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Beyond Words: Visual Mediation and the Construction of Learner Identity in Second Language Learning

Hagit Arieli Chai
Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles, USA

Research on second language acquisition (SLA) has increasingly moved beyond cognitive models toward sociocultural and post-structural understandings of language learning as a socially situated and identity-driven process. Within this shift, learner identity has emerged as a central construct, reframing language acquisition not merely as the development of linguistic competence, but as the negotiation of subjectivity, agency, and belonging within historically and socially structured worlds. Learners are not simply processing input. Rather, they are positioning themselves in relation to power, discourse, and imagined futures as they engage with new linguistic practices. This article contributes to research on language learning and identity in three ways. First, it extends sociocultural theory by conceptualizing visual art as a mediational tool through which second language (SL) learners construct and negotiate identity. While mediation has been widely discussed in relation to language itself, less attention has been paid to visual and multimodal symbolic systems as sites of identity work. Second, the article bridges identity theory and multimodal pedagogy by demonstrating how visual practices enable learners to externalize subjectivity, articulate cultural memory, and imagine future selves in ways that complement and sometimes exceed verbal expression. And third, it proposes a conceptual framework for understanding learner identity construction beyond spoken discourse, highlighting the role of multimodal mediation in shaping agency, positioning, and participation in the language classroom.

Keywords: visual mediation, learner identity, second language learning

The Connection Between Identity and Language

This paper examines learner identity in second and foreign language (FL) acquisition through the integrated lenses of sociocultural theory, post-structuralism, and visual art pedagogy. Moving beyond purely verbal conceptions of language learning, it argues that visual art functions as a powerful mediational tool through which learners negotiate identity, agency, and belonging. Drawing on established theories of identity and language learning, this paper foregrounds visual and multimodal practices as central—not peripheral—to the processes of meaning-making and identity construction in the language classroom.

Identity has become a central construct in contemporary research on language learning, reflecting broader shifts within the social sciences away from psycholinguistic models toward sociological, anthropological, and critical perspectives. Learner identity challenges binary categorizations, such as motivated *vs.* unmotivated or introverted *vs.* extroverted, emphasizing instead the dynamic, multiple, and context-dependent nature of subjectivity. Scholars, such as Norton, Block, and Morgan have demonstrated that language learners are not

Hagit Arieli Chai, Dr., Hebrew Language coordinator, Louchheim School for Judaic Studies, Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles, USA.

merely acquiring linguistic forms, but are actively negotiating their positions within social worlds shaped by power, history, and culture

Identity is worth investigating as the changing conceptions of the individual, the language, and learning impact second language acquisition (SLA). Each of these areas is associated with broader trends in the social sciences. These disciplines represent a shift in the field from a predominantly psycholinguistic approach to include a greater focus on sociological and anthropological dimensions of language learning. Particularly, with reference to sociocultural, post-structural, and critical theory (Norton & Toohey, 2001; Block, 2007b; Morgan, 2007).

Many scholars (Ricento, 2005; Zuengler & Miller, 2006; Block, 2007a; Swain & Deters, 2007; Menard-Warwick, 2009) cite Norton's theory of identity (Norton, 1995; 2000) as central in framing a contemporary approach to identity and language learning.

Scholars' focus on identity is not only about the linguistic input and output, but also in the relationship between the language learner and the broader social world. They question the view that learners can be defined in binary terms as motivated or unmotivated, introverted, or extroverted, without considering that such affective factors are frequently socially constructed, changing across time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways within a single individual.

Although identity is a complex construct, in which conceptualization is contingent upon the researcher's theoretical position (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), a learner's identity in second language (SL)/FL learning has been generally understood as "the different subjectivities and subject positions they inhabit or have ascribed to them within particular social, historical, and cultural contexts" (Block, 2013, p. 18). Specifically, it consists of the way the learner understands their relationship to the target language, other languages, and the world; how this relationship is constructed across time and space; and how they understand opportunities for the future (cf. Norton, 1995; 2010b; 2013; 2014). This accounts for the nature of this construct as "a diverse, dynamic, often contradictory, multiple rather than unitary concept" (García-Pastor, 2017, p. 39). The learner develops agency through constructing, negotiating, rejecting, or striving with other social agents in typically inequitable social contexts (Block, 2010, 2013; Norton, 2010a, 2010b, 2013, 2014; Norton & Toohey, 2011). The learner develops a sense of control and capacity to act—through various interactions with others within social contexts that are often marked by inequity. In the realm of language learning and social interaction, learners undergo a transformative process where they not only acquire linguistic skills, but also cultivate a sense of agency and identity. According to Block (2013), this process involves learners actively shaping their identities through interactions with others and using language itself.

