Language Teaching and Learner Identity: Investigating Possible Relations

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ABSTRACT: *Along with the changes in the realm of language teaching and learning in 1960s from the previous teacher-centered methodologies and the subsequent emergence of social-constructivist approaches, learners came to be considered as the key in the field. As a result, learner-centered approaches were developed and special attention was given to sociological dimensions of second language learning. Due to these shifts of focus, concept of learner identity came to attract the attention of language teachers and scholars. Therefore, second language scholars tried to investigate the possible relationship between the language learner and the larger social world. In the same line, the present article attempts to represent a description of the main variables in relation to learner identity aimed at shedding light on comprehending the theoretical points significant in the field. Then, the article goes on to discuss the role of identity and its possible influences in the field of second language teaching and learning. Finally, the applications in the field are discussed.*

1. Introduction

Due to a shift of focus from the predominantly psycholinguistic approaches to SLA to include a greater focus on sociological and anthropological dimensions of second language learning, particularly with reference to sociocultural, poststructural, and critical theory, such concepts as learner identity came to attract the attention of language scholars. Researchers of second language identity focus not only on linguistic input and output in SLA, but more specifically they are interested in the relationship between the language learner and the larger social world. In particular, these researchers have examined the diverse 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.

One of the important issues which has fascinated many researchers in second language identity is the extent to which relations of power within classrooms and communities promote or constrain the process of language learning. It is argued that the extent to which a learner speaks or is silent or writes, reads, or resists has much to do with the extent to which the learner is valued in any given institution or community. In this regard, such factors as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation may pose inequities in the social practices and thus affect learners to behave in particular ways. As such, learners don't like to be marginalized and try to avoid it through covert and overt acts of resistance. What is of central interest to researchers of second language identity is that the very articulation of power, identity, and resistance is expressed in and through language.

Taking these points into account, the present article was developed to follow two aims. First, elaborating on the main points related to the learner identity, it is going to take a critical look at this phenomenon. Second, it attempts to shed light on understanding the relationship between the learner identity and the language teaching and learning and to discuss the implications it bears to the processes involved in the field.

2. Theoretical Influences

Second language research in the area of identity is indebted to and affected by the works of scholars like Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Weedon, as well as Lave and Wenger. [1] 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 in both historical and contemporary, and both actual and assumed, communities. In this view, the appropriation of the words of others is a complex process in which words are not neutral but express particular predispositions and value systems.

The second scholar who has influenced research concerning identity is Pierre Bourdieu, a contemporary French sociologist. Bourdieu focuses on the often unequal relationships between interlocutors and the importance of power in structuring speech. He 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. In this view, when a person speaks, the speaker wishes not only to be understood, but to be believed, obeyed, and respected. However, the speaker's ability to command the attention of the listener is unequally distributed because of the symbolic power relations between them.

Research in the field of identity has been also impacted by the scholar, Christine Weedon. Like other poststructuralist theorists, Weedon emphasizes the central role of language in her analysis of the relationship between the individual and the social, arguing that language not only defines institutional practices, but also serves to construct our sense of ourselves and our subjectivity. While humanist conceptions of the individual presuppose that every person has an essential, unique, fixed, and coherent '*core*', poststructuralism depicts the individual (i.e., the subject) as diverse, contradictory, dynamic, and changing over historical time and social space.

Finally, Lave and Wenger were two other anthropologists who shifted the view of learners as individuals to seeing them as members of social and historically constituted communities. Lave and [5] argue that what they call ''*situated learning*'' is an integral and inseparable part of social practice, as newcomers are mentored (helped and advised) into the performance of community practices. They introduced the notion of ''*legitimate peripheral participation*'' by which they meant that communities are composed of participants who differentially engage with the practices of their community and that conditions vary with regard to many factors as 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 on the social structures in particular communities and on the variety of positionings available for learners to occupy in those communities. 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 Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Weedon, and Lave and Wenger offers applied linguists ways to think differently about language learning. Such theory suggests that second language learners need to struggle to appropriate the voices of others; they need to learn to command the attention of their listeners; they need to negotiate language as a system and as a social practice; and they need to understand the practices of the communities with which they interact.

3. Community of Practice

[5] defines a community of practice through the dimensions of (a) mutual engagement, (b) joint enterprise, and (c) shared repertoire (list of works that a person or group is ready to perform). The boundaries and the development of a community of practice are continuously negotiated by members bound together in its joint construction [5]. Lave and [3] discuss how the dynamic membership adopted by and interactions among learners contribute to learning. They argue that the familiarity with certain beliefs and behaviors particular to a community of practice defines the role taken by a learner (e.g., a central or peripheral participant). Moreover, the idea of community of practice implies that ''*learning involves the construction of identities*''; that is

to say, learners need to construct "*not only a relation to specific activities, but also a relation to social communities*" [3] p. 53. Such relation, as a result, leads to different learning experiences and outcomes. Thus, community of practice provides the context to understand the situated identities each member takes and his/her engagement in learning.

4. Power Relation and Identity Negotiation

[4] defines power as "*the socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed and validated*" (p. 7). In [4] view symbolic resources refer to nonphysical resources such as language proficiency. Material resources refer to tangible resources such as books, tools, and computers. Power relations between a teacher and student or among peers, may be of various nature. Identity is the product of the negotiation between an individual's identity claims and the availability of identity choices determined by the power relations in various social contexts. On the one hand, individuals claim desirable and appropriate identities based primarily on the subjects' understandings of the social world within which they are positioned. On the other hand, the social structure of communities and the power relations obtaining within them define the learning possibilities available to members. Such negotiation is referred to as the continuous struggles between positioning and repositioning. Through our choices of languages, dialects, genres, styles, modes, intonations, and timing, we create certain social positions for ourselves and simultaneously position others in particular ways. These acts of positioning occur in and contribute to a dynamic and often inequitable social terrain. The concept of identity position refers to this ongoing process of positioning: Through what we say and do, we place ourselves and are placed by others in positions that influence our identities (the ways we view ourselves and our relationship to the world).

