chinese throughout the Malay peninsula all the way to Singapore. In both of those cases the religious and cultural implications are broad and have repercussions in employment, social mobility and more importantly, social and cultural integration, as this paper will later explore. These issues are relevant because in the end, this integration and a certain degree of shared identity hypothetically allows for more effective communication. How is a person going to overcome the challenge of sharing such identity when available research suggests that that ingroup members are 'liked more', seen as 'more similar to self', or 'likely to try harder' than outsiders? (Billig and Tajfel, 1973; Ellemers at all, 1999; Haslam, 2001; Kane, 2010).

2.Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1 What is identity and how does it relate to language learning?

Because without our language, we have lost ourselves. Who are we without our words?
(Melina Marchetta, 2008)

In trying to explain 'identity' beyond the broadness of the dictionary definition in light of the available social research up to that point, political scientist James Fearon dissected years of former literature and presented us with a new analysis of the word. In his paper "What is Identity (And how we now use the word)?", he defines identity as: '(a) a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviors, or (b) socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (or (a) and (b) at once). In the latter sense, "identity" is modern formulation of dignity, pride, or honor that implicitly links these to social categories'(1999:2).

He further elaborated on this definition by suggesting that broadly speaking, identity is both a set of individual attributes that prompt us to action, as well as a social category designated by labels, such our nationality, sexual orientation and family role. It also orients and structures behaviour, be it because of the social norms that rule an individual's existence or be it because of a sense of self-respect (individual identity). This is actually a foundational aspect of second

language learning and a key tenet of this research.

Taking the above one step further and linking these notions to the field of language learning, Norton defined identity as 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (2005:5). This last point, she argues, is particularly important when connecting the concept of identity as it relates to language learning, since one of the most powerful motivations in language learners is the idea of a 'desirable future identity'; in the words of Heller (1996:10), it is through language that 'a person gains access to a powerful social network that give learners opportunities to speak'. Norton (2000) further argued that identity is a dynamic rather than a stable trait influenced by relationships and by unequal relations of power. We can see then that there seems a common thread and an agreement that from the perspective of post-structuralist researchers, identity is not rigid; it can be shaped, reshaped, abandoned, re-acquired, aspired to and negotiated. This viewpoint is also shared by Omoniyi and Tabouret-Keller (1997); the former defined identity as a 'dynamic process shaped by social action' (2006:12) and the latter theorized that identity is continuously created and re-created depending on the individual's social, historical, economic and institutional circumstances. He further elaborated in this notion of the individuals' renewal of identity as it becomes influenced their 'social interactions, encounters and wishes' (Tabouret-Keller, 1997:3).

This poststructuralist approach, however, is disputed by Block (2006:35), who claims that so much emphasis on the social / external aspect of identity construction neglects the importance of the self and what Elliot called 'the ambivalence of identity' (Elliot, 1996:8). According to them, ambivalence is a state natural to human beings which is brought about not so much by the environment as by 'life trajectory and individual choices.' Additionally, poststructuralists seem to ignore the root and origins of the concept of identity, which lie in the early works of Sigmund Freud and William James; it was them who addressed identity issues as more psychological than simply social. A wealth of research by Norton (2000), Hall (2003), Kanno (2003), Toohey (2000), Pavlenko et al (2001), and Schechter and Bayley's (2002), has shown that the individual choices mentioned above can be (and usually are) influenced by the social structures in place, thus creating a seemingly inseparable bind between them, which was best explained earlier by Fearon even before such research was made available. It can be concluded then that there is enough evidence to say that identity is neither a purely internal psychological construct nor an entirely social one, but a composite of both. An important part of this study relates to how these social structures (and the inequality contained within) can be offset through empowering learners and help them navigate the complexity of the structures in place.

If we look at the identity in relation to language learning, we can see that this a particularly important issue: second language users are not only continuously involved in negotiating and reshaping their identity based on external social constructs and internal processes, but they are also exposed to unequal relations that become evident depending on nationality, background, sexual orientation, religion, membership and language background. And this gains importance if we consider that, at least from a sociolinguistic perspective, learning truly takes place when participating in communicative events.

