

Identity and Language Learning: Back to the Future

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The conditions under which language learners speak or remain silent, when they write, read, or resist, is a passionate interest of mine that began more than two decades ago. Like many other language teachers and researchers, I have been entrusted over the years with the stories of language learners as they have moved from one country to another, from home to school, and from classroom to community. The learners have been of varying ages, and their stories have reflected both dreams and disappointments. As I have sought to make sense of such stories, I have had to grapple with what it means to know and teach a language, and English in particular, in our multilingual, transnational, and frequently inequitable world.

As I embarked on the writing of “Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning” in the mid-1990s (Norton Peirce, 1995), these were the questions that I was struggling to address in my teaching, research, and publications. It soon became clear to me that the literature available in TESOL and applied linguistics at the time did not do justice to the stories of the learners I encountered in my classrooms and research sites. In order to respond to these stories, I needed to draw on a wider social science literature that addressed the multiplicity of identity, the social mechanisms of power, and the exercise of human agency. What resonated with my observations was the exciting work of social science scholars such as Christine Weedon (1987) and Pierre Bourdieu (1991) who were interested in the way language and power are implicated in conceptions of the self. My 1995 article made the case that there should be a more productive relationship between theory and practice, and between ideas about language learning and the lived experience of learners and teachers themselves. At the same time, while I actively drew on this literature, I also wished to make my own contributions to theory building, within and beyond the field of TESOL. I was concerned that theories of language and learning had become a gendered activity in which female scholars were less visible

than male scholars, despite the predominance of female educators in our field.

The 1995 article, and the subsequent 1997 *TESOL Quarterly* special issue on *Language and Identity* laid the groundwork for three related ideas, arising from my research and teaching across diverse sites. These ideas address the constructs of identity, investment, and imagined communities, which are insightfully examined by Claire Kramsch (2013) in the afterword to the second edition of my book *Identity and Language Learning* (Norton, 2013). These ideas have remained resilient over the past two decades, although refined and extended in my collaboration with exciting scholars such as Kelleen Toohey, Yasko Kanno, Christina Higgins, Aneta Pavlenko, Peter De Costa, and Ron Darwin.

What I have learnt from language learners is that *language* is not only a linguistic system of words and sentences, but also a social practice in which identities and desires are negotiated in the context of complex and often unequal social relationships. 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). Particularly important with regard to access to social networks and target language speakers is the intriguing way in which learners can reframe their relationships with others in order to claim more powerful identities from which to speak. Thus while identity is conceptualized as multiple, changing, and a site of struggle, the very multiplicity of identity can be productively harnessed, by both learners and teachers, in the interests of enhanced language learning and human possibility.

The extent to which language learners exercise such agency in social interaction can be partly explained by a construct I have called *investment*. As a complement to the psychological construct of motivation, the sociological construct of investment signals a learner’s commitment to learn a language, given their hopes for the future and their imagined identities. In this view, learners invest in the target language if they anticipate acquiring a wider range of symbolic and material resources that will increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. This in turn provides for a wider range of identity positions from which the learner can speak or listen, read or write. I have argued further that the construct of investment has important implications for pedagogy. Rather than assuming, for example, that a silent or disengaged student is “unmotivated,” teachers are encouraged to ask, “To what extent is the learner *invested* in the language and literacy practices of my classroom?” A student may be highly motivated, but if the classroom practices

are racist, sexist, or homophobic, the learner may have little investment in the language practices of the classroom, and demonstrate little progress in learning.

A related idea to the construct of investment is that of a language learner's imagined community and imagined identity. While Benedict Anderson writes of the *imagined community* with respect to the construct of the nation (Anderson, 1983), my use of this expression signals any community of the imagination that is desirable to the language learner, whether a community of professionals, sports fans, or comic book readers. My research suggests that a learner's imagined identity and hopes for the future will impact his or her investment in the language and literacy practices of a given classroom, and subsequent progress in language learning.

As evidenced by the encouraging number of citations this work has received, as well as many other indicators of impact, the ideas of identity, investment, and imagined communities have resonated well with language teachers and researchers worldwide. The ideas have been translated into Chinese, French, German, and Portuguese, while a number of journal special issues have been devoted to this work in North America (Kanno & Norton, 2004), Asia (Arkoudis & Davison, 2008), and Europe (Bemporad, forthcoming). It is important to note, however, that while the construct of identity is now well integrated into a wider body of literature on language learning and teaching, there are many and varied ways in which identity is being taken up in TESOL and the broader field of applied linguistics. Witness the diverse range of articles in the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, established in 2002; the 2015 special issue of the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* (Mackey, 2015); and the upcoming *Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity* (Preece, in press).

The future of identity work is promising, particularly with reference to the profound digital innovations that have impacted our field since the mid-1990s. To respond to these changes, Ron Darvin and I have developed an expanded model of investment that operates at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology, which was honored with the 2016 TESOL Distinguished Research Award (Darvin & Norton, 2015). More broadly, Peter De Costa and I (De Costa & Norton, 2016) have suggested that identity work in the coming years will include increasing interest in teacher identity, and hope that our 2017 special issue of the *Modern Language Journal* on "transdisciplinarity and language teacher identity" will help to advance this agenda.

Firth and Wagner's classic 1997 article in the *Modern Language Journal* (Firth & Wagner, 1997), which called for greater social orientation to theory building, made no reference to the emerging work on identity in the *TESOL Quarterly* at that time. Significantly, however, the lead

article in the 2016 Centenary issue of the *Modern Language Journal* incorporates key ideas of identity and investment within a new framework of second language acquisition (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). It is intriguing to speculate on *TESOL Quarterly's* own Centenary issue in 2066 to anticipate the exciting trajectory of identity research in the future.

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