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Learner Autonomy as Agency in Sociocultural Settings

Kelleen Toohey and Bonny Norton

Introduction

Second language learning literature (and discourse in other fields) often constructs learners as individuals who act, think, and learn in accordance with innate, specifiable characteristics, independently of the social, historical, cultural and political-economic situations in which they live. From this perspective, these 'autonomous' learners have variable motivations, learning styles, cognitive traits, strategies and personality orientations that are seen as causal of their success or failure in language learning. We have seen particular interest in specifying the characteristics of successful language learners (e.g. Naiman et al., 1978). More recently, however, as Canagarajah (2003) points out, there has been a 'social turn' in our literature that places emphasis on the ways in which sociocultural factors and larger societal processes are involved in the construction of individuals and their learning (Hall, 1993, 1995; Rampton, 1995; Auerbach, 1997; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Pennycook, 2001). Another thread in this discussion has related to learners' agency, their embodied experiences, and their individual histories situated in sociocultural contexts (e.g. Benson, Chik and Lim, this volume).

Here, we wish to present our research on two language learners – one adult (Eva) and one child (Julie) – and to consider what factors in the learners' environments enabled or disabled their access to learning. We also wish to examine how Eva and Julie exercised agency in resisting and shaping the access to learning provided by their environments. By focusing on learners' situated experiences, we seek new insights into the dialectic between the individual and the social – between the human agency of these learners and the social practices of their communities.

In keeping with the theme of this collection, we wish to invite readers to consider language learning as increasing participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), to understand 'autonomy' not so much as individualized performance but as socially oriented agency, and to conceptualize 'cultures' as specific settings with particular practices that afford and constrain possibilities for individual and social action in them.

Two successful language learners

We wish here to examine two cases of successful language learning within our own independently conducted studies of language learners in Canada in the 1990s (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Toohey, 1996, 1998, 2000). Norton's work was with adults; Toohey's with children. Both studies were qualitative and used a variety of data-gathering techniques: journals and interviews (in the adult study) and participant observation, interviews and videotaping (in the child study). In both cases, we were less interested in individual characteristics of the learners than in their social interactions, as well as the ways in which opportunities to engage in interaction in their specific situations were structured. Drawing on our data, there are two central questions we wish to explore: (1) What kinds of access to participation in the social networks of these settings were provided for learners?; and (2) How did these two particular learners manage their own access to the social networks of their anglophone peer groups?

Eva: an adult language learner

In a study conducted with five immigrant women (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000), there was one language learner, Eva, a young Polish woman, who could be considered more successful than the others. During the course of the study, the five learners were assessed with the use of a cloze, dictation, dialogue, crossword, short essay and oral interview. Although each of the learners had arrived in Canada with little experience of speaking English, Eva's performance on these measures was outstanding relative to that of the other learners. Previous research approaches might explain Eva's learning as being a result of her particular cognitive traits, affective orientations, motivations, past experiences and individual learning strategies. However, we would prefer to theorize her learning trajectory as being due to the particular circumstances of her language learning situation, her situated position in her social

networks, her personal embodied history in other social networks, and her agency in negotiating entry into the anglophone social networks in her workplace, despite initial difficulties.

Eva worked at Munchies, an upmarket fast food restaurant, where she was the only non-English speaker and the only recent immigrant to Canada. As she said, "[Munchies] was the first place that I had to be able to communicate in English. I was having a hard time with understanding, speaking and making conversation with somebody." Activities in the restaurant for workers included: taking orders from customers, passing orders on to other workers, taking cash from customers, preparing food, cleaning the restaurant, keeping supplies current, and communicating with management. The only activities that were not dependent on spoken interaction were cleaning the floors and tables, clearing out the garbage, and preparing drinks. Significantly, it was precisely these latter activities, "the hard job[s]", that were Eva's assigned responsibilities when she first started working at Munchies. This was solitary work, in which she had little interaction with anglophones. "I'm just alone and everybody doing something else – who can I talk to?", she asked.

