

BONNY NORTON

## IDENTITY, LANGUAGE LEARNING, AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES

### INTRODUCTION

Educators interested in identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies are interested in language as a social practice. In other words, they are interested in the way language constructs and is constructed by a wide variety of social relationships. These relationships might be as varied as those between writer and reader; teacher and student; test maker and test taker; school and state. What makes the educators “critical” is the shared assumption that social relationships are seldom constituted on equal terms, but may reflect and constitute inequitable relations of power in the wider society, on terms that may be defined, among others, by gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Further, as Norton and Toohey (2004) note, the plural use of “pedagogies” suggests that there are many ways in which pedagogy can be critical; the challenge for critical language educators is to determine how best to pursue a project of possibility for language learners, in a variety of places, at different points in time. Such educators have examined the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which language learning takes place and how learners negotiate and sometimes resist the diverse positions those contexts offer them. It is argued that the extent to which a language learner speaks or is silent, and writes, reads, or resists has much to do with the extent to which the learner is valued in any given institution or community. Language is thus theorized not only as a linguistic system, but also as a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated.

### EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

While interest in identity and language learning extends to the early 1980's, those educators who have a particular interest in critical pedagogies are associated with more recent work in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (see Ricento, 2005) and are discussed more comprehensively in the following section. It is important to note, however, that much of this research is about education in English as a second or international language, indicative of the problematic dominance

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of English in the global linguistic marketplace. Further, much of this research is not sufficiently reflective about problems associated with the broader field of critical pedagogy itself, notwithstanding insightful comments from scholars such as Kramsch (1999).

In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars interested in second language identity tended to draw distinctions between social identity and cultural identity. "Social identity" was seen to reference the relationship between the individual language learner 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," on the other hand, referenced the relationship between an individual and members of a particular ethnic group (such as Mexican and Japanese) who share a common history, a common language, and similar ways of understanding the world (e.g., Valdes, 1986). As Atkinson (1999) has noted, past theories of cultural identity tended to essentialize and reify identities in problematic ways.

In more recent years, the difference between social and cultural identity is seen to be theoretically more fluid, and the intersections between social and cultural identities are considered more significant than their differences. In this research, identity is seen as socioculturally constructed, and educators draw on both institutional and community practices to understand the conditions under which language learners speak, read, and write the target language. Such research is generally associated with a shift in the field from a predominantly psycholinguistic approach to second language learning to include a greater focus on sociological and anthropological dimensions of language learning, particularly with reference to sociocultural, poststructural, and critical theory.

Critical language educators have tended to draw, in particular, on the work of scholars such as Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Foucault, Freire, Lave and Wenger, and Weedon. This more recent research suggests that second language learners frequently struggle to appropriate the voices of others (Bakhtin, 1986); command the attention of their listeners (Bourdieu, 1977); negotiate multiple identities (Weedon, 1987); and understand the practices of the target language community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The research does not suggest, however, that the language learner should bear the primary responsibility for expanding the range of identities available to the learner; of central interest is the investment of the native speaker as well. Drawing on such theory, becoming a "good" language learner is seen to be a much more complicated process than earlier, more positivistic research had suggested. Indeed, in the latter half of the 1990's, three special issues on identity were published in diverse language education journals, all of which made problematic existing notions of "the good language learner" and

anticipated the wide range of research on identity and language learning characteristic of the early years of the 21st century. These included special issues of *Linguistics and Education*, edited by Martin-Jones and Heller in 1996, *Language and Education*, edited by Sarangi and Baynham in 1996, and *TESOL Quarterly* edited by Norton in 1997.

#### MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS AND WORK IN PROGRESS

Current research on identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies grapples with questions of power and access, and conceives of identity as dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place. Further, much of this research adopts a critical pedagogical lens when considering implications of the research for classroom practice. This growing body of research, common themes of which are discussed later, has been published in a wide variety of journals, the most notable of which is the award-winning *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, edited by Ricento and Wiley. In addition, a number of monographs on the topic have appeared in catalogs and libraries, all of which are making their mark in the wider community (Benesch, 2001; Block and Cameron, 2002; Canagarajah, 2002; Cummins, 2000; Goldstein, 2003; Kanno, 2003; Kumaravaduvelu, 2003; Miller, 2003; Norton, 2000; Pennycook, 2001; Ramanathan, 2002; Toohey, 2000). The three common themes in this area of scholarship that I address are those on (i) identity, investment, and imagined communities; (ii) identity categories and educational change; and (iii) identity and literacy. This scholarship represents both major contributions and work in progress.