History has given us countless examples of languages being imposed on citizens as a way of differentiating 'us' and 'them'. Instances of this existed in ancient Greece (who identified non-Greek speakers as 'bar-bar', an early variation of 'barbarian') and in recent French history as described in detailed by Tabouret-Keller (1997); an even closer example is that of Myanmar, a country where there are more than a hundred languages spoken by their different ethnic groups, and yet the military government imposed the use of Burmese as a lingua franca; Burmese is the language spoken by the Bamar majority, and thus, from the linguistic point of view, other smaller groups find themselves not being able to identify themselves as part of those but rather as Burmese. The individual identity has yielded to the national one and social

constraints have prevailed where both should coexist (South and Lall, 2016).

2.2. Language learning and culture learning: an indelible connexion.

There is a generally agreed upon definition of culture as a system or pattern that defines and establishes the boundaries and range of what is considered acceptable behaviour and what the behavioural expectations are for a specific group, so that its members can associate effectively (Galloway, 1992; Lado, 1964; Richmond, 1992). It is also a commonly agreed notion in Sociocultural Theory that learning is a social process, and it would be hard to imagine an immigrant into a foreign country, for instance, who could associate effectively without knowing the target language to some degree as well. It can be argued then that there is an intricate and intrinsic connection between the two. According to Pourkalhor and Esfandiari (2017), Kramsch (1993) and Damen (1987), all of whom made the same claim, cultural knowledge is socially acquired and the patterns, behaviours and shared elements of a culture are transmitted and applied through language, which in turn becomes a mean to communicate and transmit the culture itself.

In a world where social mobility has become the norm, classrooms are becoming increasingly multi-cultural and diverse; this means learners bring with them their own language, communication skills and culturally rooted knowledge, or their cultural capital, as Yasso (2005) described it in her paper 'Community Cultural Wealth'. And this diverse racial, ethnic and cultural diversity means that language teachers must be able to recognize how different learners will use this capital and act accordingly. This leads us to ask why it is important to understand the notion of culture in language learning, which is an issue that has concerned social researchers for the past 20 years and one of the questions Tyrone Howard tried to answer in a 2018 paper titled 'Capitalizing in Culture'. His research focused on multi-cultural classroom in the United States, and it illustrates why this is something that should be, from this researcher's perspective, at the forefront of the language teacher's reflection and practice and why it is an important part of this research project. Much research has been done there on the issue of multi-culturalism, and a great deal of the information gathered can be used to generate further discussion, elicit reflection and invite teachers to make informed choices that foster and nurture each learner's individual culture. Gay, for instance, provides great insight into the types of examples teachers give in a classroom and illustrates it by describing an instance of a teacher praising the achievements of Asian-Americans while deploring the 'underachievement' of African Americans (2010). Howard (2018) tells of an African-American child who gets confused with his teacher's instructions, uttered not as a directive but as a question to someone used to a much more direct use of the language. Here then we have two examples from a monolingual, multi-cultural classroom, and it is not difficult to see how this can be easily compounded in a multi-lingual classroom where both culture AND language are different from one learner to the next; so, at observing this, we are reminded of Norton, who argued that a speaker's ability to become an actual social participant is contingent to their ability to negotiate the aforementioned relations of power and the conditions under which they are granted (or refused) the right to speak (in Darvin, 2015).

We have examined the notion that there is an intricate connection between language and culture, but what exactly do we mean but accessing the target culture in order to achieve further social inclusion? And what is the role of educators on this matter?

In their 2003 report on intercultural learning for the University of South Australia, Liddicoat, Papademtre, Scarino and Kohler claimed that intercultural language learning is comprised of five principles:

1. Active construction
2. Making connections
3. Social interaction

4. Reflection
5. Responsibility

They further claimed that these principles should inform teaching practices and guide teachers' choices and decisions (Liddicoat, Papademtre, Scarino and Kohler, 2003).

In order to achieve that, they further suggest approaching culture as a 'practice' rather than a 'competence': whereas the latter consists mostly on learning facts about a specific culture, the former is a highly variable, negotiable, context-sensitive action. In other words, culture becomes experiential. From this, we can determine that educators should aim, from this researcher's perspective, at developing an intercultural point of view that would allow the learners to remain true to their own roots and background while attempting, through language, to understand the target culture as much as their own. It would seem logical to assume that only then integration might be begin to take place.

2.3. Constructing identity in language learning:

So far, this paper has examined what identity is and the importance of becoming familiar with both the learner and the target culture in attempting further inclusion. What this researcher finds lacking is the presence of more definitive answers to the more pressing question "how do we assist language learners on the process of de/re/constructing their identity?"

