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Interview with Bonny Norton for *The Language Teacher*

Eton Churchill

The following interview was conducted through a series of email exchanges between Bonny Norton and Eton Churchill in the summer and fall of 2001.

Eton: On behalf of *The Language Teacher*, I would like to start by thanking you for taking time for this interview. We are honored to have your contribution to this special issue on social identity because so much of your work has inspired the contributors.

Bonny: I feel privileged to be interviewed for *The Language Teacher* and I am excited at the opportunity to share my views with readers of the journal. I see this interview as an opportunity to remain connected with the many teachers and communities I visited in Japan in 2000.

Eton: Your research (1995, 1997, 2000) on social identity and language learning has highlighted the relationship between the learner and the learning context. Could you explain why you feel the concept of social identity is so central to the process of language learning?

Bonny: As far back as 1981, when I was doing an honors degree in applied linguistics at Wits University in Johannesburg, South Africa, I was intrigued by the relationship between language, learning, and the social world. All my observations of language learners suggested that identity and language learning are inextricably intertwined. If we accept that social interaction is necessary (but not sufficient) for language learning, then language learners, at different stages in the language learning process, will need to interact with speakers of the target language.

Interaction, however, is a complex activity. In my research I take the position that every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors—they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Questions learners might ask themselves include the following: Under what conditions can I speak? How

will I be perceived by my interlocutor? How will my utterances be received? How relevant is my history and experience to this interaction? Thus, how learners perceive themselves, their histories, and their desires for the future determine, to some extent, what they speak about, to whom, and for what purposes. Furthermore, the greater the power difference between the language learner and the target language speaker, the more complex the interaction becomes. In sum, because social identity is an integral part of language learning, language learning is an ongoing process of construction and negotiation.

Eton: In your discussion of identity, you use the term *investment* to describe the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language (Norton, 2000, p. 10). Could you explain why you felt it was important to reconceptualize the notion of motivation as conceived by researchers such as Gardner and Lambert (1972), Crookes and Schmidt (1991), and Oxford and Shearin (1994)?

Bonny: When we speak of the *motivated student* or the *unmotivated student* we tend to think of the student as having a unified, coherent, ahistorical identity that is unchanging across time and space. In this view, motivation is considered an immutable personality trait of the language learner. If only Sook and Pablo were more motivated, they would learn better! My concern with this conception of motivation is that it is not consistent with either my observations or the critical theories I have found so compelling.

In my experience, I have known students to be sometimes motivated and sometimes unmotivated; in one context to be motivated, in another unmotivated. Theoretically, too, the notion of motivation does not capture the complexity of student identity—an identity that is often a site of struggle. Frequently, to say that a student is unmotivated is to fail to do justice to the complexity of a student's life, history, and desires. In this view, there is a ten-

dency to blame the victim rather than seek a more comprehensive understanding of an apparent lack of motivation

For these reasons, it struck me that there was need for a more powerful construct to capture the complexity of student motivation; we needed a new language to help frame our understanding. I found this new language in the concept of investment. While I have used Bourdieu's (1977) work to flesh out this concept, the central idea it encapsulates is that investment is best understood in the context of a post-structural notion of identity. When we *invest* in a second language, we desire a wider range of identities and an expanded set of possibilities in the future. Conversely, if we are not invested in a particular target language, it may be as a result of limited options for identification and possibility. Investment, then, is not a fixed personality trait, but a construct that attempts to capture the relationship of the learner to the larger, changing, social world. Instead of asking, for example, "Is this student motivated to learn English?" it may be more productive to ask, "What is the student's investment in learning English?" By reframing the question, we are encouraged to seek broader explanations for success or failure in language learning; we are encouraged to view the student as having a complex identity that is best understood in the context of wider social, historical, and economic processes. To invest in a language is to invest in an identity.

Eton: I can see how the notions of identity and investment are theoretically important for the learner in the ESL context, but what practical applications are there for the EFL teacher here in Japan walking into class on Monday morning?

Bonny: There are many ways in which I believe my research is relevant for the EFL teacher in Japan. Although, in the Japanese context, language learners may not be interacting with target language speakers on a regular basis, they are nevertheless interacting with a wide range of texts pertinent to the target language. Such texts are incorporated into curriculum contexts in the form of textbooks, assessment contexts in the form of standardized language tests, and policy contexts in the form of documents and guidelines for teachers. With respect to these three contexts, what are the practical applications of this research for English teachers in Japan?