#### *Identity, Investment and Imagined Communities*

In a recent review of research on identity and language learning, Ricento (2005) makes the case that Norton's work on language, identity, and investment represents a new and important direction in the field of SLA. In research with immigrant women in Canada, Norton (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995) observed that existing theories of motivation in the field of SLA were not consistent with the findings from her research and did not do justice to the identities and experiences of language learners. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1977), she developed the notion of "investment" to signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. If learners "invest" in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Unlike notions of instrumental motivation, which conceive of the language learner as having a

unitary, fixed, and ahistorical “personality,” the notion of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex, nonunitary identity, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction. Norton makes the case that an investment in the target language is also an investment in the learner’s own identity.

The notion of investment has sparked considerable interest in the field of language and education (see Pittaway, 2004). McKay and Wong (1996), for example, have drawn on this concept to explain the English language development of four Mandarin-speaking students in a California school; Angelil-Carter (1997) found the concept useful in understanding the language development of an English language learner in South Africa; and Skilton-Sylvester (2002), drew on her research to argue that the interaction between a woman’s domestic and professional identities is necessary to explain her investment in particular adult ESL programs. Most recently, Potowski (2004) has used the notion of investment to explain students’ use of Spanish in a dual Spanish/English immersion program in the USA, and in 2008, a special issue of the *Journal of Asian-Pacific Communication*, edited by Davison and Arkoudis will focus on the theme of investment in the Asia-Pacific context.

An extension of interest in identity and investment concerns the imagined communities that language learners aspire to when they learn a new language. Norton (2001) drew on her research with two adult immigrant language learners to argue that while the learners were initially actively engaged in classroom practices, the realm of their desired or “imagined” community extended beyond the four walls of the classroom. This imagined community was not accessible to their respective teachers, who, unwittingly, alienated the two language learners, who then withdrew from the language classroom. Drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), Norton makes the case that, for many language learners, the community is one of the imagination—a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future. The community may also be, to some extent, a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships. In essence, an imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner’s investment in the target language must be understood within this context.

Of particular interest to the language educator is the extent to which such investments are productive for learner engagement in both the classroom and the wider target language community. Such questions have been taken up more extensively in a coedited special issue of the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* on “Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities” edited in 2003 by Kanno and Norton, in which Blackledge, Dagenais, Kamal, Kanno, Norton,

Pavlenko, and Silberstein explore the imagined communities of specific groups of learners in Canada, Japan, Pakistan, the UK, and the USA.

*Identity Categories and Educational Change*

Critical language educators with an interest in identity have sought to investigate the ways in which particular relations of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation may impact on the language learning process. Innovative research that addresses these issues does not regard such identity categories as “variables,” but rather as sets of relationships that are socially and historically constructed within particular relations of power. With regard to questions of race, Ibrahim’s (1999) research with a group of French-speaking continental African students in a Franco-Ontarian High School in Canada explores the impact on language learning of “becoming black.” He argues that the students’ linguistic styles, and in particular their use of Black Stylized English, was a direct outcome of being imagined and constructed as Black by hegemonic discourses and groups. From a slightly different perspective, Taylor’s (2004) research in an antidiscrimination camp in Toronto, Canada, argues for the need to understand language learning through the lens of what she calls “racialized gender.” The stories of Hue, a Vietnamese girl, and Khatra, a Somali girl, are particularly powerful in this regard, supporting the view held by Kubota (2004) that a color-blind conception of multiculturalism does not do justice to the challenges faced by language learners of diverse races and ethnicities. Lee (in press) makes the case that race is in fact a “third voice” in the native and nonnative speaker debate while a special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* on “Race and TESOL,” edited by Angel Lin and Ryuko Kubota in 2006, will put race squarely on the agenda of language education.

With regard to issues of gender and language learning, the work of scholars such as Ehrlich (1997) and Pavlenko (2004) is particularly insightful. Their conception of gender, which extends beyond female–male divides, is understood to be a system of social relationships and discursive practices that may lead to systemic inequality among particular groups of learners, including women, minorities, elderly, and disabled. Pavlenko, for example, argues for the need to understand the intersections between gender and other forms of oppression, noting that both girls and boys who are silenced in the language classroom are more likely to be those from the working class. In a similar spirit, Nelson (2004) explores the extent to which sexual orientation might be an important identity category in the second language classroom. Of central interest is the way in which a teacher can create a supportive

environment for learners who might be gay, lesbian, or transgendered. A special issue of the *TESOL Quarterly* on “Gender and Language Education,” edited by Kathy Davis and Ellen Skilton-Sylvester in 2004, brings much current research on gender to the attention of a wider audience, while an edited volume on *Gender and English Language Learners*, edited by Norton and Pavlenko, (2004), highlights gender research in different regions of the world, including Uganda, Malaysia, and Australia.