Eva understood that in order to practice speaking English, she had to become part of the social network within the workplace; she had to form social relationships with her co-workers. However, the work she was assigned limited her access to that network. Eva had a job that often isolated her spatially from the other workers, and it carried little status in her community. As a result, she felt her co-workers had little respect for her and did not interact with her: "I think because when I didn't talk to them, and they didn't ask me, maybe they think I'm just, like [not worth talking to] – because I had to do the worst type of work there. It's normal." The relevance of such relationships for language learning was clearly articulated by Eva: "When I see that I have to do everything and nobody cares about me, because – then how can I talk to them? I hear they doesn't care about me and I don't feel to go and smile and talk to them."

After a period of months, however, Eva managed to develop relationships with her co-workers and to enter their social network. These relationships developed because of certain affordances in the social hierarchies of her workplace, as well as Eva's agentic action in (and outside) her workplace. The fast-food company sponsored monthly outings for employees outside the restaurant, and on those outings, Eva was able to challenge her workplace position as a 'stupid' person, only worthy of the "worst kind of job". Outside the restaurant, Eva's attractiveness, youth and charm were valued symbolic resources. Also on these occasions Eva's partner would help provide transportation for her fellow employees. Outside the institutional constraints of the workplace, Eva's identity in the eyes of her co-workers became more complex and their relationship to her began to change. Had these outings not been a part of company policy, it is doubtful that Eva would have developed social outside-work relationships with her co-workers.

With reference to activities that took place in the restaurant, Eva was gradually given greater responsibility. As she was given more status and respect in the workplace, she felt more comfortable speaking: "When I feel well, then I can talk to the others," she said. Eva explained that it was not that she wanted a job that was "better" than those of her co-workers, but one in which she would have an equal status. This in turn would open up possibilities for shared conversation.

Eva described in interviews that she listened to the way her co-workers spoke to the customers and participated in social conversation. Having access to the expert performances of her native English-speaking co-workers, and the kind of job that required continual practice, Eva quickly developed fluency in work-related English. She also came to participate more actively in coffee-break conversations with her co-workers. On one occasion, for example, she took the opportunity to teach a co-worker some Italian so that the co-worker could surprise her husband. Eva also described how she would claim spaces in conversations, with the intention of introducing her own European history and experiences into the workplace.

Conversations in Eva's workplace were initially not easily accessible to her, but the company practice of worker outings allowed Eva access to social conversations with her co-workers. Her workplace was one in which it was possible to move from "hard jobs" where there was little opportunity for social interaction, to jobs in which speaking English was required. With a shift in her job responsibilities, Eva, although not initially an active participant, could hear conversations between experienced English speakers, both co-workers and customers. After some time, then, Eva was able to claim both space and time in conversations with her peers. She ingeniously brought her own resources to the attention of her co-workers and she invited them to invest in a relationship with her. She was able to do this despite her immigrant status, the nature of the work she was initially assigned, and her imperfect English. Eva's success in her endeavours is poignantly captured in a conversation she overheard a few months after starting work at Munchies. One worker, turning to another, said in passing: "I don't like working with people who aren't Canadian." When his companion replied "Except Eva," he repeated: "Except Eva."

Julie: a child language learner

The second learner to be considered is Julie, who was, at the time reported on here, a five-year-old child of Polish-speaking immigrant parents. Julie had not attended an English pre-school program, but she and her younger sister had attended a Polish-medium Sunday school from an early age. Julie (as well as five other children of minority language backgrounds) was observed in a public school over the course of three years for a study aimed at discovering how these children came to be participants in school activities (Toohey, 2000). Julie was initially identified as an English as a second language (ESL) learner and she subsequently attended, in addition to her regular kindergarten, a supplementary afternoon ESL kindergarten. By the end of kindergarten, her teacher assessed her as being enough like a (in the teacher's words) "normal" (i.e. English-speaking) child linguistically and academically, that she would have a good year in Grade 1, an assessment that in effect 'graduated' her from ESL. In view of her mother's opinion that Julie knew only "a few words [of English]... not much", her progress seemed extraordinary. No formal English proficiency tests were administered to the children, but Julie's teacher's assessment of her as linguistically and academically able, and the evidence that she participated in a wide variety of classroom interactions, are the basis for the selection made here of her experience as a relevant case of successful language learning.

