
Identity, Language Learning, and Critical Pedagogies in Digital Times

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Abstract

Recognizing how the social landscape of language learning has shifted with innovations in technology, this chapter examines how critical pedagogies have responded to the new structures and relations of power that have evolved in increasingly digital times. As learners perform multiple and dynamic identities in this new world order, how they navigate their investments in the language and literacy practices of classrooms and communities also becomes more complex. To understand the evolution of identity as a central construct of language learning, this chapter looks to original conceptualizations of identity and earlier scholarship that informed it. Major developments in identity research that intersect with the digital are then discussed and classified in three categories: the construction and performance of identities, structures and relations of power, and social and educational inequities. The chapter then proceeds to examine two important issues in language learning that are associated with the digital turn. First, the multiplicity of spaces learners are able to engage with requires the mastery of new

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and continually evolving literacies. Second, the mechanisms of power have become more invisible, requiring more critical reflection in order to identify and navigate systemic patterns of control. To respond to these challenges, the chapter concludes by recommending specific research areas that will help create transformative critical pedagogies: issues of political economy, digital exclusion, and methodological innovations.

Keywords

Critical pedagogy • Language learning • Identity • Investment • Digital

Introduction

Educators interested in identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies are interested in language as a social practice and the way language constructs and is constructed by a wide variety of social relationships. These relationships are as varied as those between the writer and reader, teacher and student, test maker and test taker, and school and state. What makes the educators “critical” is the shared assumption that social relationships are seldom constituted on equal terms, reflecting and constituting inequitable relations of power in the wider society. Further, the plural use of “pedagogies” suggests that there are many ways in which pedagogy can be critical; the challenge for critical language educators is to determine how best to pursue a project of possibility for language learners, across time and diverse spaces. In this view, language is theorized not only as a linguistic system but also as a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated.

In the twenty-first century, as language learners navigate new digital spaces governed by different value systems, they have to perform multiple identities and linguistic repertoires while frequently positioned in new, often invisible ways. How teachers, researchers, and policy-makers are able to map out these increasingly complex spaces, while negotiating competing ideologies and pedagogies, is perhaps one of the greatest challenges for language education in digital times. To address this challenge, language education scholars have sought to advance new understandings of identity that capture this changing relationship between the language learner and the social world. This research seeks to sharpen the lens through which language learners and teachers negotiate relations of power, challenging educational agents to reflect on the material conditions that allow language learning to take place, and how learners, inscribed by race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexual orientation are accorded or refused the right to speak.

Early Developments

In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars interested in second-language identity tended to draw distinctions between social identity and cultural identity. “Social identity” was seen to reference the relationship between the individual language learner and the

larger social world, as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services, and law courts (e.g., Gumperz 1982). “Cultural identity,” on the other hand, referenced the relationship between an individual and members of a particular ethnic group (such as Mexican and Japanese) who share a common history, a common language, and similar ways of understanding the world (e.g., Valdes 1986). As Atkinson (1999) has noted, past theories of cultural identity tended to essentialize and reify identities in problematic ways. In more recent years, the difference between social and cultural identity is seen to be theoretically more fluid, and the intersections between social and cultural identities are considered more significant than their differences. In this research, identity is seen as socioculturally constructed, and educators draw on both institutional and community practices to understand the conditions under which language learners speak, read, and write the target language. Such research is generally associated with a shift in the field from a predominantly psycholinguistic approach to second-language learning to include a greater focus on sociological and anthropological dimensions of language learning, particularly with reference to sociocultural, poststructural, and critical theory (Douglas Fir Group 2016).

Scholars have noted that Norton’s work on identity, investment, and imagined communities (Norton Peirce 1995; Norton 2013) has become foundational to research on language learner identity (Kramsch 2013; Miller and Kubota 2013). Drawing on poststructuralist theory and a wide range of research in the global community, Norton conceptualizes *identity* as multiple, fluid, and a site of struggle. People perform different identities in particular spaces or conditions, in the same way that they can be positioned by others by virtue, for example, of their race and gender. This applies as well to language learning contexts, where learners negotiate relations of power and seek to assert their place as legitimate speakers. Recognizing that learners are social beings with complex identities, Norton also developed the construct of *investment*, which highlights the socially and historically constructed relationship between learners and their commitment to language learning. The construct recognizes that commitment to learning is not just a product of motivation but that learners invest in particular language and literacy practices because such practices will help them acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. At the same time, how learners are able to invest in a target language is contingent on the dynamic negotiation of power in different fields and how they are granted or refused the right to speak.