In many educational and social contexts, power dynamics can be pronounced, creating environments marked by inequities (Foucault, 1977; Freire, 1970). Within these settings, learners navigate a complex landscape where they encounter various challenges and opportunities. They may find themselves negotiating their identities, rejecting imposed roles or expectations, and striving to assert their agency to influence and shape their learning experiences. In such settings, learners navigate a complex landscape where they encounter various challenges and opportunities. They may find themselves negotiating their identities, rejecting imposed roles or expectations, and striving to assert their agency to influence and shape their learning experiences. For instance, learners may assert their agency by actively participating in classroom discussions, challenging conventional norms, or advocating for their perspectives. These actions not only demonstrate their linguistic competence, but also reflect their growing confidence and ability to navigate social structures. Moreover, interactions with peers,

teachers, and community members provide learners with opportunities to explore different facets of their identities.

In contexts where power imbalances are prevalent, learners may employ diverse strategies to assert control over their learning journey. This might include seeking out supportive networks, advocating for inclusive practices, or engaging in critical dialogue to challenge inequitable norms. Ultimately, the integration of language learning with social interaction empowers learners to develop a nuanced understanding of their capabilities and responsibilities within broader societal contexts. By actively participating in the construction of their identities and navigating complex social dynamics, learners not only enhance their linguistic proficiency, but also cultivate a sense of agency that empowers them to contribute meaningfully to their communities. This process fosters a transformative learning experience where language acquisition becomes intertwined with personal growth, social awareness, and the pursuit of equitable participation in diverse environments. Based on the author's extensive experience teaching students at various levels over two decades, he firmly asserts that through language use, learners articulate their cultural backgrounds, personal beliefs, and aspirations, thereby constructing a multifaceted identity that evolves over time.

The Foundation for Learner's Identity

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that higher mental functions develop through mediated social activity using cultural tools. Language is the most prominent of these tools, but it exists alongside other symbolic systems, including art. Through engagement with visual media, learners appropriate culturally available signs and reorganize their cognitive and emotional experiences. Visual production thus supports not only language development, but also identity formation, allowing learners to articulate cultural memory, personal history, and imagined futures. The sociocultural theory, as originally conceived of by L. S. Vygotsky, during the years immediately following the Russian Revolution led to a view of learning and teaching, which in many respects, is very different from theories currently in favor in the mainstream SLA. The most fundamental concept of sociocultural theory is that the human mind is mediated. In opposition to the orthodox view of mind, Vygotsky argued that just as humans do not act directly on the physical world but rely, instead, on tools and labor activity, which allows us to change the world. Sociocultural theories draw on L. S. Vygotsky's (1978; 1987) insights into the social nature of learning but also on the work of more contemporary theorists who have extended and modified his ideas (e.g., Wertsch, 1998; Rogoff, 2003).

Vygotsky (1978) argued that humans behave in the world with tools (both physical and symbolic) among symbolic tools are numbers and arithmetic systems, music, art, and above all language. He emphasized the symbolic tool of language, proposing that children gain "increasing control over the mediational means made available by their culture, including language for interpersonal (social interaction) and intrapersonal (thinking) purposes" (Lantolf, 2000, p. 8). As with physical tools, humans use symbolic artifacts to establish an indirect, or mediated, relationship between us and the world. According to Vygotsky's (1978) view, the task of psychology is to understand how human social and mental activity is organized through culturally constructed artifacts.

One aspect of mediation is regulation. When children learn language, words serve to reconstruct biological perception into cultural perception and concepts, rather than as a function to separate specific objects and actions. For children, thinking and actions at early stages of ontogenetic development are at first subordinated to the words of adults (Luria & Yudovich, 1972). According to Luria and Yudovich (1972), subordination of the child's actions and thinking to adult speech raises the child's mental and physical activity to a new stage of development.

It signals the onset of a "long chain of formation of complex aspects of his [sic] conscious and voluntary activity" (p. 24).

