

Language learner stories and imagined identities

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In seeking to better understand English language learners and their imagined identities, which is the central focus of our article, scholars have drawn extensively on the work of Norton and colleagues. This work has foregrounded the language learner as a participating social agent with complex and changing identities. It is this agentive sense of self that is linked, in narratives, to larger socio-cultural and historical social practices. Our interest here lies particularly in the effects of migration on language learners. With this in mind, we advocate that classroom communities be fostered wherein a range of narrative identities, as sense-making practices, are respectfully harnessed as resources for learners of diverse linguistic histories, to create more socially just and responsive “possible worlds”.

Keywords: identities, imagined identities, narrative identities, small stories, language education

Articles in the recent 2011 Forum section of *Narrative Inquiry* (vol. 21, issue 2) demonstrate convincingly how narrative and identity work has flourished across different disciplines and diverse research traditions, partly as a result of the wide-ranging influence of Jerome Bruner (1986, 1991). Interpretation of constructs such as *narratives and narrating* (Bamberg, 2010) and constructions of *self* and *identity* in and across *contexts* are also of increasing interest to those of us in language education (cf. Barkhuizen, 2011; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Norton & Early, 2011; Pavlenko, 2007). As Kress (1993), drawing on Halliday (1978) notes, “Language

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always happens as text; and as text, it inevitably occurs in a particular generic form. That generic form arises out of the action of social subjects in particular social situations.” (p. 27). In Hallidayan terms, narratives, in content and structure, like all language texts, must be understood relative to the context of situation and the context of culture in which they emerge. In this view, narratives are variously understood and interpreted according to an individual’s range of familiarity with the registers of the culture in which they are situated. As a result, research on the ways in which diverse language learner stories travel across time and space is of crucial concern to language educators in our mobile, globalized world.

In a similar vein, Norton (2000), drawing on poststructuralist theory, holds that in the field of language education, ‘identity’ is not a fixed construct but must be understood with respect to a learner’s relationship to the broader social, political and economic world. In this perspective, identities, which are frequently sites of struggle, change across time and space, and are reproduced in situated social interactions. Her view is consistent with Bruner’s construct of a self that is “distributed” (Bruner, 1990, p. 107), a “Self [that] can be seen as a product of the situation in which it operates” (p. 109). Specifically, as language educators and researchers, like Sunil Bhatia in the Forum (Bhatia, 2011), we are keenly interested in the identities of learners in the context of migration and transnational movement, and how learner stories might inform educational theory, policy and practice.

An email, recently received from a newly graduated Ugandan UBC student, is illustrative of the issues that arise with respect to identity and context in the field of language education. After spending a year with her husband and two young boys in Vancouver, our former student, Doris Maandebo Abiria, sent the following update from Kampala on the 28th November, 2011:

The boys are getting better. In school the teachers complain they have gone with a style they are calling Western. The teachers say the boys have an accent that they do not hear while the boys say the teachers speak English up side down... Paul talks to the teacher in class any time he wishes when children are expected first to listen to the teacher and talk when the teacher asks them. Now we keep checking on them frequently in school and supporting them more at home. We hope that by next year they will be okay.

As we read this small story (Bamberg, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2006), we were greatly moved, and wondered how these two young boys might be supported to negotiate the “otherness” and “difference” of transnational movement and migration across contexts, particularly with respect to language education. We also wondered how many power struggles, local and global, socioeconomic, historical, and hierarchical in academic terms, were being waged in this rural East African school context. On a larger scale, the Ugandan small story raises the question of how a

better understanding of such narratives might inform educational practice for the benefit of students, teachers and parents, alike.

We begin with a brief introduction to our own personal narratives, where stories ‘big’ and ‘small’ have always been central in our language learning and teaching research, as well as in our teacher education practice, whether in Africa or North America. We have sought to ensure that our research does justice to the stories that have been entrusted to us, and that the stories of language learners not only bear witness to personal challenges or celebrations of success, but also that learning experiences promote social action and educational change. Most recently, we have been centrally concerned with ways in which narrative inquiry can provide insight into the relationship between researcher identity and language teacher education in poorly resourced communities (Norton & Early, 2011).

In seeking to better understand language learners and imagined identities, which is the central focus of this Forum article, scholars have drawn extensively on the work of Norton and her colleagues (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). This work has foregrounded the language learner as a participating social agent, and, as noted above, it is this agentic sense of self that is linked, in narratives, to larger socio-cultural and historical social practices. Moreover, as previously indicated, our interest lies particularly in the effects of migration on language learners. Accordingly, we advocate that classroom communities be fostered wherein a range of narrative identities, as sense-making practices, are respectfully harnessed as resources for learners of diverse linguistic histories.