Norton’s challenge to examine issues of identity in language learning came at a time when second-language acquisition scholars were calling for “an enhanced awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use” (Firth and Wagner 1997, p. 285). In 1997, Norton guest edited a special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* on Language and Identity, and in 2002, the award-winning *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* was launched, providing a platform for scholars from different parts of the world to publish research on identity and the sociocultural issues of language learning. By 2006, Zuengler and Miller (2006) had declared that language and identity had been established as “a research area in its own right”

(p. 43). This research suggests that second-language learners frequently struggle to appropriate the voices of others (Bakhtin), command the attention of their listeners (Bourdieu), negotiate multiple subjectivities (Weedon), and understand the practices of the target language community (Lave and Wenger). The research does not suggest, however, that the language learner should bear the primary responsibility for expanding the range of identities available to the learner; of central interest is the investment of the native speaker as well. Drawing on such theory, becoming a “good” language learner is seen to be a much more complicated process than earlier, more positivistic research had suggested.

A great number of books have helped build the canon of early identity research (see Norton 2013 for an overview). In the last decade, this interest has continued to flourish. Block (2007) provides insight on the lived experiences of adult migrants and foreign language learners; Byrd Clark (2009) discusses how youth of diverse backgrounds perform multiple identities in a globalized world; and Higgins (2011) examines an exciting range of research on identity and language learning in the new millennium. Much of this work has begun to address the importance of the digital in language learning and teaching and to incorporate the digital in diverse critical pedagogical practices. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the edited book by Cummins and Early (2010), which illustrates how students invest their identities in creative works or performances, what the authors call “identity texts.”

Major Contributions

The rapid development of technology and digital innovations in recent years, together with the intensification of neoliberal pressures on different economies, have accelerated globalization. The paradox of globalization however is that while we increasingly develop a sense of the interconnectedness of the world, particularly with digital media, the world has become increasingly fragmented. The lived realities in urban cosmopolitan centers in post-industrialist societies are markedly different from those in villages of developing countries. Not only are there social, cultural, and political differences across the horizontal spaces of neighborhoods, regions, and countries but also in the vertical spaces of class, gender, and ethnicity. At the same time, the virtual world also provides an axis where people of shared interests and tastes are able to construct new communities and ideas of co-citizenship (Gee and Hayes 2011). It is the intersection of these axes in the twenty-first century that cleaves the world into very diverse, segmented spaces and that shape identities and pedagogies in new, profound ways (De Costa and Norton 2016).

In this changing digital landscape, research on identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies grapples with new questions of power and access, particularly when considering implications of the research for classroom practice. As the affordances of the digital have enabled innovative means of self-representation and diverse sites of social participation, identity studies have taken on different tropes. Interpretive research has examined the construction and performance of digitally mediated identities, while more critical research has focused on issues of power and

social inequities. The three common themes in the area of critical pedagogies that we will address are those on (i) the construction and performance of identities, (ii) structures and relations of power, and (iii) social and educational inequities.

The construction and performance of identities. While the digital is the medium, at the core of the performance of multiple identities is language. Through two case studies, Thorne and Black (2011) demonstrate how blogging and IM enables a stylization where writers strategically mix textual conventions with different semiotic resources to achieve more personal intentions. By developing new performative, semiotic repertoires, they are able to enact relevant identities as they interact with both close social networks and also distant and anonymous audiences. As a kind of identity text, digital stories have become a significant channel for researchers to understand how learners construct identities through textual production. By borrowing and repurposing texts, images, and music, learners are able to claim authorial agency and be coauthors and agents of literacy acquisition (Lotherington 2011). In a study of the creative process of ninth-grade students as they produce their own digital stories about “an odyssey of self,” Rowsell (2012) demonstrated how learners are able to reposition their identity. By making multi-modal choices to represent their lived histories, learners are granted individual creative expression that can effect subtle shifts in disposition. Because digital stories have very few structuring conditions and constraints, learners can improvise their ideas, values, and histories without critical challenge, and thus, they are able to reimagine their own self-identifications.

