Identity, Investment, and TESOL

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Framing the Issue

Research on the relationship between identity and investment in language learning was placed on the TESOL agenda in 1995, when Norton published a key article on this topic in the *TESOL Quarterly* (Norton Peirce, 1995), following it up with a guest edited special issue of the journal in 1997. Drawing on a longitudinal study of adult immigrants in Canada, and informed by the work of Weedon and Bourdieu, Norton saw the need to reframe current understandings of individual language learners and their motivations for language learning. At that time, cognitive and psychological theories dominated understandings of how languages were learned, and theories of the good language learner interpreted individuals as having an essential, unique, fixed, and coherent core. In this more traditional research, language learners were often defined in binary terms as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited, with little reference to unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers.

Norton's research, subsequently supported by other leading researchers such as Toohey (2000), Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), Block (2007), and Kramsch (2009), provided evidence that language learners are not uni-dimensional, but have identities that are multiple, changing, and often sites of struggle. Rather than a neutral medium of communication, language is theorized as a social practice in which speakers negotiate meaning. Relations of power in the social world determine access to communities and social networks, and also the ways in which language learners interact with target language speakers. In this poststructuralist view, when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with others, but are reconfiguring their relationship to the social world. While learners can speak from multiple positions, as they perform different identities, they can also be positioned in undesirable ways, which may limit opportunities to speak and be heard. For example, the identity categories of race, gender, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation can shape interaction in different learning contexts, and the opportunities that are available for language learning. These contingent positions are shaped not only by material conditions and lived experiences, but

also by learners' imagined identities (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Identity is thus defined as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton 2013, p. 45).

In order to capture this complex relationship of learners to the target language, Norton developed the sociological construct of investment as a complement to the psychological construct of motivation (Dörnyei, and Ushioda, 2009). Recognizing how language learning as a social practice is implicated in the operation of power, the construct of investment signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. *Investment* can be defined as the commitment to the goals, practices, and identities that constitute the learning process and that are continually negotiated in different social relationships and structures of power. In this view, learners can be highly motivated to learn a language, but may not necessarily be *invested* in the language practices of a given classroom if its practices are, for example, racist or sexist. In addition to asking "Are students motivated to learn a language?" researchers and teachers pose the question, "To what extent are students and teachers invested in the language and literacy practices of a given classroom and community?" (Norton, 2013).

Because identity is always a site of struggle, investment is complex, contradictory, and often in a state of flux. To successfully negotiate the conditions of power that enable or constrain language learning contexts, learners need to develop a communicative competence that goes beyond understanding the rules of use of a target language. They also need to understand how these rules are socially and historically constructed to support the interests of dominant groups (Norton, 2013) and they need to learn symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2009). As a theoretical tool, investment helps teachers and researchers to examine the conditions under which social interaction takes place, and the extent to which social relations of power enable or constrain opportunities for language learners to speak.

Making the Case

In the 1990s, when identity and investment became foundational to understanding language learning as a social practice, large-scale migrations were transforming the economic and cultural landscape of many urban centers of wealthy countries. As people of different backgrounds crossed borders to fill the labor needs of these sites, these urban centers became more multilingual and multicultural. Learning the official language of the host country was critical in enabling migrants to integrate into these new environments and to find meaningful employment. Investment became a means to examine how language learning expanded both symbolic and material resources, and how English language learners were able to access and participate in contexts usually dominated by native English speakers.
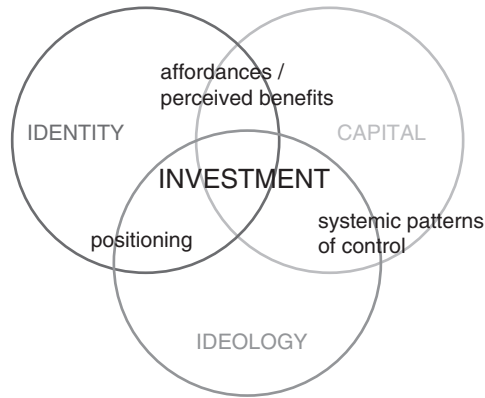
Figure 1 Darvin and Norton's 2015 model of investment.