Like workplaces, classrooms might be seen as having desirable and not-so-desirable activities and resources. While workplaces often differentially assign workers to particular resources and activities, classrooms are at least putatively organized so as to provide equitable access for children to all resources and activities. While Julie initially was quite quiet in her classroom, and spent a good deal of time watching and listening to other children, she appeared nevertheless to have relatively easy access to many classroom interactions and materials quite early in her kindergarten year. Before discussing Julie's particular negotiation of access, it will be useful to discuss some characteristics of activities in Julie's kindergarten.

Activities in Julie's kindergarten might be seen as of two broad types: not-so-desirable activities in which the teacher was a participant (and often, leader) and activities in which the teacher was not involved. Teacher-led activities in "play", in which the teacher was not involved. Teacher-led activities in this classroom were primarily in the form of "Circle Time", when children sat on the floor in a circle around the teacher and she led them in chanting, singing, talking and literacy activities. Many of these Circle activities were choral, and each child could participate in them to

varying extents, depending on expertise and/or inclination. In solo activities (e.g. when children were asked if they had anything to "share", or when they were asked to give individual answers to teacher questions), participation was also voluntary and the teacher 'protected' each child's turn with prompts and scaffolds, and reminders to other children to listen.

While these circumstances were the case for all the English language learners in the classroom, not all of them showed increasing ease in participation. Julie was early on a rather inactive participant in choral activities (like the other English language learners in her classroom), but with access to hearing the expert performances of her anglophone classmates over time, she (as well as most of the other English language learners) began to participate in the chorus. While initially also a reluctant performer in solo speech activities, later in the kindergarten year, Julie participated more actively in "sharing" and reporting on home events, with the support of her teacher, and after having heard models of expert performance from other children. Not all her English language learner classmates displayed such participation in solo performance.

Kindergarten play, unlike Circle, rarely involved the teacher. In play, children were together, speaking or not to one another, manipulating the materials of the room (puzzles, cars, blocks, dressing-up materials, materials in playsites like the housekeeping centre, computers, and so on) and taking more or less full roles in that play. Although talk usually accompanied play, talk was seldom or never the only mediator. Instead, play materials often seemed more crucially important than talk. Children needed to secure access to materials and also to playmates, and their access to either was by no means universally secure. But in kindergarten play, unlike in coffee-breaks in Eva's case, access did not appear dependent primarily on experience in English; children who were inexperienced speakers of English sometimes appeared desirable, or at least tolerated playmates, and they also sometimes had access to desirable play materials. This is not to say that all children were always welcome in interactions with all other children, nor that they always got access to materials they liked; this was definitely not the case – some children (including experienced English speakers) were forcefully rejected by others as playmates and some children rarely got access to desirable materials. This was, then, a community in which it was possible to be successful or unsuccessful in gaining access to some social networks and to some desired resources.

Julie socialized actively with other children in her classroom. While she rarely appeared to seek to play with those anglophone girls in her

classroom who appeared very powerful there (the girls who dominated the 'housekeeping' playsite), Julie did seem able to play with or beside the children whom she sought as playmates. She was particularly friendly with another second language learner, a boy, as well as an anglophone girl classmate. Was Julie's active interaction due to her inherent sociability (as concluded in some other child second language acquisition (SLA) studies, viz. Wong Fillmore, 1979), or were there characteristics of Julie's community that enabled her success there?