Vygotsky (1978) reasoned that humans have the capacity to use symbols as tools, they cannot control the physical environment, but they can mediate their own psychological activity. He proposed that while physical tools are externally directed, symbolic tools are internally or cognitively directed. Physical tools serve as auxiliary means to advance the ability to control and change the physical world, symbolic tools serve as supportive means to control and reorganize our biologically endowed psychological processes. This control is voluntary and intentional which allows humans to inhibit and delay the functioning of automatic biological processes.

This perspective suggests that learning is a social process in which culturally and historically participants engage in culturally valued activities, using cultural tools. They can develop the specific behaviors required for participation, and by doing so, change the activities and the tools. This foregrounding of dynamic social activity and the tool mediators of that activity are special features of sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) formulated the idea that the human mind has a functional system in which the properties of the natural, or biologically specified, brain is organized into a higher, or culturally shaped, mind through the integration of symbolic artifacts into thinking. Some of the higher mental capacities include voluntary attention, intentional memory, planning, logical thought, and problem solving, learning, and evaluation of the effectiveness of these processes.

Physical or symbolic artifacts often being modified as they are passed on from one generation to the next. Each generation reconstructs its cultural inheritance to meet the needs of its communities and individuals. For example, the cumbersome early computing machines which we were in awe of during the 1950s, today have become sleek and much more powerful devices that have increasingly found their way into the daily lives of communities in many parts of the world. Likewise, languages are continuously remodeled by their users to serve their communicative and psychological needs (Lantoff, 1980). A remarkable example is in the impact of new metaphors on the way people think and behave. For instance, for nearly four decades researchers have conceived of and studied human minds as if they were computational devices, a perspective that would have been impossible until the development of computers during the middle years of the twentieth century. As often happens throughout history, a development in one domain gives rise to a "spin-off" in another (Wertsch, 1998, 58-59).

Olson (1994) shown how our commonly accepted view that "writing maps onto pre-existing models of language" (Wertsch, 1998, p. 62) is misleading, since in fact, the relationship between writing and language models is the reverse. That is, the categories and structures (for example, sentences, words, and phonemes) that are the focus of much linguistic theorizing are, in fact, spin-offs of alphabetic writing systems. For example, while early pictorial writing systems brought meaning into consciousness, because these scripts "provided a notion of saying the same thing each time they were scanned or recited", the graphemic or alphabetic system brought verbal form into awareness (Olson, 1994, p. 258).

Different communities (and nations) inherit cultural artifacts from their ancestors, who in turn inherit these artifacts from their ancestors, Vygotsky reasoned that the most appropriate approach to the study of higher mental abilities was historical. He proposed four genetic domains for the proper study of higher mental functions: (a) phylogenetic domain, concerned with how human mentation came to be distinguished from mental processes in other life forms through the integration of mediational means over the course of evolution; (b) sociocultural domain, concerned with how the different types of symbolic tools developed by human cultures throughout the course of their respective histories affected the kinds of mediation favored, and with it the kinds of thinking valued, by these cultures (for example, the impact of such artifacts as numeracy, literacy, and computers on

thinking); (c) ontogenetic domain, where focus is on how children appropriate and integrate mediational means, primarily language, into their thinking activities as they mature; and (d) micro-genetic domain, where interest is in the reorganization and development of mediation over a relatively short span of time (for example, being trained to criteria at the outset of a lab experiment; learning a word, sound, or grammatical feature of a language).

In the author's opinion, it is important to rely on Vygotsky's significant contribution to the cultural context in shaping individuals' cognition and behavior. He emphasized the significance of social interaction in cognitive development, suggesting that language and thought are closely intertwined. Language is not only a tool for communication, but also a means through which individuals construct meaning and shape their identity within social contexts.

In language acquisition, social interaction provides learners with opportunities to negotiate meaning, practice language skills, and develop a sense of belonging within the language community, contributing to the formation of their language identity.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory underscores the crucial role of social interaction, scaffolding, and cultural context in supporting learner identity in acquiring a new language. By engaging in meaningful interactions, receiving structured support, and exploring diverse cultural perspectives, learners develop their language skills and construct a dynamic language identity within sociocultural contexts.

The Framework of Learner's Identity Theories

In the 1970s and 1980s, a great deal of language learning research conceptualized the "identities" of language learners as their fixed personalities, learning styles, and motivations. However, recent work on language learner identities adopts post-structural understandings of identities as fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing, particularly historical and cultural circumstances. According to this perspective, personalities, learning styles, motivations, and so on are not fixed, unitary, or decontextualized, and while context "pushes back" on individuals' claims to identity, individuals also struggle to assume identities that they wish to claim. Constructs of investment and imagined communities/imagined identities have been particularly important in these discourses.