Conversely, Stornaiuolo et al. (2009) argue that the multiplicity of ways to represent one’s self made available through the digital not only extends but complexifies self-identifications. By sharing these stories online, learners communicate across multiple symbolic systems and to audiences no longer confined to one’s geographic location. While one can imagine new identities and ways of being in the world, the implied, incidental and overt audience of one’s story may not share one’s local understandings. Thus, there is a need to develop the adaptive, generative, and critical capacities of learners to construct coherent texts. For Darwin and Norton (2014a), digital storytelling is a powerful way to affirm the transnational identities of migrant learners. Through a workshop where high school students collaborated to produce videos narrating their own stories of migration, the learners were able to use their mother tongue and draw from the modalities of images, music, and voice to share their lived experiences and the material conditions that inscribed their own transnational journeys. Like Lam and Warriner (2012), Darwin and Norton point out that teachers who are critically informed about the material realities and inequalities of migration can develop more transformative pedagogies.

Structures and relations of power. Not only has technology enabled the performance and affirmation of learner identities, but research has also been able to examine how the digital can be used in critical pedagogies. As learners continue to engage with new technologies, Norton and Williams (2012) demonstrate how digital devices become more than mere physical tools – they become meaningful symbolic resources that accord their users’ cultural capital and social power. For example, in a project where rural Kenyan students were provided digital cameras, laptops with

connectivity, and voice recorders to conduct interviews with government officials, Kendrick et al. (2012) note how digital tools became signifiers of membership in a journalistic context, which provided students with agentive power. Through role-playing that emboldened students to ask about controversial issues like dissent and police corruption, they were able to negotiate the performance of new, more empowered identities. Similarly, in a project that promoted digital literacy with girls and women from poorly resourced communities in Uganda, Norton et al. (2011) helped the participants gain access to digital tools that allowed them to research about HIV/AIDS. By accessing the internet privately, they were able to pose questions about the female body and teenage pregnancy that they might otherwise not be comfortable discussing in larger groups. Engaging with the digital allowed them not only to access English in new ways but also to construct their identities as empowered young women fully invested in learning.

In a study of how migrant learners negotiate competing language ideologies in their adoptive countries, Shin (2012) examines how some Korean students who study abroad, originally mocked by Korean immigrants as unsophisticated, were able to gain strategies of distinction through the creation of their own particular ways of communicating. By integrating Korean youth slang with English, transliterated Korean, and Korean internet shorthand and emoticons in their text messages and IM chats, they were able to style “Korean cool” and reinvest their linguistic resources with new values. Recognizing the rising prominence of South Korea in the global stage and the increased economic value of the Korean language, these learners, while originally wanting to acquire English to become global cosmopolitan citizens, reversed the indices by constructing Korean language and culture as an index of coolness, to gain more empowered identities.

Social and educational inequities. Not only does the digital construct and empower identities, it can also reproduce social inequities. A learner’s identity, his or her social position and possession of capital, shapes digital access, use, and outcomes (Warschauer and Matuchniak 2010). In an ethnographic study of the digital media engagements of two families from contrasting socioeconomic settings in South Africa, Lemphane and Prinsloo (2014) demonstrate how the identities of youth shape their language use and digital practices. The middle class children who had digital devices and unlimited broadband connectivity gained access to more English language resources, allowing them to develop topic-specific vocabulary and meta-awareness of language. Adapting avatars that became identity markers, they were able to experiment with different accents and become familiar with global middle class cultural references, while developing class-specific dispositions. The working-class children, on the other hand, had only mobile phone access, and the games they were able to play on these devices provided no language development opportunities. They spoke mostly a colloquial version of the local language, indexical of their working-class status and not valued in school. In this context, the contrasting digital practices lead to different resources, tacit knowledge, and habits that may or may not be bridged to school literacies and classroom practices.