This question stimulated examination of moments of conflict in the classroom: moments when children's access to materials, to desirable identities or to playmates was in question (Toohey, 2001). While children's play in this kindergarten was often 'harmonious', it was also characterized by conflict (like the play analysed in detail by Goodwin, 1990) over materials or activities or access to play. Sometimes, children engaged in what appeared to be 'subordination' moves, in which they attempted to denigrate or subordinate other children, so as to command ownership of classroom materials or to exclude others from play. It was interesting to note that some children were unsuccessful in countering attempts by others to appropriate classroom materials or to exclude them from play. Julie, however, often ignored exclusionary/subordination attempts, or countered them with exclusionary or subordination moves of her own. She was able to do this with the aid of allies, other children who sometimes 'spoke for' her or who intervened on her behalf in disputes. While she was usually successful in her counter-moves, other children who used, in many cases, exactly the same language that Julie used, were not so successful. Exclusion from play meant removal from opportunities to hear other children speaking, or to practice themselves. Julie, however, often with the aid of her particular friends (mentioned above), was usually able to stay in play. So, this was a community in which it was possible to be excluded from play, one of the community's primary activities; and a community in which it was possible to be successful or unsuccessful in countering attempts by others to exclude one from those activities.

As well as making allies of children, Julie was successful in creating alliances with adults in her classroom. As an experienced Sunday-school attendee, Julie was familiar with school conventions of, for example, silence upon adult command, expeditious movement through transitions, 'appropriate' body demeanour and adept use of the tools of schools (scissors, paste, and so on). She appeared quiet on demand and her speech volume was low when required. She often greeted adults in her classrooms with excited smiles and hugs. These behaviours seemed

to contribute to the adults who worked with her deeming her a "pleasant and easy-going" child, a "nice little girl", whose behaviour was 'mature' enough for Grade 1. Again, not all the English language learners in her class were so designated.

Eva, the adult language learner discussed above, was able to negotiate for herself an identity at the parties held outside the workplace, an identity which was in some ways at odds with her workplace identity. Aspects of Julie's outside-school identity might also have influenced her classroom access to peers. The afternoon ESL kindergarten which Julie attended also included her cousin Agatha and several other Polish-speaking youngsters. Agatha was a proficient speaker of Polish, but she was also an experienced English speaker because of her pre-school attendance at an English-speaking daycare centre, and she was, thus, another powerful ally for Julie. In the afternoons and on the playground, and in their homes, Julie and Agatha played together often.

By the end of the kindergarten year, Julie's teacher saw her as a student who was ready for Grade 1, at least as adequately prepared as other "normal" students. Not all of her English language learner classmates were so evaluated: some of these children, children who had had a much more problematic time in kindergarten, were deemed by the teacher to have further need of ESL instruction in Grade 1, and they would be removed from their classrooms for specified amounts of time for such instruction.

Workplaces and school classrooms: different 'cultures' for language learning

We referred earlier to sociocultural perspectives on L2 learning that focus not so much on individuals as on how practices in specific social, historical, and cultural contexts afford or constrain the access of learners to community activities and thus to learning. This approach, based on what is variously termed sociocultural, sociohistorical or cultural-historical theory, aims to "reflect the fundamentally social nature of learning and cognition" (Kirshner and Whitson, 1997: 1). Inspired by the early twentieth-century work of Vygotsky (1978) and that of more contemporary cultural psychologists, anthropologists and educators, second language researchers with interests in sociocultural theory have urged that our traditional focus on individuals and their functioning needs to shift to a focus on activities and settings and the learning that inevitably accompanies social practice (e.g. Gutierrez, 1993; Donato and McCormick, 1994; Lantolf and Appel, 1994; Willett, 1995; McGroarty, 1998; Toohey, 2000). These researchers conceptualize language learning

as increasing participation in the activities (including linguistic activities) of particular communities, rather than in terms of control of wider varieties of linguistic forms or meanings.