The general argument of evaluating learner identity was set off in 1998 by the sociolinguist Susan Gass. She made an important argument about the theoretical relevance of identity categories to L2 learning that needed to be established. The new theories of identity and language learning permit a conceptual shift in research about L2 learning and offer important insights about the language learning process. Over the past 15 years, there has been an explosion of interest in identity and language learning, and "identity" now features in most encyclopedias and handbooks of language learning and teaching (Norton & Toohey, 2002; Ricento, 2005; McKinney & Norton, 2008; Norton, 2010; Morgan & Clarke, 2011). In the broader field of applied linguistics, interest in identity has also gained considerable momentum. There is work, for example, on identity and pragmatics (Lo & Reyes, 2004; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), identity and sociolinguistics (Joseph, 2004; Omoniyi & White, 2007; Edwards, 2009); and identity and discourse (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Wodak et al., 2009; Young, 2009).

The Post-Structuralist Theoretical Framework

Post-structuralist theories of language have become increasingly interested in identity and language learning researchers (Norton & Morgan, in press). Structuralist theories of language, cited as originating with the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), emphasized the study of the linguistic competence that allowed

idealized speakers to use and understand language forms and structures. From this perspective, actual instances of language performance, which could be affected by memory lapses, fatigue, slips, errors, and so on, were not seen as revealing of idealized patterns, and thus were of little interest in the scientific study of language.

However, post-structuralist theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981; 1984; 1986) viewed language not as a set of idealized forms independent of their speakers or their speaking, rather as situated utterances in which speakers, in dialogue with others, struggle to form meanings.

"He used the metaphor of speech communication as a chain, an ongoing conversation that new speakers (for example, children or newcomers to speech communities) strive to join" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 416). Structural theories viewed language learning as a gradual individual process of internalizing the set of rules, structures, and vocabulary of a standard language, Bakhtin (1981) claimed that language learning is a process of struggling to use language in order to participate in specific speech communities. Using language meant using a tool other had used before, and Bakhtin saw speakers as constrained by those past usages. However, he also saw speakers as able to use language to express their own meanings (with both custom and innovation characterizing language use). Further, Bakhtin pointed out how social positions outside language might affect any individual's speaking privilege.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu addresses the post-structuralist study of the politics of language (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1991; Albright & Luke, 2008). While post-structuralists are not the only theorists interested in language and power, Bourdieu (1977) explicitly pointed to the importance of power in structuring discourse, with interlocutors seldom sharing equal speaking "rights". For Bourdieu, "legitimate" and "illegitimate" speakers were distinguished by their differential "rights to speech" or their "power to impose reception" (p. 648). According to Bourdieu (1977), using language was a social and political practice in which an utterance's value and meaning was determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the speakers. Recognizing that the ascribed value of a person or group can vary, depending on circumstances or contexts (in Bourdieu's terms, "fields"), he saw linguistic discourse as "a symbolic asset which can receive different values depending on the market on which it is offered" (1977, p. 651). Additionally, he noted that dominant usage is associated with the dominant class.

At the center of the post-structuralist theory of SLA are the view of language as symbolic capital and the site of identity construction (Bourdieu, 1991; Gal, 1989; Weedon, 1987), the view of language acquisition as language socialization (Ochs, 1993; Wenger, 1998) and the view of L2 users as agents whose multiple identities are dynamic and fluid (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 1995; Pavlenko, 2000). This theory examines how linguistic, social, cultural, gender and ethnic identities of L2 users, on the one hand, structure access to linguistic resources and interactional opportunities and, on the other, are constituted and reconstituted in the process of L2 learning and use.

The post-structuralist view of language differs significantly from the traditional views of language as consisting of grammar, phonology, and the lexicon, or of language as an ethnic identity marker, post-structuralism views language as an array of discourses imbued with meaning. While the traditional view of language assumes a chain of signs without a subject, produced and seen from an "objective" position or from nowhere in particular, "discourses" are viewed as "practices which form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49) and serve to reproduce, maintain, or challenge existing power and knowledge structures. Discourses may develop about a particular topic, such as gender, class, or linguistic competence, and compete, creating distinct and often incompatible versions of reality.

