

Identity as a sociocultural construct in second language research

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Introduction

In recent months, a graduate student at the University of British Columbia asked me for feedback on the mixed responses she had received to a manuscript submitted for publication to a highly prestigious second language journal. The anonymous comment by one reviewer stated as follows:

In the introduction, the author makes much of the point that the study takes a sociocultural approach. This is not borne out by the manuscript itself. There is no hint of a sociocultural analysis here along the lines suggested by Lantolf (2000), Lantolf & Appel (1994), Wertsch (1991) and others. The author certainly describes [the study] in its social context; however, this does not equate to a sociocultural analysis.

It was clear that the reviewer was equating “sociocultural theory” with a primarily Vygotskian framework (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978), associated with the work of second language scholars such as Jim Lantolf (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf 2000), while the student in question had a much broader conception of sociocultural theory.

In this article, I wish to make the case that sociocultural theory reflects a growing interest in interdisciplinarity in second language research, and that this research includes but goes beyond the sociocultural research associated exclusively with Vygotsky (see for example Zuengler & Cole, 2004). As a window on this second language research, I will be focussing in particular on the growing body of research that addresses the relationship between identity and language learning. I will first draw on the range of articles published in the special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* on Language and Identity that I edited in 1997 to make the case that, by the 1990s, much second language research had adopted an interdisciplinary, critical approach to identity research. Drawing on more recent research, I will then outline five main characteristics of research that addresses identity as a sociocultural construct, briefly examining the theories of a range of scholars who are associated with this broader conception of sociocultural research (Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Weedon, and Lave and Wenger). The final section will draw on my research on English language learning and teaching in Pakistan to illustrate the ways in which it is informed by this broad conception of sociocultural theory, in which identity is understood to be a sociocultural construct.

From social and cultural identity to sociocultural identity

It is interesting to note that in the 1970s and 1980s, second language researchers interested in the relationship between identity and language learning might have drawn distinctions between social identity and cultural identity. While “social identity” was seen to reference the relationship between the individual 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” referenced the relationship between an individual and members of a particular ethnic group (such as Mexican and Japanese) who are considered to share a common history, a common language, and similar ways of understanding the world. In my own earlier work, (Norton Peirce, 1995) I initially examined identity as a *social* construct as opposed to a *cultural* construct because I debated whether theories of cultural identity could do justice to the heterogeneity within the groups I encountered, and the dynamic and changing nature of identity I observed in my research. Theories of cultural identity tended to essentialize and reify identity in ways that I found problematic.

In more recent years, however, the difference between social and cultural identity is seen to be theoretically more fluid, and the intersections between social and cultural identities are more significant than their differences. In this more recent second language research, identity is seen as socioculturally constructed, and scholars draw on both institutional and community practices to understand the conditions under which language learners speak, read, and write the target language. To illustrate, I wish to draw on the diverse research projects covered in the special issue of the *TESOL Quarterly* in 1997. In the course of this analysis, I will make that case that a broad conception of sociocultural theory, with particular reference to identity and language learning, was alive and well in the 1990s.

A changing landscape...

When editing the special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* on Language and Identity, I was intrigued by the differences and similarities in the researchers’ conceptions of identity and language learning. With respect to the differences among the authors, I was struck by the fact that the authors *framed* identity in different terms. Thus the focus of Brian Morgan's research was on "social identity", Patsy Duff and Yuko Uchida's on "sociocultural identity", Lucia Thesen's on "voice", Sandra Schecter and Robert Bayley's on "cultural identity" and Constant Leung, Roxy Harris and Ben Rampton's on "ethnic identity".