Fundamental to a sociocultural approach is the assumption that "learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community" (Rogoff, 1994: 209). From this perspective, learners of English participate in particular, local contexts in which specific practices create possibilities for them to participate in community activities, and in so doing, use one of the community's tools, language. Lave and Wenger (1991) propose the notion of a "community of practice" ("a set of relations among persons, activity and world", p. 98) as a way to theorize and investigate social contexts. Social contexts in their view can be viewed as complex and overlapping communities in which variously positioned participants learn specific, local, historically constructed and changing practices involving the use of particular tools. This view shifts attention away from questions about, for example, the personality traits or learning styles of participants, to questions about community organization, with respect to how participants' engagement in community practices, and use of the community's tools, is enabled or constrained.

The work of Mikhail Bakhtin also has been taken up in studies of L2 learning from a sociocultural perspective. Bakhtin (1981: 294) spoke to the need for speakers to wrest language away from "other people's mouths" and "other people's intentions". For him, speakers try on other people's utterances; they take words from other people's mouths; they appropriate those utterances and gradually those utterances come to serve their needs and relay their meanings. Bakhtin speaks about this process of appropriation as a struggle involving "the meeting and clash of divergent interests and the points of view to which these interests give rise" (Packer, 1993: 259).

From this perspective, second language learning is seen not simply as a gradual and neutral process of internalizing the rules, structures, and vocabulary of a standard language. Rather, differentially positioned learners are seen to appropriate the utterances of others in particular historical and cultural practices, situated in particular communities. Thus, researchers need to pay close attention to how communities and their practices are structured in order to examine how learners' access to the linguistic tools of their communities is facilitated or constrained. Attention thus shifts from the cognitive and emotional resources and strategies individual learners bring to second language learning situations, to a consideration of the learning situation and its everyday practices, and how these enable and constrain learning. It is with this in mind that we will examine the practices of Eva's workplace and Julie's classroom.

Munchies was a workplace with differentiated practices for workers, and Eva – positioned as newcomer, immigrant and English language learner – was seen by her boss and co-workers as an appropriate performer, at least initially, of hard, solitary work tasks. Doing these tasks blocked her access to conversations with her co-workers and customers, and thus limited her opportunities to engage in community practices like talking while working. Eva did have access to coffee-break conversations, but they were not very lengthy and they required expertise in English usage that Eva, as a relatively inexperienced speaker of English, did not have. If Eva's English proficiency had been tested at this point, when her workplace community had blocked her access to practice with more experienced participants, she might not have appeared to be a successful language learner. However, the workplace community of practice overlapped with another community of practice, the outside work social contacts in which workers participated. In this context the division of labour, spatial relationships, role possibilities and so on were different; Eva was able to bring valued resources to bear, and she could participate in a fuller way than she was able to in her workplace.

Julie's community was also structured hierarchically, in that the teacher was clearly the director of activities there. As director, however, the teacher invited and scaffolded children's access to classroom activities and conversations, at least in those interactions in which she was involved, and she explicitly desired and encouraged talk (within specified limits). When the teacher was involved, all community activities and resources were potentially, at least, accessible to all the children, and there were few solitary tasks required of children. When children played with one another, however, their interactions were often mediated by material resources that were not accessible to all. Julie was able to secure access to classroom resources and to talk with peers relatively easily, and her path to this access seemed less fraught with difficulty than Eva's and, indeed, less fraught than the paths of other English language learners in her classroom. As a participant with adult and child allies, previous experience with classroom materials and behavioural conventions, and as a person whose resistance to domination was (allowed by others to be) successful, Julie was able to participate in most interactions to which she sought access. Her kindergarten experience was thus relatively comfortable, not only because of what she brought with her, but also because of the way in which community practices in her classroom were

structured. Had the expertise of her community, her cousin and her allies been less available to her, or had the resources she brought to the community or her allies been less symbolically valued, it is possible that her language and academic learning would have been evaluated differently.

