13

LEARNER INVESTMENT AND LANGUAGE TEACHER IDENTITY

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Introduction

I have, for over two decades, been centrally concerned with the conditions under which language learners speak, read, and write the target language, and how relations of power enable or constrain opportunities to learn (Norton, 2013). Growing up in apartheid South Africa, I researched struggles over language rights and social change; now living in multilingual Canada, debates on language and identity remain vibrant and important. I have argued in my research that language learner identity is central to the process of language learning, and that a learner's investment in the language and literacy practices of a classroom has an important impact on language learning progress. In this view, language learning is enhanced if learners can claim more powerful identities in social interaction, and where power relations with interlocutors are inequitable, learners may seek to reframe such relationships in order to claim greater legitimacy as speakers.

An important extension of this work concerns language teaching, language teachers, and language teacher identity. Of primary interest is the extent to which language teachers promote learner investment in the language practices of their classrooms, and whether the teacher can expand the range of identities available to language learners. As I argue and illustrate in this chapter, promoting learner investment may necessitate shifts in teacher identity, as well as challenge conceptions of what it means to be a successful or legitimate teacher. Further, an expanded model of investment, which locates investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology (Darvin & Norton, 2015) may provide a useful analytical tool for future research on language teacher identity.

Defining language teacher identity

What I have learnt from both language learners and teachers is that "language" is not only a linguistic system but also a social practice in which identities and desires are negotiated. I have therefore defined identity as "the way 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. 4). This definition acknowledges that language teacher identity indexes both social structure and human agency, which shift over historical time and social context. Also important are the language teacher's hopes and desires for the future, and their imagined identities (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Language teachers need to navigate relations of power in the classroom and understand the possibilities and limitations of their institutions and communities. Like language learners, language teachers can reframe their relationships with others in order to claim more powerful identities from which to teach. Thus, while identity is conceptualized as multiple, changing, and a site of struggle, the very multiplicity of identity can be productively harnessed in the interests of more productive language teaching.

If teachers are to promote learner investment in the language practices of their classrooms, what implications does this have for language teacher identity? To provide an illustration of the implications of learner investment for language teacher identity, I will share the experiences of an English language teacher in Vancouver, who was struggling with considerable attrition in her adult education classes. In a term paper, Keeley Ryan (2012) compared two adult education classes, before and after she had read a considerable body of research on identity and investment in my graduate seminar at the University of British Columbia. In her first adult education class, the number of students dropped from 25 to 9 over a period of three months. As she notes, "I asked my colleagues what they thought I should do about the situation. I was told that this phenomenon was quite common, that my students were just not motivated to complete the course" (p. 4). Ryan was not satisfied with this explanation, and in her second adult education class, after reading extensively about learner investment, she decided to adopt a very different set of practices in her teaching. She began the class with a comprehensive questionnaire in which the students provided information on their experiences of learning English, their expectations of the class, and their hopes for the future. As Ryan learnt more about the students, not only from the questionnaire, but also from observations of classroom activities, she altered her practice "to reflect what [she] imagined their idea of a good school would look like" (p. 6). In this second class, there was very little attrition, with 25 of 29 students remaining till the end of the class. As Ryan explains, "I tried to match the subject positions of the majority of the class, as expressed through the questionnaire, with the language practices of the classroom, in order to maximize the investment of the majority of the students" (p. 19). Ryan

emerged from the second class with a greater sense of accomplishment and legitimacy as a language teacher.

In order to investigate and better understand the experiences of teachers, such as Keeley Ryan, I have worked with Ron Darvin to develop a more comprehensive model of investment, which locates investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology (see Figure 13.1). The model challenges teachers to reflect on the extent to which classroom events and practices are indexical of more systemic ideological practices, and raises the following three questions for research on language teaching (Darvin, 2015, p. 597):

1. To what extent do teachers recognize and respond to the material, unequal lived realities of learners, and their multiple identities?
2. What dominant ideologies and systemic patterns of control circumscribe the realities and experiences of language learners and teachers? How does the world view of teachers position learners?
3. To what extent and in what ways do teachers recognize the linguistic and cultural capital that language learners bring to class?