In this spirit, we take the position that one of the most important features for language researchers, teachers and schools in the twenty-first century is, as our title suggests, to link “language learner stories and imagined identities”. Drawing on Bruner’s work, the goal of such an endeavor is not only to realize the potential of individuals’ “actual minds” but to create both for individuals and for society, more socially just and responsive “possible worlds”. Our discussion will be grounded in three small stories about classroom learning that are narrated by ESL (English as a Second Language) students, and are available in prior publications (Cummins & Early, 2011; Norton, 2000). The first small story is narrated by Tomer Shaha, a young man born in Israel who immigrated to Canada when he was in Grade 6; the second by Kanta Khalid, a young woman born in Pakistan who immigrated to Canada when she was in Grade 4; and the third by Mai, a young woman born in Vietnam who immigrated to Canada as a young adult.

Tomer: In my ESL, I was given the most amazing opportunities. My teacher, Lisa Leoni, ... in her classroom I did not feel like an ESL student. All it was, it was a class to develop your English, not that you are a second class citizen... The confidence

the teacher gives you, it's less the teaching, it's the confidence you get to be able to push yourself forward in learning. (Leoni, Cohen, Cummins, Bismilla, Bajwa, Hanif, Khalid & Shahar, 2011, p. 57)

Kanta: How it helped me [writing bilingual stories] was when I came here in Grade 4, the teachers didn't know what I was capable of. I was given a pack of crayons and a coloring book and told to get on with it. And after that I felt so bad. So when I started writing the book [Entitled 'The New Country'] I could actually show the world — I am not just a coloring person-I can show you that I am something. (Leoni et al., 2011, p. 50)

Mai: 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. (Norton, 2000, p. 143)

These three small stories, narrated many years apart by students of different backgrounds (Israeli, Pakistani, Vietnamese); ages (youth, pre-teen, young adult); and genders (male and female) share a number of important lessons to be learned. These lessons index related concerns about the centrality of learners' identity in language learning; how teacher-student interaction affects learner investment in the language practices of the classroom; and the extent to which both space and time are implicated in learners' imagined identities. We also gain insight into the learners' power to act as social agents to resist or re-write their stories. That so much can be gleaned from three small tales is testimony to the potential of language learner stories to transform educational practice.

So, then, one of the first insights that we gained from these language learner stories is that to have one's identity constructed as an "ESL student" is problematic. As implicit in Tomer's story, the image too commonly reflected for English language learners is that of "a second class citizen." Kanta's story, too, is one of early experiences of being constructed as a person who, because of lack of English, is incapable of engaging in literacy or cultural production at an age-appropriate cognitive level. Mai's story further illustrates how even when students are invited to narrate their stories, the students' many complex and potentially conflicted identities are sometimes essentialized as "ethnic" (European, Indian), and how classroom practices can fail to interpellate students' multiple subjectivities, interests, and intentions.

Norton's poststructuralist construct of "investment" (Norton, 2000) provides further insight the relationship between student-teacher interaction and student commitment to learning. As Norton notes, the sociological construct of investment complements more 'fixed,' psychological constructs of motivation, and seeks

to make meaningful connections between a learner's commitment to language learning and learner identity. As Norton notes, if learners "invest" in learning a language, they do so with the understanding that the social and economic resources they accrue will increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. This, in turn, will expand the identity options available to learners and their access to diverse communities. A central question for Norton, then, is not only, "Is this student motivated to learn this language?" But also, "Is this student invested in the language practices of this classroom?"

To elaborate, we return to the stories of Tomer and Kanta. Their teacher, Lisa, created a classroom context and a set of language practices that opened up students' learning opportunities and identity options, and greatly impacted their investment in the language practices of the classroom. The students not only found personal value in telling their own stories, but they learned from each other, not only from the teacher and from textbooks. Of central interest were the different ways of telling stories and of making sense of the world, and the sometimes competing historical narratives they encountered.¹ As Phillip Hammack, in one of the Forum articles notes, "a narrative approach is posited as better able to capture the reality of lives in context and to enable possibilities for social and political transformation than variable-centered experimental science, which continues to dominate psychology" (2011, p. 311).