Recognizing digital literacies as a social practice, North et al. (2008) assert that technology use is tied to one’s identity. What is valued in the home greatly

determines digital tastes, which appear to be consistent among learners of a particular social class. Home socializes learners into understanding, accepting, or rejecting digital practices, and this socialization involves the appropriation of technology into existing family norms, values, and lifestyles. Whereas some families value technology for consumption of information, those who are not directed toward traditional academic success may view new media and technologies as entertainment tools. These different mindsets shape varied digital tastes that may be valued or devalued in different contexts like school and have important implications for critical pedagogies.

Work in Progress

Recognizing that the achievement gap between rich and poor learners in the United States is now twice that of white and black, Jones and Vagle (2013) call for a social class-sensitive pedagogy that recognizes and addresses these inequalities. Because of prevailing neoliberal discourses of upward mobility, status, and entrepreneurial success, classism can be unwittingly inscribed in curriculum, pedagogy, and school practices. The authors propose locating and disrupting social class hierarchies in schools and communities and integrating social class and marginalized perspectives into the curriculum. They challenge educators to have a more informed understanding of the web of economic theory, globalization, immigration policies, and labor laws, to construct a critical pedagogy that responds to differences in social class. Aligned with such a pedagogy, online content, media, and texts produced by students are used to not only represent diverse lived experiences but also to examine “assumptions of (classed) normality” (p. 134).

In this spirit, Darvin and Norton (2014b) have done a comparative case study of two adolescent migrant Filipino learners from different social class positions in Canada. They examine how differences in levels of capital shape students’ language use, home literacies, and digital practices, with important implications for critical pedagogies. The youngest child of an entrepreneur and full-time homemaker, Ayrton lives in a wealthy neighborhood and speaks English almost exclusively at home and with his classmates in a private school. He has enrolled in an online course on currency trading and he views technology as a rich source of information, which can realize powerful imagined identities. In contrast, John is raised solely by his caregiver mother and lives with her and two siblings in a one-bedroom apartment. His social network is almost entirely Filipino, and he speaks about his struggle to adjust his English. In this case, the linguistic, cultural, and social capital of the two learners appear to already lead them toward different social trajectories and educational opportunities.

In 2015, a colloquium in Calgary organized by Rahat Naqvi and Jennifer Rowsell brought together renowned scholars of New Literacy Studies to discuss how literacy pedagogies need to evolve in transcultural cosmopolitan times. The work of Toohey et al. (2012) is particularly exciting in this regard, drawing on the use of video to build communities of language learners across global sites. In a multi-country

videomaking project with school children in India, Mexico, and Canada, the authors found that the making of videos offered language learners opportunities for meaning making that extended beyond their particular second-language capabilities. As educators imagine critical pedagogies that foster transnational identities, there is increasing need for critical language educators to examine issues of power and inequality (Hawkins and Norton 2009). Such pedagogies not only bring together transcultural practices, multimodal epistemologies, and multilingual forms of communication, but they also weave in a critical examination of how these practices are inscribed by relations of power.

Problems and Difficulties

As digital affordances continue to offer a more flexible engagement with the world, the implications of the virtual on identity are becoming increasingly significant. However, two important issues confront educators interested in identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies. First, these new spaces that allow learners to access, select, and transform information for individual aims and to participate in a more global community continue to multiply (Kress 2009). How learners negotiate these spaces and new forms of sociality through language becomes even more crucial, as these spaces require continually evolving forms of literacy. Second, as learners occupy more virtual and isolated spaces, the capillaries of power that manage these contexts, together with concomitant processes of inclusion and exclusion, become more invisible. As learners move fluidly across different contexts, the challenge lies in their capacity to identify and navigate systemic patterns of control, which impact their investments in particular language and literacy practices (Darvin and Norton 2015).