An examination of these questions has important implications for language teacher identity. What is the relationship of the teacher to the world of the classroom, the institution, and the community? How is that relationship structured across time, and in diverse social and educational contexts? What are the teacher's hopes and possibilities for the future? An enhanced understanding of the relationship between investment, identity, capital, and ideology will provide greater insight into language teacher identity.

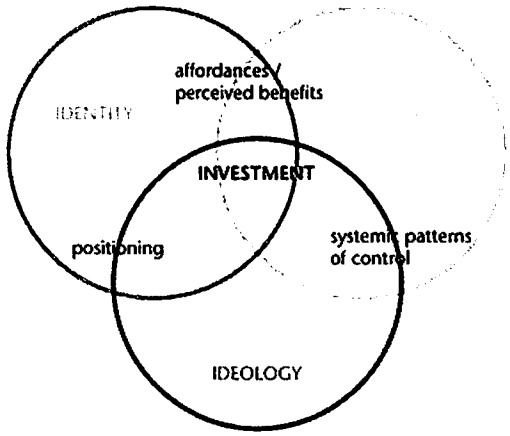

FIGURE 13.1 Darvin and Norton's 2015 Model of Investment (*Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 35*, p. 42)

Language teacher identity: Insights from teaching and research

While I have done much collaborative research with language teachers and graduate students in a range of international contexts, I have for over a decade focused on the African context, and Uganda in particular, to explore questions of identity and investment in language learning and teaching, and the educational opportunities provided by advances in digital technology. What we have found is that both Ugandan students and their teachers are highly invested in new literacies because the internet, mobile phones, digital cameras, and other digital technologies have expanded what is socially imaginable for students and teachers, and extended the range of identities available for them. Advanced education, professional opportunities, study abroad, and other opportunities have become part of imagined futures and imagined identities. In our research, we do not suggest that what is socially imaginable is also socially available in the African context. However, it has been clear to us that as students and teachers have developed valued digital skills they have also gained increasing cultural capital and social power. By way of illustration, the investments of female teachers in digital practices have been particularly profound. One Ugandan teacher named Betty, for example, noted that she "felt like a man" when using a digital camera:

> I feel very powerful like a man because I had never held a camera in my life. I have always seen only men carrying cameras and taking photos in big public functions like maybe independence celebration, political rallies, and wedding ceremonies. But now as I move in the community taking pictures with my camera, I feel I am also very powerful, like a man.
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> *(Andema, 2014, p. 91)*

In the process of navigating my identity as a researcher in the Ugandan context, I have also drawn on my own identity as a teacher to reframe relationships with research participants who are teachers (Norton & Early, 2011). Amongst many other researcher identities, including "international guest," and "collaborative team member," Margaret Early and I argue that the identity "teacher" helped to reduce power differentials between ourselves as researchers and the teachers as participants. In a focal group meeting in a secondary school in rural Uganda, for example, I introduced the discussion by explicitly claiming the identity "teacher":

> We're very interested in what are your particular challenges that you find in teaching. Because obviously we are all interested in improving education. [Teachers: Mm.] Obviously. *We are all teachers.* [Teachers: Yes.] So we need to identify first of all the particular challenges that uh—that you—that you have in your own subject areas.
>
> *(p. 429, italics added)*

In another extract in this data set, it is clear that the identity "teacher" is not only a professional designation, but also indexes the way teacher identity is constructed in the context of institutional space. Our focus group meetings took place in the principal's office, the only place in this school where we could locate a private interview space. However, the following debate ensued about who should sit where in this politicized context (pp. 429–430):

BONNY: Um. I think I'm—I'll probably have to sit over here—
ABEDNIGO: It's okay. You can sit on the principal's chair.
BONNY: Sit on the principal's chair.
SPEAKERS: [laughter]
BONNY: Uh.
ABEDNIGO: And—
BONNY: Yeah. I'd—Just in the interest of—
MUSA: [inaudible]
MARGARET: Do you want your notepad?
BONNY: Yeah thank you. Um. Actually I feel kind of awkward sitting in the principal's chair [laughter].
BONNY: So I might end up sitting on top of this table.
KAIKARA: Yeah, Bonny, come and sit here—I can sit on the other side.
BONNY: Oh. Okay.