Power relations embedded in different social contexts are the driving forces that shape the individuals' awareness of how they are positioned, what identity roles are accessible, what opportunities are available for negotiation, and what kind of learning takes place. While it is essential to understand situated identities in light of power relations and the limitations of the notion of identity negotiation, as there are cases in which identities may not be negotiable or relevant in the historical or social contexts. They assert that it is important to differentiate the following three types of power relations: (a) "*the power differential is such that resistances of negotiation [are] impossible*", (b) the power relations "*which evoke resistance*", and (c) the power relations "*where the interlocutors or the negotiating parties may enjoy a relatively equal power balance*" (p. 250). Given the intricate relation between power relations and identity negotiation, it is critical to identify the nature of power relations in order to understand the possibility for and effectiveness of identity negotiation.

5. Identity Investment

By analyzing power relation and the process of identity negotiation, it was found that individual's desires have a significant role in the process of identity negotiation. Norton (2000) proposed that instead of the discussion of motivation in the process of SLA, it is better to propose the concept of identity investment as a way to recognize the complex relationship between power, identity, and language learning. It was formerly assumed that motivation was a driving force of the language learners and those learners who failed to learn the target language were not sufficiently loaded by motivation. [4] states that these theories did not represent the identities and experiences of the language learners fairly. Therefore, the notion of motivation was replaced by the more fruitful concept of investment. Unlike notions of instrumental motivation, which conceive of the language learner as having a unitary, fixed, and a historical '*personality*', the notion of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex identity, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction.

6. Sociocultural Approach to Learner Identity

Sociocultural perspectives on learning allocate particular attention to the concept of learner identity. In order to be, the individual requires the co-recognition of himself and others of this being. Hence, having an identity is to have a sense of recognition as someone. The meanings that are being constructed about oneself need to be recognized. Yet another shared feature of most of the socioculturally oriented approaches is the emphasis on the two-dimensional nature of an identity as individual and social. The distinction between two dimensions and their point of overlap seems to be an ongoing theoretical and empirical challenge. In Vygotskian terms, this specific feature could be expressed as the connection between the interpsychological and intrapsychological processes of identity construction. This implies that although an identity mostly is experienced as a personal resource, the origin of its constituents, its value and its mediating function are socioculturally defined and constructed through relations.

7. Types of Identity

There are at least five different kinds of identity that are influenced by learning, namely professional, personal, talent, character and learner identity. From another perspective, identity can be categorized into social, cultural as well as ethnic or racial identity all affecting the process of learning in certain ways. The learner's identity is affected by every new learning experience and it seems all the other identities revolve around this one. A change and development in any of the other identities depends on the condition of the learner identity. Social identity is defined as the relationship between the individual and the social world, as mediated through institutions such as families, school, workplaces, social services, and so on. In more recent years the intersections between social and cultural identities are considered more significant than their differences. In 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.

As [2] states current research on second language identity conceives of identity as dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place. Indeed, a recurring theme throughout much of the research is that of '*transition*'. Many of the participants in research projects on second language identity are undergoing significant changes in their lives, whether moving from one country to another or from one institution to the next. Such transitions can be productive for language learning, providing learners with enhanced skills at negotiating bilingual identities; other transitions can be more problematic, as learners struggle to accommodate changing expectations in different institutional contexts. In such changing sets of circumstances, identities that might be seen as contradictory may in fact be constructed within contexts that are themselves sites of struggle [2].

8. Concluding words

Learner identity, as an important characteristic, has a crucial effect on the teaching practices as well as learning outcomes. As it is argued there are three reactions of the learner toward confronting new identity, namely accommodation, separation, assimilation. In the first state, which is considered as the best one the learner's identity is made up of both his Native identity and new identity coming from new language. In the second one, the learner's identity is not influenced by the new culture. In the third state, the learner's identity is completely away from his native identity and shaped by the new identity influenced by new language. Getting familiar with the concept of identity as both an individual and a social variable, certain implications deserve mentioning in relation to educational and teaching practices which bear significant outcomes both for language teachers and educational authorities.

• One important thing teachers should notice is that every learner comes to class with a different linguistic background as well as a specific identity which is culturally bound. Therefore, teachers should try to construct a collaborative environment in which all learners with different identities feel comfortable to freely participate in classroom activities.

• Considering the nature of power relations, students decide to conform or to contest their positioning by the teacher in the classroom. Teachers should not give priority to certain identities due to different orientations including cultural, social, gender, racial, class and so on; instead they should provide an equitable situation in which identity negotiation is fostered and as a result this enhances learning outcomes in students and lead to their success in classroom community.

• Teachers should also notice and be sensitive to institutional norms that may impose undesirable identities on students and support making necessary institutional changes which may lead to constructing a positive identity in learners. for instance, teachers can consult to school authorities for providing appropriate environment, programs and facilities.

• According to Cummins (1996) when students feel supported in their self-worth, they have a much stronger sense of belonging in the community. Teachers need to recognize how powerful their discursive practices can be in helping students negotiate undesirable identities and leading to positive learning experiences. Teachers have to participate students in decision-making processes and by empowering them try to provide a learner-centered environment moving away from teacher centeredness.

Finally, as it was said earlier, learner identity has opened up an extensive area of research both for language teachers and scholars to work on its various aspects trying to measure its impact on the teaching practices as well as learning outcomes. If we consider identity not just as an individual variable but also as a social variable then it follows that teachers, researchers, administrators, testers, and policy makers are all implicated in the range of identities available to the second language learner.

References

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