As we have discussed, identity is an evolving and not a static construct; moreover, it is not in isolation but through our interactions with others that our identity is negotiated and shaped and that it is mostly through language that these interactions take place (Weedon, 1997).

Although both Norton (1995) and Weedon have established the need for teachers to become actively involved in assisting students in the process of identity construction neither offers concrete answers that are transferable to other contexts: my experience in Asian countries has proven time and time again that, for instance, Japanese or Saudi students are highly unlikely to engage, as they suggest, in self-directed efforts to socialize in English outside the classroom, to say nothing of them keeping journals or reflecting on their identity struggle (because struggle they do). Although it has been my empirical observation that pedagogical practices can be and are often transformative, the question remains how and which ones. Pennycook (2012) argues for what I believe to be the first of these practices, which relates to our mindset as language teachers. He states: 'We do not actually 'speak languages,' we are not in fact 'native speakers' of things called 'languages'' (Canut, 2007). Rather, we engage in language practices, we draw on linguistic repertoires, we take up styles, we partake in discourse, we do genres' (Pennycook, 2010: 98). If we are to agree with him, then it becomes necessary to move away from the native / non-native speaker paradigm and to aid learners in the process of communicating, negotiating and availing themselves of opportunities to construct their identities through the aforementioned discourse.

A study by Lovaas (2014) drew on these notions in an examination of how L2 speakers may construct identity, arguing in favour of Pennycook's "resourceful speaker" concept, which he defined as 'both having available language resources and being good at shifting between styles, discourses, and genres' (2012: 99). She investigated how two women, Natalie (teacher) and Ana (student), both bilingual users of English and Spanish, were able to constantly shift their identities as the conversation veered into certain areas, keeping a record of how they effectively navigated styles, discourses and genres as it suited the conversation. This, then, brings us to a second pedagogical practice of value: encouraging learners to draw on their linguistic repertoire to renegotiate their identity (even if a temporary one); by doing this, Lovaas argues, the learner is validated as a resourceful speaker and the balance of power shifts, with the exchange becoming more balanced and the participants having asserted their identity through their interaction.

A third dimension concerning identity construction is the notion of power dynamics in the

classroom, or to look at more simply, how valued learners feel at different stages of their interactional process, both by fellow learners and by teachers. Here we come to a key term, what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) labelled as 'linguistic capital'; this can be explained as the accumulation of a person's language resources and the role these resources play in navigating pre-existing social power dynamics. In his seminal work *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), he also claimed that languages form a wealth of sorts; the same way a language benefits and affords possibilities to the members of that linguistic community, the opposite can be said to be true: for those outside of the group belonging to the linguistic majority, there are reduced possibilities of access thus creating an unequal relation of symbolic power. This inequality present in language has a wide range of repercussions; looking deeply into this issue from the perspective of language learners and drawing on Bourdieu's earlier theories on cultural capital and cultural reproduction, Cromley and Kanno (2013) found evidence ranging from documented poor external perception and stigmatization of the speaker to lack of access and attainment in education, and this brings us to the dimension of empowerment, and it connects with the process of identity construction

2.4. Empowerment in Language Learning

"...Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important." (Czuba & Page, 1991:1)

To understand what empowerment really means as far as language learners are concerned and why it is important, it is first necessary to go back to 1981, when Julian Rappaport proposed his empowerment model while examining what he called 'the paradoxical nature of social and community problems' (1981:2). He exemplifies this by situating freedom and equality: the more freedom you give people in a group, he claims, the more power the strong will be able to accrue and exert, to the detriment of the seemingly weaker members. Hence freedom is annihilated.

   Language learners are faced with very particular challenges, in that, as we have examined before, the lack of linguistic capital has a direct impact in the degree of social belonging (or freedom) they experience; there is an inherent inequality because of this lack of resources, and that is why a key to this research is finding ways to empower learners in the unequal world they find themselves in. In a paper that attempts to define both power and empowerment, Czuba and Page claim that power 'does not exist in isolation but within the context of a relationship' (1999:1). And this is the crux of the matter: these relationships, naturally though not always intentionally unequal, are also changeable and then it follows that so is the power that pervades them. And empowerment is the process by which they change once people are equipped, both socially and motivationally, to take affirmative action in regard to the existing balance of power. Empowerment, in the context of classroom learning (such as what this study is trying to investigate), has a number of other dimensions: following up on an early paper by Shulman, McCormack and Luechauer (1993), Frymier et al (1996) established three of them: that being empowered means to feel motivated, competent about what one is doing and that our actions have an impact. We can see how each of these dimensions has a prevalent presence in language learning and easily be related to the process of communicating in another language.