Post-structuralists suggest that not all languages, discourses or registers are equal in the linguistic marketplace: Some are "more equal than others". Many post-structuralist linguists build on Bourdieu's (1991) view of linguistic practices as a form of symbolic capital, which can be converted into economic and social capital. The notion of language as symbolic capital has a significant advantage over the notion of "instrumental motivation", as it allows us to link the individual and the social, tracing the process by which particular linguistic varieties and practices become imbued with values or devalued in the linguistic marketplace (Pavlenko, 2001).

Bonny Norton's (2012) concept of investment in language learning highlights how learners invest their time, effort, and emotions in the language learning process. Learner identity is closely connected to motivation and investment, while learners develop a sense of ownership and personal attachment to the language being learned, which in turn influences their willingness to engage in language learning activities.

Identity Perspective on SLA

Norton (2007) emphasized the learner identity as a flexible paradigm is a post-structuralist perspective on social reality and SL learning. She argues that language learners navigate complex social landscapes marked by power differentials, cultural norms, and institutional structures. Learners draw on their linguistic resources and negotiate their identities within these contexts, actively engaging in processes of meaning-making and identity construction. Baxter (2016) claimed that this approach about learner's identity stands in opposition to traditional positions, in which identity is clearly delimited, fixed, coherent and is expected to be similar among individuals. Norton's post-structuralist perspective challenges traditional views of identity in language learning and underscores the dynamic and contingent nature of learner identity, emphasizing the importance of social context and agency in shaping language learning experiences.

Pennycook (2003) stated, "It is not that people use language varieties because of who they are, but rather that we perform who we are by (among other things) using varieties of language" (p. 528). In the process of identity construction there seems to be a tension between the impacts of the individual's own agency and the societal structure (Dewi, 2007). Cauldron and Smith (1999, as cited in Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 113) tried to elucidate the tension by providing definitions for both concepts. They explained that the term "agency" denotes the "personal dimension", whereas the term "structure" covers what is "socially given" (Cauldron & Smith, 1999, as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 113).

Throughout history, identity has been defined differently, although with common ideas. Among the various definitions, there seems to be an evolutionary process. In general terms, identity can be defined as the way we understand and view ourselves in relation to the world, other people, time, and space.

Ashmore, Jussim, and Wilder (2001) proposed a framework of identity consisting of four dimensions: personal, social, collective, and relational identity. Personal identity refers to an individual's perception of themselves as individuals with distinct attributes, characteristics, and experiences. Social identity pertains to the aspects of an individual's membership in social groups. These groups can include various categories, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, etc. Collective identity involves the belonging and identification to a larger social entity, such as communities, nations, or cultural groups. It encompasses the shared beliefs, values, symbols, and practices that define the group and contribute to individuals' sense of belonging to it. Relational identity refers to how individuals define themselves in relation to others, including their roles and positions within interpersonal relationships such as family, friends, and romantic partners. It involves aspects such as one's roles as a parent, sibling, friend, etc. These dimensions highlight the complexity of identity and the

multiple factors that contribute to how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships with others and society at large.

Identity has both a social and personal dimension. As a personal dimension, on the one hand, humans are considered as agents; and agents can think, decide, and choose. This agency is a self-conscious process which requires us to decide on which self to activate while contradictory multiple selves are negotiating simultaneously. On the other hand, subjectivity constitutes an integral part of identity, which refers to our conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions. Regarding the social dimension, identity reflects an individual's relationship with the environment, which is reconstructed through interaction with society. Thus, membership of the community constitutes the social aspect of identity (Hitlin, 2003).

Identity and Community

Identity has two aspects: One is the attempt to differentiate oneself from the community and the other is the attempt to integrate. One forms his/her identity by adopting different social and personal dimensions, such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory (Bamberg, 2010, p. 1). When we define a certain identity for ourselves, we are in some way assimilating ourselves to a particular group, and at the same time, we are differentiating ourselves from others who do not belong to that group, although the differentiating role played by identity far outweighs its integrating one. That is why Woodword (2002) claimed that identity is essentially about differentiation. There are other scholars, such as Joseph (2004), who argue that the process of identity construction can be two edged which can work partially against individuals and yet connect them together.