As I examined the articles with greater care, however, I came to realize that the commonalities in the conceptions of identity, as articulated by the different researchers, were more marked than their differences. I argued at the time that the apparent differences between the theoretical orientations of the researchers might be explained in terms of the disciplines and research traditions that informed their work and the different emphases of their research projects. Morgan (1997), working within an institutional context, and committed to social change, adopted a more sociological approach to his conception of identity. Schecter & Bayley (1997), whose research focussed on the language socialization of a particular group of people with a common linguistic heritage, adopted a more anthropological approach to their analysis of identity. Duff & Uchida (1997), working within an institutional context, but addressing differences between American and Japanese teachers, found both social and cultural theories of identity useful. Leung, Harris & Rampton (1997), who were interested in the extent to which schools in England are adapting to an increasingly bilingual and multilingual student population, found theories of ethnicity helpful in addressing identity. Finally, Thesen (1997), who was interested in the life histories and biographies of students in transition in South Africa, and sought to give greater prominence to human agency in theorizing identity, found the social theory of Bakhtin, particularly the notion of "voice" relevant.

Defining a sociocultural theory of identity

The range of research covered in this *TESOL Quarterly* special issue reflects the wide range of research currently found in the broader field of second language research (see Norton, 2000, 2006). It is precisely because of the collapsing of boundaries between the “social” and “cultural” that we can talk of identity as a sociocultural construct, without necessarily limiting our analysis to a Vygotskian framework. The five characteristics of a sociocultural conception of identity, as evidenced in this broad range of research, can be identified as follows:

(i) A sociocultural conception of identity conceives of identity as dynamic and constantly changing across time and place. Indeed, a recurring theme throughout much research on identity and language learning is that of “transition.” Many of the participants in research projects on identity and language learning are undergoing significant changes in their lives, whether moving from one country to another (Kanno, 2003) or from one institution to the next (Harklau, 2000). As Kanno (2003, p. 135) notes:

The most important finding of this study is that it is possible for bilingual youths to reach a balance between two languages and cultures. The trajectories of their identity development show a gradual shift from a rigid and simplistic approach to bilingualism and biculturalism to a more sophisticated skill at negotiating belonging and control.

On a less optimistic note, Harklau’s (2000, p 36) participants had a very different experience of “transition”:

The very same students who had been considered the ‘good kids’ in high school, the ones praised and admired by their teachers, subsequently came to be characterized as underachieving and difficult students in their college ESL classes. ... I found that the way in which students’ identities were constructed in these two different educational institutions played a crucial role in students’ transition from high school to college.

(ii) Much research on identity conceives of identity as complex, contradictory, and multifaceted, and rejects any simplistic notions of identity. As Toohey (2000, p. 16) notes, “My research takes a different perspective on learners and learning. I reviewed feminist, cultural and poststructural theorists’ positions on identity as socially constructed, contradictory, dynamic and entailing power.”

(iii) Most researchers note that identity constructs and is constructed by language. As Pavlenko (2004, p. 54) argues, “Language is seen in this paradigm as the locus of social organization and power, and as a form of symbolic capital as well as a site of struggle where subjectivity and individual consciousness are produced.”

(iv) Most researchers note that identity construction must be understood with respect to larger social processes, marked by relations of power that can be either coercive or collaborative. As Pennycook (2001, p. 27) notes, “The notion of politics I am using here takes as its central concern the notion of power and views power as operating through all domains of life. Power is at the heart of questions of discourse, disparity, and difference”.

(v) Finally, much research seeks to link identity theory with classroom practice. As Canagarajah (1999 p. 186) notes:

Learners should be encouraged to become reflexive about their classroom relations since knowledge is socially constructed. Eventually, learners must be encouraged to

become reflexive about themselves, - i.e. how their values, community membership, historical background, and subject-positions motivate them to negotiate language and knowledge in particular ways.

So who besides Vygotsky is a sociocultural theorist?

Thus far, I have drawn on the breadth of work in second language research to make two arguments: The first argument is that sociocultural relationships must be understood with respect to larger institutional practices in schools, homes, and workplaces (the social) as well as more grounded practices associated with particular groups (the cultural). The second argument is that much contemporary research on identity and language learning shares an interest in the complex and dynamic nature of identity, co-constructed in a wide variety of sociocultural relationships, and framed within particular relations of power. I now wish to turn to my third argument, which seeks to make the case that this broad range of theory can enhance our understanding of the relationship between identity and language learning, and to the extent that this theory addresses both institutional and group practices, it can be considered “sociocultural theory”. I will defend this argument with reference to the work of Michael Bakhtin (1981, 1984) Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), Christine Weedon (1987), and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), all of whom have influenced research on identity and language learning. These theorists, while working within diverse disciplinary frameworks, are centrally concerned with both institutional and group practices, and thus, I argue, can be considered sociocultural theorists, who, in turn, have helped to conceptualize identity as a sociocultural construct.