Research on the use of English language textbooks has highlighted struggles over identity. Suresh Canagarajah's (1993, 1999) research in Sri Lanka, for example, demonstrates convincingly that English language learners may be ambivalent about the textbooks they use in the English language classroom. Christopher Candlin in Hong Kong is currently conducting a large-scale study on bias in language textbooks, and Jane Sunderland (1994) in

England has conducted in-depth research on gender stereotypes in language textbooks.

The reading of a target language text, no less than a conversation with a target language speaker, raises questions of the kinds of identities that readers bring to the text, which identities are available to them in the text, and what possibilities there might be for alternative readings of the text. Related to the choice of textbooks and texts is the relationship between teaching, identity, and popular culture. While popular culture is often dismissed in formal education, it is clear that many language learners find popular culture appealing and enjoyable. On a Monday morning, an EFL teacher in Japan would need to be sensitive to the ways in which texts construct meaning and are integral to larger social and economic practices.

The relationship between scores on language tests and learner identity is also profound. Notwithstanding other evidence to the contrary, if a student in Japan scores low on the TOEFL, for example, she or he may likely be positioned as a *poor* language learner. For this reason, when students in Japan take a high-stakes language test, they may be centrally concerned with second-guessing the test maker. Rather than bringing personal experience and history to bear on the test, they will ask, "How am I expected to read this text?" "What interpretation would be considered appropriate for this listening test?" It is the imbalance of power between test maker and test taker that is central to meaning construction, and my research suggests that changes in the balance of power are reflected in the meaning that students construct from texts—whether written or oral. Despite the extensive research that is conducted on international English language tests, questions of validity remain. I have argued in previous research that language testing organizations need to be conservative in the claims that they make on behalf of their tests. Furthermore, it is not only testing organizations that need to be accountable, but also the administrators who use such scores. On a Monday morning, then, the EFL teacher in Japan would need to consider to what extent it might be possible to redress power imbalances in the test-taking situation.

Significantly, however, if the teacher is required to administer international standardized language tests, the teacher may be as powerless as the students. At the level of policy, there is much debate about the role of English internationally and the extent to which the demand for English is undermining local and minority languages. The work of Kachru (1986, 1990), Pennycook (1994, 1998), Phillipson (1992), Skutnabb-Kangas (1994), and Tollefson (1991) is important in this regard.

Discussions of identity are central to this debate as they raise a host of questions including the fol-

lowing: Who *owns* English? What power do nonnative speakers of English have? Who has access to English? What forms of English are considered acceptable internationally? Is mother-tongue literacy compromised by the early introduction of English in elementary schools? All of these questions address, to some extent, students' perceptions of themselves, their histories, and their desires for the future. On Monday morning, the challenge for many EFL teachers in Japan is to encourage language development while simultaneously validating the mother tongue, local affiliations, and national histories.

In sum, I believe, as others have said, that there is nothing as practical as good theory. In Japan, no less than in any other teaching context, students come to class on Monday morning with multiple identities and investments. In order for teachers to engage actively with these students, the teacher needs to better understand how questions of identity and investment are implicated in classroom practices. The struggle to interpret texts used in the classroom engages student identities in complex ways. The struggle to negotiate language tests is in fact a struggle over which identities to portray in the language testing context; and the struggle over the ownership of English has profound implications for the status and role of the Japanese language in Japan. In each of these contexts, and I'm sure there are many more, questions of student resistance may also be better understood.

Eton: How do you see some of your current work informing the practices of EFL teachers in Japan?

Bonny: I am working with Yasuko Kanno on a special issue of the *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* on the topic, "Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities." The learning contexts featured in the issue include situations in Japan, Pakistan, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and involve the learning of English, French, Japanese, and Chinese. In the special issue, we hope to introduce an orientation to the future into our educational discourse and to highlight the role of hope and desire in the construction of language learners' identities.

The subject of imagined communities is also central in a chapter I am writing with Aneta Pavlenko for the Kluwer Handbook on English Language Teaching. Our chapter discusses ways in which language learners' desired memberships in different imagined communities affect their learning trajectories. With regard to national imagined communities, for example, we will examine ways in which postcolonial identities are constructed simultaneously through and in opposition to English as a global language. With regard to racial and ethnic identities, we will explore the multiple worlds of

language learners who may strive for membership in communities other than those inhabited by white middle-class speakers of Standard English. And with regard to social and gender identities, we will point to ways in which membership in imagined social and professional communities shapes the learners' multiple investments in the language learning process. We hope that these issues will resonate with the concerns of EFL teachers in Japan.

Eton: Thank you so much for making time for *The Language Teacher*.

Bonny: Thank you.

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