### *Identity and Literacy*

Critical researchers of identity and language learning have become interested not only in the conditions under which language learners speak, but in the extent to which identities and investments structure their engagement with *texts*. There is growing recognition that when a language learner reads or writes a text, both the comprehension and construction of the text is mediated by the learner’s investment in the activity and the learner’s sociocultural identity. Scholars such as Luke (2004), Kress (1993), and Ivanič (1997) have influenced much research on the relationship between literacy and second language identity. Although Luke’s work has focused on the contribution of critical literacy to second language education and Kress’s on the conception of text as a socially and historically constituted “genre,” Ivanič has explored the notion of writer identity, making the case that writers’ identities are constructed in the possibilities for self-hood available in the sociocultural contexts of writing.

In exploring what he calls the “subversive identities” of language learners, Canagarajah (2004) addresses the intriguing question of how language learners can maintain membership of their vernacular communities and cultures while still learning a second language or dialect. He draws on his research with two very different groups, one in the USA and the other in Sri Lanka, to argue that language learners are sometimes ambivalent about the learning of a second language or dialect, and that they may resort to clandestine literacy practices to create what he calls “pedagogical safe houses” in the language classroom. In both contexts, the clandestine literacy activities of the students are seen to be forms of resistance to unfavorable identities imposed on the learners. At the same time, however, these safe houses served as sites of identity construction, allowing students to negotiate the often contradictory tensions they encountered as members of diverse communities.

In a very different region of the world, Stein (2004) invites us into a language and literacy classroom in post-apartheid South Africa, drawing on the innovative and increasingly influential work on



multiliteracies associated with a variety of scholars, including those in the New London Group (1996). With reference to multiliteracies research, as well as feminist theories of the body, Stein reflects on her classroom teaching with English language learners, and develops a comprehensive blueprint for what she calls “multimodal pedagogies.” Such a blueprint, she argues, arises from the need to acknowledge the tensions between local forms of communication and the literacy demands of schooling, recognizing that representation occurs through a variety of modes, including the visual, the gestural, speech, writing, and sound.

Starfield (2004), like Stein, seeks innovative and empowering pedagogies that can expand the range of identities available to language learners, focusing in particular on the power of concordancing in academic writing at an Australian university. Drawing on her teaching experience in an academic writing workshop, Starfield describes how she and her students used concordancing to examine the structure of academic writing and the ways in which authors use language to establish credibility and authority. Over time, Starfield noted a marked improvement in the academic writing of her students. Her work provides a window into the possibilities that technology holds for helping students develop identities not only as accomplished writers but also as contributors to the larger academic community.

The use of technology is also the subject of research that addresses the impact of literacy practices on relationships beyond the classroom. Lam (2000) for example, who studied the internet correspondence of a Chinese immigrant teenager in the USA who entered into transnational communication with a group of peers, demonstrates how this experience in what she calls “textual identity” related to the student’s developing identity in the use of English. In another study of synchronous and asynchronous communication between American learners of French in the USA and French learners of English in France, Kramsch and Thorne (2002) found that some students had little desire to adopt the textual identity of the other. Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999), indeed, make the case that there is much need for cross-cultural writing research to better inform both teachers and students of the sociocultural knowledge of student writers from diverse regions of the world.

## PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

Two problems that face scholarship in the area of identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies concern the challenges of classroom practice, on the one hand, and the complexities of qualitative research, on the other. Although critical language educators have great interest in

rapidly evolving theories of language and identity, this is not always shared by an equally passionate commitment to practice. Students' voices are sometimes little more than a backdrop to discussions on the development of theory and teachers sometimes feel disempowered by abstract notions that appear unrelated to the challenges they face on a daily basis. Lin (2004), for example, provides a comprehensive and rigorous account of her attempts to introduce a critical pedagogical curriculum in an MA TESL program at the City University of Hong Kong. The challenges she experienced include student teacher frustration with the academic language of critical pedagogical texts, as well as feelings of pessimism and powerlessness. She makes the case that school-teachers, unlike academics, are situated in contexts in which cultural capital is determined not by mastery over academic language, but by the ability to make learning meaningful for students. In this context, the inaccessibility of some critical texts serves simply to alienate the very teachers who seek insight from these texts. Such frustration is exacerbated by pessimism arising from a teaching context in which labor relations are unfavorable to teachers.

Two publications that have sought to address this problem in this area of scholarship are those by Sharkey and Johnson (2003) and Auerbach and Wallerstein (2004). In "The TESOL Quarterly dialogues," Sharkey and Johnson initiate a productive and engaging dialogue between researchers and teachers, with the express aim of demystifying research and theory in critical language education. Equally effective, though with a different audience in mind, Auerbach and Wallerstein's classroom text "Problem-posing in the workplace: English for action" takes seriously the need for critical pedagogies to be accessible and relevant to language learners.