As technological innovations continue to transform the 21st century by offering a more flexible and fluid engagement with the world, there are important implications for theories of language and identity (Darvin, 2016). The spaces of socialization and information exchange continue to multiply, in both face-to-face and virtual worlds, locally, and globally. As English language learners move fluidly across transnational spaces, they are able to learn and use English in exciting new ways. How they negotiate these spaces and new forms of sociality has become increasingly relevant to language education research. At the same time, how power operates in these spaces has become less visible. An examination of investment in this shifting communication landscape challenges us to understand how these changes provide innovative affordances of learning, while positioning learners in new ways. How do learners gain access to these multiple, shifting spaces of socialization? In this new communicative order, how do learners claim the right to speak?

To provide a critical framework that responds to these questions, Darvin and Norton (2015) have constructed a model of investment that responds to a more mobile and fluid world, where language learners move in and out of online and offline sites (Figure 1). This model recognizes how the skills, knowledge, and resources learners possess are valued differently in these multiple spaces. As they are able to interact with others from different parts of the world and from communities that share specific interests, language learners are exposed to very different belief systems and worldviews. To draw attention to how these ideologies operate on micro and macro levels, this model examines both communicative events and communicative practices. Institutional processes and patterns of control shape what become regular practices, but it is in specific instances or events that learners are able to question, challenge, and reposition themselves to claim the right to speak. To provide a lens that calls attention to how structures of power work, while finding opportunities for learners to exercise agency, this model locates investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology.

Darvin and Norton (2015) refer to *ideologies* as "dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 72). Neoliberal ideology for instance upholds the supremacy of market forces, and the notion of the individual as what Foucault calls an "entrepreneur of one's self." Following this logic, impoverished and unemployed people, regardless of the power structures that prohibit their upward social mobility, may be viewed as simply not persevering or entrepreneurial enough. Ideological assumptions guide the choices people make until these assumptions become "common sense," and repeated actions become "practice." Hence, ideology is constructed and maintained through the imposition of power, through hegemonic consent, and the repetition of practices. In the same way, language ideologies that privilege English, for instance, are reproduced through language policies constructed by governments, the acquiescence to such policies, standardized testing, and the use of English in different discourses with limited forms of resistance.

As learners move fluidly across spaces, ideologies collude and compete, shaping learner identities and restructuring opportunities to listen, speak, read, and write, both on and offline. Concomitantly, this model recognizes that the value of one's economic, cultural, or social capital shifts as it travels across time and space. Its value is subject to, but not completely constrained by, the ideologies of different groups or fields. As Bourdieu notes, it is when different forms of capital are perceived and recognized as legitimate that they become symbolic capital. It follows that the extent to which teachers are able to recognize the value of the linguistic or cultural capital learners bring to the classroom—their prior knowledge, home literacies, mother tongues— will impact the extent to which learners will invest in the language and literacy practices of their classrooms. At the same time, as learners oscillate between online and offline contexts, they are able to assemble and engage more complex linguistic and non-linguistic repertoires, where English becomes just one of many resources. The unbounded nature of these interactions grant learners greater agency to participate in and withdraw from spaces, to invest in and disinvest from communicative practices, and this includes the decision to choose or resist the use of English.

Pedagogical Implications

Through an examination of the interplay of identity, ideology, and capital, language teachers are better able to explore and understand the conditions under which language learners will invest in language and literacy practices of diverse spaces. The model extends the question, "To what extent are learners invested in the language and literacy practices of their classrooms and communities" to:

1. How invested are learners in their present and imagined *identities*? In what ways are they positioned by others, and how do they, in turn, position interlocutors in ways that grant or refuse power? How can learners gain from or resist these *positions*?