   There are two things these studies have in common: one, is that empowerment is consistently linked to teachers' attitudes and behaviour as well as situational factors both in and out of the classroom; the other is that because of that very reason, the teacher's role is key in helping learners become more empowered by developing and using strategies that can help build self-confidence , and thus self-esteem, both of which are indelibly connected to our sense of self.

In establishing a conceptual framework for this study, which seeks to find ways in which teachers can assist students in their process of identity construction as language learners, it is important to note that in this researcher's opinion such assistance is intricately connected with actively engaging in practices that allow learners to feel empowered. Social inclusion in the way of understanding not only a second language but the target culture must be accompanied by the learners ability to have an impact and to implement measures that achieve that inclusion, and exactly how this could be achieved is discussed in the section 'Conclusions' below.

3. Research question

Investigating the type and degree of pedagogical interventions needed to facilitate the conditions I have described above, both in the process of identity construction and the degree to which such process assists learners in gaining further social inclusion forms an important part of this study, and it is here where I intend to make a clear contribution to knowledge; the available research sheds some light on these questions but they all have limitations in either scope, context or both: Norton's suggested classroom-based social research might not necessarily be feasible in places where there are limited opportunities to speak the target language, for instance; teachers' attitudes and behaviors, such as the ones reported on the other studies, are likely to change according to context: Asian classrooms in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and East Asia differ from those in Western countries, as do teacher-student relationships. Moreover, while Norton's suggestions had a practical approach, other aforementioned studies focused on attitudes and behaviors. Hence my decision to explore this area further and attempt to make a further contribution to this area by incorporating these different perspectives into a single in-class ethnography. Students will keep journals and use posters, presentations and digital stories to reflect on issues of individual and national identity, culture and empowerment, and tell their own experiences as language learners. Focus groups will be conducted mid-course to gather data, assess progress, evaluate available information and make changes or adjustments to the course as needed.

Another important aspect of this study is its focus on John Dewey's ideas regarding the participation of learners in their own education provision. He argued that '…absence of participation tends to produce lack of interest …(sic) resulting in lack of responsibility' (1937: 314). Much of this study relates to aiding learners gain their own voice, become empowered and be able to offset inequalities, and guiding them towards such participation is essential; for Luff and Webster (2014), such participation translates as opportunities for engagement fostered through the development of positive relationships and partnerships; exactly what type of opportunity and exactly how these positive relationships are fostered fall within the research question below concerning the type of pedagogical intervention needed. I also make additional suggestions on how to further learner participation in the last section of this paper; these suggestions are rooted in the belief that democratic participations and engagement are an essential part of the project.

Hence, the question this study will attempt to answer is: What kind of pedagogical interventions are needed in order to help language learners in the process of identity construction, so they are able to offset unequal conditions of power and gain further social inclusion?

4. Conclusions

In light of the above, what can first be concluded is the intricate connection between language and culture and how they shape each other to allow the transmission of acceptable behaviour patterns; that learning a language invariably involves becoming acquainted with the target

culture, that teachers must remain aware and respectful of both of these in individual learners since both are also intricately connected with the learners' sense of identity.

Additionally, and extrapolating from the aforementioned studies on the type of pedagogical interventions that can further assist in the process of identity construction through empowerment, some possible ideas are developing positive relationships with language learners, based on collaboration rather than imposition, so as to help offset the existing power structure of the classroom in which teachers are seen as hierarchically superior due to their greater linguistic capital (Diaz, Cochran and Karlin, 2016); exhorting learners to become active participants in learning activities by shifting the power flow towards them: this includes the learners themselves making choices regarding their own educational input when applicable, and having an equal voice in the classroom. Examples of this can be negotiated grading, having focus groups, and collaborative language learning projects in which the teacher is just another participant, such as shared research, posters, digital storytelling and group writing (Brunton and Jeffrey, 2014), and finally encouraging and supporting language learners' efforts to engage in learning activities outside the classroom as well, in order to help them become more autonomous and agents of their own learning process, such as finding opportunities to socialize with others, recording their personal experiences, gaining exposure to the language they are learning through music, videos, films and books, and keeping journal entries with the outcomes of these for personal reflection, written in their second language (Dörnyei, 2005; Ushioda, 2011).

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