Bakhtin (1981, 1984) takes the position that language needs to be investigated not as a set of idealized forms independent of their speakers or their speaking, but rather as situated utterances in which speakers, in dialogue with others, struggle to create meanings. For Bakhtin, the notion of the individual speaker is a fiction, as he sees all speakers constructing their utterances jointly, on the basis of their interaction with listeners, both in historical and contemporary, actual and assumed communities. Thus, language for him is “populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (1981, p. 294). Bakhtin stresses that the appropriation of the words of others is a complex and conflictual process: because the historical, present, and future positioning of speakers and those of their interlocutors are expressed in the “very words” of utterances, words are not neutral but express particular predispositions and value systems.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), a French sociologist, focuses on the often unequal relationships between interlocutors and the importance of power in structuring speech. In arguing that “speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it,” (1977, p. 652) Bourdieu suggests that the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks and that the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships. He argues that when a person speaks, the speaker wishes not only to be understood, but to be “believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished” (1977, p. 648). However, a speaker’s ability to “command a listener”(1977, p. 648) is unequally distributed because of the symbolic power relations between interlocutors. To redress the inequities between what Bourdieu calls legitimate and illegitimate speakers, Bourdieu argues that an expanded definition of competence should include the “right to speech” or “the power to impose reception.” (1977, p. 648).

Rather than seeing language learning as a gradual individual process of internalizing a neutral set of rules, structures, and vocabulary of a standard language, the work of both Bakhtin and Bourdieu offers us ways to think differently about language learning. Speakers need to struggle to appropriate the voices of others, and to "bend" those voices to their own purposes. Further, what others say, the customary discourse of any particular community, may privilege or debase certain speakers. For this reason, finding answering words for the words of others is as much a social as linguistic struggle. The work of Christine Weedon, like that of Bakhtin and Bourdieu, is centrally concerned with the conditions under which people speak, within both institutional and community contexts. Like other poststructuralist theorists who inform her work, Weedon foregrounds the central role of language in her analysis of the relationship between the individual and the social:

Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed (Weedon, 1987, p. 21).

Weedon notes that the terms "subject" and "subjectivity" signify a different conception of the individual than that associated with humanist conceptions of the individual dominant in Western philosophy. While humanist conceptions of the individual presuppose that every person has an essential, unique, fixed, and coherent "core", poststructuralism depicts the individual - the subject - as diverse, contradictory, dynamic and changing over historical time and social space.

A shift from seeing learners as individual language producers to seeing them as members of social and historical collectivities, moves observers toward examining the conditions for learning, for appropriation of practices, in any particular community. Anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) argue that "learning [on the part of all] is an integral and inseparable part of social practice" (p. 31) as newcomers participate in "attenuated ways" with "old-timers" in the performance of community practices. Their notion, "legitimate peripheral participation", represents their view that communities are composed of participants who differentially engage with the practices of their communities, and that this engagement or participation in practice is "learning". Stressing the importance of local analysis of communities, Lave and Wenger point out that conditions vary with regard to ease of access to expertise, to opportunities for practice, to consequences for error in practice and so on. From this perspective, then, educational research might focus not so much on assessing individual "uptake" of particular knowledge or skills, but rather focus attention on the social structures in particular communities and on the variety of positionings available for learners to occupy in those communities.

Having argued that a broad range of theory, which is becoming increasingly influential in second language research, can be framed as "sociocultural theory", I now wish to illustrate how these theories lend insight into the institutional and community practices encountered by young English language learners in Karachi, and how these practices, in turn, impact the learners' identities and language learning trajectories.