2.   What do learners perceive as *benefits* of investment, and how can the capital they possess serve as *affordances for learning?*
3.   What *systemic patterns of control* (policies, codes, institutions) make it difficult to invest and acquire certain capital? How have prevailing *ideologies* structured learners' habitus and predisposed them to certain ways of thinking? (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 47)

By posing these questions, English teachers are able to design learning activities that recognize the rich diversity of learners and affirm the histories, languages, and identities that they bring to class. The central questions teachers need to ask concern the conditions under which learners will speak, and which identity positions offer greater opportunities for access to powerful networks. Learners who may be marginalized by virtue of gender, race, ethnicity, social class or sexual orientation can be helped to reframe their relationship with others in order to appropriate more powerful identities and claim the right to speak. Such learners, for example, may be excellent musicians, artists, or athletes. If the teacher constructs classroom activities in which these talents are made more visible, the identity of the learner may shift in the eyes of classmates, with greater opportunity for social interaction.

In the literature, one such activity is the construction of *identity texts,* which are creative works or performances that promote enhanced investment on the part of learners (Cummins & Early, 2010). In recent years, digital stories have become a popular identity text project that encourages learners to claim authorial agency. By borrowing and repurposing texts, images, and music, learners are able to become co-authors and agents of literacy acquisition. In a study of the creative process of ninth-grade students, Rowsell (2012) demonstrated how their production of their own digital stories about "an odyssey of self" helped them reposition their identity. By making different multimodal choices to represent their lived histories, learners are granted individual creative expression. 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. For Darvin and Norton (2014), digital storytelling is a powerful way to affirm the transnational identities of migrant learners, whose lives are emblematic of the fluidity of the new world order. Through a workshop where high school students produced their own stories of migration, learners were able to use their own voices and mother tongue and draw from the modalities of images and music to share their lived experiences. Kendrick, Chemjor, and Early (2012) conducted a project where rural Kenyan students were provided with digital cameras, laptops with connectivity, and voice recorders to be journalists. As students conducted interviews with government officials, their digital tools became signifiers of membership in a journalistic context. Through role-playing, students were able to ask about controversial issues like dissent and police corruption, and negotiate the performance of new, more empowered identities.

Similarly, in a project that promoted digital literacy and English language learning with young women from poorly resourced communities in Uganda, Norton,

Jones, and Ahimbisibwe (2011) helped the participants gain access to digital tools that gave them the opportunity to do research about HIV/AIDS. Through private Internet access, the young women were able to pose questions about the female body and teenage pregnancy that they might otherwise have not been comfortable discussing in larger groups. Engaging with the digital enabled them not only to access English in new ways, but also to construct their identities as empowered young women fully invested in the language practices of their classroom. Toohey, Dagenais, and Schultze (2012) drew on the use of video to build communities of English language learners across global sites. In a multi-country videomaking project with school children in India, Mexico, and Canada, the researchers found that the making of videos offered language learners opportunities for meaning making that extended beyond their particular second language capabilities.

Apart from serving as a guide to construct inclusive and identity-affirming activities, the model of investment also provides a way for language teachers to reflect on their own pedagogical practices. Teachers are challenged to consider the extent to which they recognize and respond to the material, unequal lived realities of learners, and their multiple identities. How does the teacher's own worldview position learners? In what ways do teachers recognize or overlook, value or devalue the linguistic and cultural capital that learners bring to class? By continually addressing these questions through teacher training and reflexive practice, language teachers are able to develop a critical disposition necessary for a pedagogy that affirms and empowers the complex, multiple identities of learners. Through this critical pedagogy, English language learners are encouraged to invest in the language and literacy practices of their classrooms, and claim their right to speak and be heard

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SEE ALSO: Digital Storytelling; English Dominance on the Internet; Language, Literacy, and Community; Social Media in the Writing Classroom and Beyond; Teacher Identity; Technology and Pedagogical Goals

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how the constructs of *identity* and *investment* highlight language learning as a social practice implicated in relations of power. In an increasingly mobile world, English language learners navigate more complex, multiple spaces, where they need to continually reframe their identities and develop wider linguistic and non-linguistic repertoires. Designed as a critical lens that can capture the dynamics of power in this new communicative order, an expanded model of language learning locates investment at the intersection of identity, capital and ideology. It challenges educators to reflect on our pedagogical practices, and to formulate a more critical approach to affirming and empowering language learner identities in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS

digital literacy, digital storytelling, identity, ideology, investment

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