In identifying and making sense of this data, Early and I drew on conceptions of the "small story" in narrative inquiry to better understand the ways in which we related to the Ugandan teachers in our study. As Bamberg (2004) notes, whereas big stories may be oriented toward life histories, small stories are situated in small talk and chitchat, but nevertheless provide a "narrative construction of self" (2004, p. 368).

Teacher identity, transdisciplinarity, and the African Storybook

For over two years (2013–2015), I worked with The Douglas Fir Group (2016) to help develop a transdisciplinary framework for second language acquisition (SLA), in which I represented the identity perspective. The deliberations of this group resulted in a framework that recognizes language learning as a complex phenomenon, existing along three interrelated dimensions of social activity: micro contexts of social action and interaction, meso contexts of sociocultural institutions and communities, and macro levels of ideological structure. While The Douglas Fir Group sought to capture transdisciplinarity with respect to language learning, in an increasingly multilingual global context, it was not within the scope of the work to conduct a comprehensive examination of transdisciplinarity with regard to language teaching.

To address this gap, Peter De Costa and I are using The Douglas Fir Group's (2016) transdisciplinary perspective as a guiding framework for a special issue of *The Modern Language Journal* on "Transdisciplinarity and language teacher identity."

This special issue, with contributions from leading scholars in language teacher identity, will capture the multifaceted and transdisciplinary nature of language teacher identity research. It will respond to real-world concerns of second and foreign language teachers and teacher educators as they attempt to navigate the three dimensions of social activity (micro, meso, and macro). Consistent with the 2015 model of investment, The Douglas Fir Group holds that it is often only when the semiotic resources of learners—and we will argue, teachers—at the classroom interaction level (micro) are valued by the school (meso) and society (macro) that optimal language learning and teaching results are obtained.

In addition to co-editing the special issue with De Costa, I will be working with Espen Stranger-Johannessen on a joint paper for the special issue that examines language teacher identity in Uganda, in the context of our collaborative work on the African Storybook (AS) project (http://www.africanstorybook.org/). This initiative of the South African Institute for Distance Education consists of an online repository for traditional and contemporary African stories that allows teachers, parents, and other users to download, translate, adapt, and upload digital stories appropriate for young African children. Our paper examines how teachers advance the goal of improving the early literacy of Ugandan children in local languages, as well as English, from Grades 1 to 4. Data were collected in three rural Ugandan schools from July to December 2014, and we found qualitative research methodologies the most generative for our purposes. Stranger-Johannessen and I will draw on the constructs of identity, investment, capital, and ideology to help explain findings from the study, and relate these findings to The Douglas Fir Group's transdisciplinary framework. Our preliminary analysis suggests that shifts of identity are associated with changing pedagogical practices in the use of these stories, and the ways the digital stories can promote investment on the part of young learners. At the same time, an understanding of the way ideology impacts language learning and teaching in Ugandan classrooms is central to the analysis.

Directions for future research

In our chapter on future directions in identity research, De Costa and I suggest that future identity work will explore how teacher identities have evolved in the wake of globalization and neoliberal impulses (De Costa & Norton, in press). How are the global movements of people, ideas, goods, and services affecting language teaching and language teacher identity? What are the impacts of accountability measures, school ranking practices, and the pursuit of profit? How will debates on the native/non-native language teacher evolve? To what extent will issues of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation remain vibrant?

My own research program will continue to focus on the ways in which advances in digital technology are impacting the identities and investments of language learners and teachers in both wealthy and poorly resourced communities across global sites. At the same time, given my work as a language teacher educator in a

tertiary institution, I will continue to learn from language teachers, such as Keeley Ryan, who challenge me to consider the relevance of identity theory for classroom practice, and the importance of classroom practice for the advancement of theory. Is research on the identity of the language teacher educator the next frontier?

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