An example of sociocultural theory in research and practice

In a recent study of a social action literacy project in a middle school in Karachi, Pakistan (Norton & Kamal, 2003), we investigated students' investments in the English

language and their desires for the future. For their social action project, the students of Model Elementary School had decided to teach local Afghan refugee children “some simple English phrases”, and we wished to investigate what symbolic and material resources were associated with the learning of English. While details of the study and data can be found in Norton & Kamal (2003), of central interest here is the extent to which sociocultural theory, as framed by such scholars as Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Weedon, and Lave & Wenger, can help to make sense of our data as well as the larger research project with these English language learners in Pakistan.

First, Bakhtin (1981, 1984) takes the position that language needs to be investigated not as a set of idealized forms independent of their speakers or their speaking, but rather as situated utterances in which speakers, in dialogue with others, struggle to create meanings. While English is the medium of instruction at Model Elementary, children could be heard conversing in both Urdu and English during small-group work, while on the playground, Urdu was regularly heard alongside English. In response to a question directed to all the students at the beginning of the study, “In what language do you prefer expressing your thoughts and opinions?”, 1 indicated Urdu, 5 indicated English, and 66 indicated both Urdu and English. When asked to comment on their responses, most students noted that the expression of ideas is the paramount goal, and that they switched from one language to another as the need arose. As one student said, “Conveying my opinion is more important so when I think I am not doing it well in English I quickly switch to Urdu.” In a similar vein, another noted, “We prefer speaking in both the languages, switching from one to another to make ourselves clear.” There seemed to be general agreement that “both these languages are impressive and can convey opinions, thoughts and ideas to people.” Our research suggests that the students at Model Elementary, while being favorably disposed towards English, still had high regard for Urdu, and had no difficulty code-switching between Urdu and English. As Bakhtin would argue, the struggle for meaning is what is central in the use of language.

Second, Bourdieu suggests that language cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships. As one student said, “The word society is taken from the Arabic language. It means a group of people living together to promote their common interest. Society also means fellowship or companionship. We can say in short that society is a ‘web of relationships.’” Students noted that it is English that helps to link societies to one another. As one said: “English is the language spoken commonly. This language is understood throughout the world. If the Afghan children learn English, know English, speak English, they will be able to discuss their problems with the people of the world.” Students expressed the hope that in the future, many countries would emerge from isolation and become a more integral part of the global community: “Not only Pakistan but countries of the world also will cooperate and unite with each other through giving up the policy of isolation.”

Clearly, the persistence of English in Pakistan is partly explained by Pakistan’s geopolitical isolation. Pakistanis, like the Tamils in Canagarajah’s (1999) study, who also expressed much regard for the use of the English language, have struggled for international connection and recognition, and have used English to reach out to international media, connect with the diaspora community, and communicate with hotlines and electronic mail. Pakistanis, like Tamils, have a powerful neighbor, India, which is not sympathetic to its interests; it has another neighbor, Afghanistan, that has been politically unstable for decades; and it has a government that has been struggling for legitimacy in a skeptical international

community. Under these conditions, English provides Pakistanis with the opportunity to remain socially, economically, and politically connected—not only to the USA and United Kingdom—but to the wider international community.

Third, Weedon argues that while language is a site of social and political struggle, it is also a site in which identity is constructed. What we found in our research is that while English was thought to provide access to a wider international community, what was of particular significance to the children at Model Elementary was their identities as Muslims. The kind of society desired by many students in the future was a humane Islamic society in which people would contribute to the development of their country. One student, for example, noted as follows:

I would like to see an Islamic society where children respect old people, and older people love children. In an Islamic society where the ruler is full of justice and a kind man. A ruler who listens to everyone and follow good principles. A ruler who is not favouring his friends and relatives. There should be respect for women who live within the boundaries of Islam.