The very complexity of undertaking research on identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies is another problem facing scholars, given that much of this research tends to be qualitative and ethnographic. This problem is the subject of recent work by Leung, Harris, and Rampton (2004) and Toohey and Waterstone (2004). Drawing on their research on task-based language learning in urban settings in the United Kingdom, Leung, Harris, and Rampton (2004) examine the inelegance of qualitative research, arguing that the "epistemic turbulence" in SLA qualitative research centers on the question of what constitutes or represents reality. In their study, naturally occurring data were collected with the use of video and audio recordings, supplemented by field notes. An ongoing challenge was how to represent and account for data that did not fit neatly into the theoretical construct of task-based language use. Leung, Harris, and Rampton make that case that researchers need a conceptual framework that acknowledges rather than obscures the messiness of data.



In a very different context, Toohey and Waterstone (2004) describe a research collaboration between teachers and researchers in Vancouver, Canada, with the mutual goal of investigating what practices in classrooms would make a difference to the learning opportunities of minority-language children. Although teachers were comfortable discussing and critiquing their educational practices, they expressed ambivalence about translating their practice into publishable academic papers. Like the student teachers in Lin's (2004) study, the teachers in the research group felt little ownership over the academic language characteristic of many published journals. Toohey and Waterstone draw on this experience to suggest that writing which respects both teacher and researcher ways of knowing might artfully blend narrative with analysis, telling dramatic stories of classroom incidents, enriched by a consideration of theoretical insights.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although this chapter has focused primarily on the identity of the language learner, there are broader developments in the area of critical language education that suggest important directions for the future. If we take seriously the argument that the identity of the language learner is not just a "personality variable" but a socially and historically constructed relationship to both institutional and community practices, then it follows that teachers, researchers, administrators, testers, and policy-makers are all implicated in the range of identities available to the language learner.

One area that is receiving increasing attention is that of the language teacher educator (see also Andrews, *Teacher Language Awareness*, Volume 6). In recent research, Pennycook (2004) reflects on his observations of a TESOL practicum in Sydney, Australia. He reminds us that a great deal of language teaching does not take place in well-funded institutes of education, but in community programs, places of worship, and immigrant centers, where funds are limited and time at a premium. Of central interest in this work is a consideration of the way in which teacher educators can intervene in the process of practicum observation to bring about educational and social change. To this end, Pennycook argues that "critical moments" in the practicum can be used to raise larger questions of power and authority in the wider society, and provide an opportunity for critical discussion and reflection. Other perspectives on this issue can be found in the edited collection by Hawkins (2004) in which a wide variety of scholars make the case that language teacher education is a practice that engages identities of teachers in complex and intriguing ways.

Another direction for the future concerns the broader area of critical language testing. Shohamy (2001) provides a comprehensive analysis of the way in which democratic principles can be applied to assessment practices in multicultural societies in which minority groups struggle for recognition and respect. Although dominant groups may pay lip service to principles of equality, the *de facto* situation, in many societies, is that minority groups are expected to assimilate into the majority society. Evidence to this effect is frequently demonstrated in the form of assessments that are used in education, where competing conceptions of “knowledge” vie for prominence. The ongoing and future challenge for language educators in general, and language testers in particular, is to develop language assessment practices that take seriously the identities and investments of language learners, and challenge rather than perpetuate inequity in the wider society.

A third area that has much potential for future research on identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies concerns growing interest in globalization and language learning (Block and Cameron, 2002). Morgan and Ramanathan (2005) argue persuasively that the field of language education needs to consider ways in which English language teaching can be decolonized, arguing that there is a need to decenter the authority that Western interests have in the language teaching industry. In particular, we need to find ways to restore agency to professionals in periphery communities (Kumaravaduvelu, 2003) and give due recognition to local vernacular modes of learning and teaching (Canagarajah, 2002). In this regard, special issues of a number of journals are significant, including: a special issue of the *TESOL Quarterly* on Language in Development, edited by Numa Markee in 2002; two recent issues of the *AILA Review of the International Association of Applied Linguistics* on “Africa and Applied Linguistics” (Makoni and Meinhof, 2003) and “World Applied Linguistics,” (Gass and Makoni, 2004); and a 2006 special issue of *English Studies in Africa*, edited by Pippa Stein and Denise Newfield. It is clear that research on identity, language learning, and critical pedagogies has struck a chord in the field of language and education, opening up multiple avenues for research on every aspect of the field. The future holds much promise.

**See Also:** *Stephen J. Andrews: Teacher Language Awareness (Volume 6)*

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Au7

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