Tomer and Kanta's stories attest to this claim; collectively they increased the range of perspectives, possible worlds, and identity options that the students could imagine. Moreover, in this context, Western grand narratives were not reified, but challenged. Through this narrating process, as is documented in this classroom and many others (Cummins & Early, 2011), marginalized students were enabled to find their voice and 'talk back'.

Interestingly, Mai's teacher may have been equally well intentioned in creating a space for learners to tell their stories of their lived experiences in their countries. However, Mai did not read and interpret the pedagogical context or the narrating process in her classroom in the same way as Tomer and Kanta did. One possible explanation is that Mai, in her reading of these narrative texts, carried a different notion than her teacher of how language classroom practices and cultural contexts should be constructed. At the very least, Mai's teacher did not make explicit, as did Lisa, the cultural capital to be gained by listening to and learning from linguistically and culturally diverse stories and competing historical narratives, variously structured and told. As a result, Mai saw no possible gains, socially or economically, in listening to other learners' stories; there was no link to her current struggles as a young immigrant woman, or to the identity, of a successful global citizen that she hoped to construct in the future.

The point here is that language learner stories, while having enormous potential, are not always sound educational practices. It follows that to be effective a teacher must ask: How might narratives and narrating be linked to the language learners' identities, everyday needs and interests, and hopes for the future? How might narratives be used to link possibilities for greater learner investment, on the one hand, and social action and transformation, on the other? To help address these questions, we turn to Bruner's (1986) well-known distinction between "paradigmatic" and "narrative" modes of thought. While a paradigmatic mode of thought leads to "good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, sound argument." (p. 13), a narrative mode gives rise to:

Good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily "true") historical accounts. It deals in human or human-like intentions and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course. " (p. 13)

Narratives then are fertile ground in which language learners, particularly those who have or are experiencing asymmetrical relations of power and legacies of discrimination, can link to the past and yet explore new identity formations and possible worlds through their imagination. Affording language learners' opportunities through narrative constructions to explore possible worlds in which new identity formations, practices, and activities may be rehearsed and shaped in safe spaces is, we argue, a very important feature of twenty-first century education.

However, it is not our intention to suggest that these new identity formations remain 'imaginary'. People who have access to a wide range of resources will have access to power and privilege, which will in turn influence how they understand their relationship to the world and their possibilities for the future. Thus the question "Who am I?" cannot be understood apart from the question, "What can I do?", and what learners aspire to "do", must be understood with respect to frequently inequitable distribution of material resources, in both local and global terms (Norton & Williams, 2012). Such theory, according to Bamberg (personal e-mail communication, Nov. 25, 2011), is important for narrative analysts: "While the emphasis of narrative analysts usually is either on differentiating the self from the others, or on integrating past with present, 'narrative agency' (and its contextual construction) has been left 'alone'."

This brings us to reconsider the agentic aspect of self and identity construction. As the three learner stories illuminated, the learner can act as a social agent by re-writing stories 'big' and 'small' in empowering ways, by resisting classroom practices, or by withdrawing entirely from classroom settings. The form that learners' resistance might take to the identities that are constructed for them by their teachers, the classroom community, or curriculum materials on offer is a topic of increasing interest in language education research. As Canagarajah (2004) notes,

these include resorting to clandestine literacy practices to create “pedagogical safe houses” where learners negotiate the conflicting tensions they encounter as members of diverse communities. Alternatively, learners may resort to leaving their materials “at home”, playing cards, and talking with friends throughout lessons (Talmy, 2008). One can only imagine how things might have been different had the learners’ language practices in their pedagogical safe houses been recruited in the interests of student learning. As Bamberg notes, such small stories, told in passing and in everyday encounters, are, indeed, “the real stories of our lived lives.” (Bamberg, 2004, p. 254).

Reading the recent Forum section of *Narrative Inquiry* through the lens of language education, we have argued that a crucial feature for language researchers, teachers and schools in the twenty-first century is to link language learner stories and imagined identities. In the spirit of Bruner, we made the case that such a pedagogical endeavor holds great promise not only to realize the potential of individuals’ “actual minds” but to create more socially just and responsive “possible worlds”. To this end, we have suggested that teachers and researchers need greater insight into the relationship between language learner identity and language learner investment. Significantly, as language learners find their voice, speak out and ‘talk back,’ as they did in the three small tales reported here, they provide powerful testimony to the potential of language learner stories to transform educational practice.

Note

1. To read Lisa’s own small stories of her language practices, transformative pedagogy and teacher identity, see Leoni et al. 2011, p. 48–49.

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