Although both Eva and Julie were successful in gaining access to the conversations of their milieux, they had to struggle for this access. As we shall now discuss, we have found current post-structural and critical theory about identity and agency helpful in understanding how these language learners differentially engaged with the struggles they encountered in their respective communities.

Autonomy, identity and human agency

Previous researchers might have seen Eva and Julie as gradually developing appropriate strategies for interaction in their respective linguistic communities by, for example, monitoring their linguistic performances more diligently and exploiting the target language more systematically. Our research paints a more complex picture, however. Rather than focusing on language acquisition per se, both learners sought to set up counter-discourses in which their identities could be respected and their resources valued, thereby enhancing the possibilities for shared conversation. Thus Eva, initially constructed as an 'ESL immigrant', sought to reposition herself as a 'multilingual resource' with a desirable partner; Julie, initially constructed as an 'ESL learner', became seen as a "nice little girl" with allies. It was their success in claiming more powerful identities (either consciously, as in Eva's case, or perhaps unconsciously, as in Julie's case) that seems central to their success as good language learners. This is not to say that proficiency in English was irrelevant in the process of accessing peer networks, particularly in Eva's case, but rather that struggles over identity were central. Such an analysis is informed by recent work on identity and language learning in the field of SLA (see Norton and Toohey (2002) for an overview).

During the past few years, scholars such as Goldstein (1996), McKay and Wong (1996), Norton (1997), Angelil-Carter (1997), Stein (1998) and Harklau (2000) have demonstrated in their research that the conditions under which language learners speak are often highly challenging, engaging the learners' identities in complex and often contradictory ways. They have focused, in particular, on the unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers, arguing that SLA theory has not given sufficient attention to the effects of power

on social interaction. The notion of 'investment' (Norton Peirce, 1995; McKay and Wong, 1996; Angelil-Carter, 1997) has been helpful in signaling the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. Re-conceptualizing the established SLA notion of 'motivation', some researchers argue that when learners 'invest' in a second language, they do so anticipating that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn enhance their conception of themselves and further their desires for the future.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), a French sociologist, focused on the importance of power in structuring speech. He argued that "speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it" (1977: 652). For him, because of unequal power relations between speakers, the ability of speakers to "command a listener" (p. 648) is concomitantly unequal. Both Eva and Julia had shifting degrees of ability to command listeners in their respective communities. Eva initially had difficulty in commanding the attention of her listeners: a person who carried out the garbage was a person of limited value; a person who was not Canadian had very little power to impose reception in her community. Nevertheless, Eva was highly invested in learning English because she wanted better relationships with her co-workers (symbolic resources) as well as improved job prospects (material resources) which would in turn give her a greater sense of self-worth. Julie was similarly invested in mastering the shifting set of practices that would position her as a successful student and a desirable and powerful playmate. She may have been initially silent in her classroom, but silence or 'ESL-ness' was not a stigmatized category there; her silence, simply, was not particularly noticeable. Her community granted her (but not everyone) the right to participate in community activities, and this access helped her to claim the right to speak fairly soon after entry into kindergarten. Eva struggled for months for equivalent success.

Theories of identity as multiple, changing, and a site of struggle are comprehensively developed by Christine Weedon (1996), working within a tradition of feminist poststructuralism. Weedon (1996: 32) notes that the terms 'subject' and 'subjectivity' signify a different conception of the individual than essentialist views associated with humanist conceptions of the individual dominant in Western philosophy. Poststructuralism depicts the individual – the subject – as diverse, contradictory, dynamic and changing over historical time and social space. Our data demonstrate convincingly that the subjectivity of the language learner is crucial to an understanding of the conditions under

which a language learner speaks. Eva could not speak from the position of the person who carried out the garbage: she had to reposition herself in the eyes of her co-workers before she could claim the right to speak and, more crucially, impose reception on her interlocutors. Likewise, Julie needed to position herself as someone with allies, and as someone resistant to subordination, so as to continue to claim space in the play of her classmates.