This finding is consistent with that of Canagarajah (1999, p. 61), who notes that when English took root in Tamil society in the 19th century, it was religion, and not language, that was central to ethnolinguistic consciousness. Thus in the Saivite revivalist movement, Tamils were encouraged to acquire English and Western scholarship, provided they continued to be Saivites. Like Tamils in Sri Lanka, who maintained their Saivitian identity while learning English, the students at Model Elementary did not associate English with religious practices dominant in the West and were able to acquire English without sacrificing their identity as Muslims. This is an important insight for second language researchers concerned that the spread of English is a form of western imperialism, implicated in the loss of local and minority languages (Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Tollefson, 1991). Our data suggest that the appropriation of English does not necessarily compromise identities structured on the grounds of linguistic or religious affiliation, and that English and the vernacular can co-exist in mutually productive ways.

Finally, Lave and Wenger focus their attention on the social structures in particular communities and on the variety of positions available for learners to occupy in these communities. Extending such notions of situated learning, Wenger (1998) argues more recently that the imagination serves as a link between attempts to engage with practice, on the one hand, and align ourselves with broader enterprises, on the other. Thus, in Wenger's view, imagination is "a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176). It is this conception of imagination that I have extended to my work on second language learning, focusing in particular on the relationship between imagination and investment in communities of practice (see Kanno & Norton, 2003).

In the Pakistan study, students were given the opportunity to re-imagine their community in a time of social and political instability, and asked to envision the kind of society they would find desirable in the year 2020. Such an imagined community was one perceived to be literate, knowledgeable about English, and technologically advanced. Students hoped for a peaceful society, true to the principles of Islam, and respected in the international community. As one student noted: "there will be more peace-loving,

understanding people, and societies of Pakistan and of other countries will have unity and justice." Greater unity, in turn, would lead to greater peace: "Countries and nations of the world would come closer to each other due to modern and latest transport and technology. This would result in better understanding and less wars and conflicts."

The students in the study made frequent reference to the relationship between literacy, the distribution of resources, and international inequities. Students recognized that resources—what one student called “funds and donations”—are needed to promote literacy in a country, and they offered many suggestions as to how resources could be shared to promote literacy in the broader society. “The most important thing,” said one, “is that the people who are already literate should give free tuition and support to poor people.” Another, similarly, noted that if children are unable to pay school fees, “we can educate them by opening schools in which they will not have to pay the fees.” One particular student reported on a conversation with a person she called a “childlabour,” who had requested the provision of night school:

I spoke to a childlabour about education. They said that their parents are not able to earn enough in order to survive: . . . “If any one will open night school for us we will get education, because we are not free in the morning and afternoon.”

The central point here is that the conception of an imagined community assumes an imagined identity. In articulating their hopes for the kind of society they would wish to have in the year 2020, the students at Model Elementary were also articulating the kind of identity they would wish to negotiate across both time and place. Further, for these students, an imagined community that is literate, skilled in English, and technologically advanced, is also a community that has food, shelter, and peace.

Concluding thoughts

Drawing on a broad range of sociocultural theorists, I have examined the data from Model Elementary students in Pakistan through diverse theoretical lenses. This has enabled me to confront a number of important issues with respect to identity and language learning. One issue students raise is that the learning of English does not necessarily jeopardize the students’ investment in the official language, Urdu. As students said, they shifted from one language to another to make themselves clear. Second, students were more invested in their identities in Muslims than in any given linguistic identity. What they desired was the opportunity to live in peace according to the “three golden principles given by the Quaid-E-Azam [the founder of the nation]: Unity, discipline and faith”. They recognized, further, that material resources are necessary to secure social, political, and economic stability. In their relatively isolated geopolitical context, students hoped that English would provide access to communities not only in North America, but in other parts of the world. What they wanted, in the terms articulated by both Bourdieu and Lave & Wenger, was to become “legitimate” members of the international community, sharing in the symbolic and material resources that are the privileges of membership. By drawing on a broad range of sociocultural theory to understand my data, I have come to a better understanding of identity and language learning in what Canagarajah (1999) has called a “periphery” community. Central to this analysis is an understanding of identity as a sociocultural construct.

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Biodata

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