While the digital shapes identity by demanding new literacies and strategies, it also constructs new forms of inequality that impinge on the agency of learners as they pursue their life trajectories. As the fulcrum of the knowledge economy, technology, according to Castells (2001), can lead to “one of the most damaging forms of exclusion” (p. 3). Social class greatly impacts access and use of technology (Darvin and Norton 2014b; North et al. 2008), but in recent language education research, it has been a largely underexamined construct (Kanno and Vandrick 2014). Traditional models of class structure, together with class-inscribed identities like “middle class” or “working class,” no longer capture the realities of the new world order. For Kramsch (2013), the political promise of identity as a site of resistance is in danger of being commodified in a competitive, deregulated fast capitalism, as a means of personal gain. “Identity might then cease to be a matter of investment and imagination and might become once again a matter of birth privilege and social class” (p. 199). To respond to this threat, new, more fluid conceptualizations of class and a sharper analysis of digital inequalities are necessary to investigate identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies in the twenty-first century.

Future Directions

As a central construct in the sociocultural dimension of language education research, identity will continue to be a significant topic of discussion among teachers, scholars, and policy-makers. Further, the comprehensive model of investment and language learning, developed by Darwin and Norton (2015), invites future research on the relationship between identity, capital, and ideology. In this spirit, three particular areas are shaping new, exciting paths for research on identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies in digital times: issues of political economy, digital identities and literacies, and methodological innovations.

Issues of political economy. The neoliberal forces of deregulation and free market continue to structure relations in a rapidly globalizing and digitalizing world. Technology comes with a cost, and the capacity to access, produce, and distribute digitally mediated information considered valuable in the knowledge economy is increasingly linked to mechanisms of profit. The commodification of languages, the marketization of language learning, and the role of language in regulating and legitimizing geopolitical spaces make political economy a very important focus in applied linguistics (Block et al. 2012; Duchêne and Heller 2012). This lens enables researchers to dissect identity and to understand the challenges of learners in an increasingly polarized and segmented world. How social class intersects with other categories such as ethnicity and gender promises to be a very fruitful way to understand how learners are positioned in different learning contexts in the twenty-first century (De Costa and Norton 2016).

Digital exclusion. As the digital playground carved out by new media becomes a more ubiquitous space of language acquisition and socialization, researchers and scholars have gravitated toward this domain to examine and to discover new pedagogical opportunities. Studies however have usually come from wealthier contexts (Snyder and Prinsloo 2007), and the emerging issue is that the distribution of digital tools that enable mediation is unequal (Warschauer and Matuchniak 2010), not just across the horizontal dimensions of localities and nations but also the vertical axis of class, gender, and ethnicity. Differences in digital use, tastes, and preferences (Snyder et al. 2008) also determine learners' inclusion in these spaces. Hence, there needs to be more research that not only examines the positioning of identities in the "unglobalized" areas of the world but also in the virtual spaces where learners of different backgrounds can be granted or refused access and the right to speak.

Methodological issues and innovations. As the digital transforms conceptions of time and space by making artifacts permanent and perpetually present, multimedia self-presentations of learners can also fix representations of identity and influence their lives in complex, consequential ways (Nelson et al. 2008). At the same time, ethnographers traverse digital frontiers where boundaries of private and public are blurred, and together, this raises new questions regarding ethics, informed consent, and researcher identity (De Costa and Norton 2016). Researchers also need more sophisticated tools to observe and interpret contexts of learning, where learners move seamlessly online and offline, using language and technology in ways that

are continually evolving. How these lead to more complex methodological issues in examining identity promises to be an exciting area in language education research.

If we take seriously the argument that the identity of the language learner is not just a character trait or “personality variable” but a socially and historically constructed relationship to both institutional and community practices, then it follows that teachers, researchers, administrators, testers, and policy-makers are all implicated in the range of identities available to the language learner. As both institutions and communities navigate new digital frontiers in an area of increasing globalization, the implications for critical pedagogies are profound.

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

Ron Darvin and Bonny Norton: [Language, Identity, and Investment in the Twenty-First Century](#). In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education
 Patricia Duff: [Language Socialization, Participation and Identity: Ethnographic Approaches](#). In Volume: Discourse and Education
 Saeed Rezaei: [Researching Identity in Language and Education](#). In Volume: Research Methods in Language and Education
 Taehee Choi: [Identity, Transnationalism and Bilingual Education](#). In Volume: Bilingual and Multilingual Education

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