Discussion

Let us return, then, to our two central questions: (1) What kinds of access to participation in the social networks of these settings were provided for learners? And (2) How did these two particular learners manage their own access to the social networks of their anglophone peer groups? We believe the answers to these questions lie in the dialectic between agency/autonomy and community/culture and we summarize our thinking on these matters below.

Eva and Julie were able to gain access to the social networks of their particular communities because of practices in the communities in which they were located and through their own agency/efforts to position themselves as persons worth talking/listening to. Eva was able to counter her positioning as an undesirable immigrant with an undesirable job, because her community was one in which mobility in work assignments was possible. Her community also supported different constellations of value in outside-work outings. Julie participated in a community in which participation in choral performance was always accessible, but not compulsory for her. Her community was also structured so that solo performances for the teacher were protected and scaffolded. In interactions with other children, when community practices might have sequestered Julie from peer interaction, her community accepted her efforts to counter subordination. In both cases, we wonder what data we would have collected had Eva and Julie not been blonde and white-skinned, slim, able-bodied, well-dressed and attractive to Western eyes. In this regard, while her co-workers were ultimately happy to work with Eva, they remained reluctant to work with other immigrants. And in the classroom, other English language learners (notably a South Asian female student in the study) were not as successful as Julie in resisting subordination, even though they used in many cases exactly the same language to attempt this resistance.

The other question raised by our studies is the relationship between access to second language networks and second language learning.

We think both studies demonstrate that access to second language networks, and increasing participation in them, is coincident with second language learning. In the adult study, Eva had more access to an English-speaking Canadian network than the other women reported in Norton (2000); she also showed the best progress and proficiency in English language assessments. In the child study, Julie moved from very little preschool experience in English to 'graduation' from ESL in one year, unlike the other children in Toohey (2000), whose access to a peer network was less secure. Like Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), we believe that learning to use the tool of language, like learning to use the tools of other activities, is primarily a matter of access to skilled performance, practice and access to identities of competence. Our data, from learners of different ages and in different environments, support this claim.

Concluding comments

In this chapter we have argued that our studies of two successful language learners demonstrate that there was nothing inherently good about them as language learners. In another work place, Eva might have remained a 'non-Canadian'; in another classroom, Julie may have joined other English language learners on the margins of social life. Our research and recent theoretical discussions have convinced us that understanding language learning requires attention to social practices in the contexts in which learners learn second languages. Further, we have argued for the importance of examining the ways in which learners exercise agency in forming and reforming their identities in those contexts. We see this dual focus as necessary to understand good language learning. Further, learners' investments in learning a second language, as well as the ways in which their identities affect their participation in second language activities, must also be matters of consideration in future research.

Drawing on our data, we conclude this chapter with a comment on the way conceptions of SLA theory may evolve in the future. We believe it is significant that both Eva and Julie were able to access the social networks in their respective learning communities, albeit at different rates. We would like to underline here that the reception both learners received in their different learning sites was more favourable than that given to other English language learners with different physical and cultural characteristics. Accordingly, we hope that future research, drawing on diverse methodologies, will develop insights into issues of race, the body, and language learning.

Reflection/discussion questions

1. Describe a particular language learning setting with which you are familiar. What practices in this setting enable or disable learners' participation in community activities?

2. Consider your own second/foreign language learning trajectory. Did you struggle to re-position yourself within your learning setting? How did you do this?

3. From your own experience, what generalizations can you make about differences between child and adult second language learning settings?

4. Think about a second language teaching situation with which you are familiar. What do you think are the implications for learning and for autonomy of *compulsory* participation in second language activities?

Note

This is a substantially revised version of B. Norton and K. Toohey (2001). Changing perspectives on good language learning. *TESOL Quarterly* 35/2: 307–22.