Traditionally, identity was perceived as a unitary phenomenon. Yet, recently it has been addressed and explored from a post-structuralist perspective. In a globalized, post-structuralist, postmodern world, identity consider to be a subject to change, fluid, diverse, dynamic, shifting, and contradictory. Identity can be socially constructed, co-constructed, and continually reconstructed through language and discourse (Zacharias, 2010; Omoniyi & White, 2007). Rather than being fixed and coherent, identity is considered as "a process" by social theorists (Block, 2007b). Some authors (e.g., Hall, 1995), prefer to use *identification* in an attempt to imply this processing sense. For Harr´e (1987), identity was about the constant and ongoing engagement of individuals in interactions with others (Block, 2007a). Identity, while being linguistically constructed, is thought to be fluid (Pablé, Haas, & Christe, 2010).

The discourse about identity permits rethinking the terms *History and Memory*. Shenhav (2012) claimed that identity discourse is not a new phenomenon. Block, Gray, and Holborow (2013) posit that one aspect of identity has developed as an individualistic discourse that is anchored in the social sciences and developed because of liberalism. This is a result of methodological liberalism, a world view that assumes that to understand a particular phenomenon one must consider the individual point of view. In the case of language and identity, the forces of neoliberalism, which entail deregulated markets, heightened individualism, and the marketization of activities, have had concomitant effects on the identities of language learners and teachers.

Post-structuralist theories of language have become increasingly attractive to identity and language learning researchers (Norton & Morgan, in press). Structuralist theories of language, often cited the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), emphasized the study of linguistic knowledge (competence) that allowed idealized speakers to use and understand language's subtle patterns and structures.

Foucault's (1980) insights about the relationship between knowledge and power, and the subtle and complex ways in which power circulates in society has been at the forefront of language. Foucault's conceptualization of power as discursively produced and reproduced is of special interest to language educators as they investigate certain learning environments and how they privilege or stigmatize learners. Pennycook (2007, p. 39) noted that "Foucault brings a constant skepticism towards cherished concepts and modes of thought. Taken-for granted categories, such as man, woman, class, race, ethnicity, nation, identity, awareness, emancipation, language, or power must be understood as contingent, shifting and produced rather than having some prior ontological status". This approach encourages language education researchers to reject "grand theories" and methods, and to focus on the particularity of the persons, environments, and processes they wish to examine.

The post-structuralist's perspective of identity is considered as being unstated, contextually driven, and emerging within interactions of a given discourse (Miyaharay, 2010). Identity is not only a category or a personal characteristic, but also actually a kind of "becoming", it is social, a learning process, a nexus, and a local-global interplay (Wenger, 1998, p. 163).

Additional focus in research on Identity and SLA examines the relations of power within classrooms and communities whether it promotes or constrains the process of language learning. It is argued that the extent to which a learner speaks or is silent, or writes, reads, or resists, is connected to the extent to which the learner is valued in any given institution or community. In this regard, social processes marked by inequities of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation may serve to position learners in ways that silence and exclude. At the same time, learners may resist marginalization through both covert and overt acts of resistance. What is of central interest to researchers of SL identity is that the very articulation of power, identity, and resistance is expressed in and through language (Norton, 2013).

Identity concerns "negotiated experience", which means people experience different identities through their social participation and then make a choice among the identities within them (Wenger, 1998, p. 149). Researchers, Pierce (1995), McKay and Wong (1996), and Armour (2004) note that negotiating multiple identities is a site of struggle. For example, one of the participants in McKay and Wong's (1996) study was "Michael Lee" who resisted the way he was treated as an ESL student. Michael Lee refused to write about the suggested topic of family or school when he was asked to in a language examination. As an alternative, he chose to write about his hobbies as he felt much more comfortable with this aspect of his identity. The conclusion McKay and Wong (1996) reached was that any person or any language learner experiences social negotiations within his or her learning environment in order to finally form identities he or she prefers (Zacharias, 2010).

In addition to continually negotiating identity formulation, especially national identity, as Puri (2004) and Smith (2003; 2004) note, that is no longer regarded as a fixed concept attached to one's native land. Rather, identity formulation is a continuing process, re-created daily through ceremonies and influential historical events (Block, 2007b). Therefore, the notion of race as a way of classifying and attributing identity to people can also be questioned (Ali, 2004). Abdi (2004) contributed to ongoing discussions within academia and society at large about the complexities of race, identity, and social justice. By questioning the traditional notions of race, Abdi encourages critical reflection and dialogue aimed at promoting inclusivity, equality, and respect for diversity.

Norton (1997) argued that language learners are continuously engaged in a process of identity construction every time they speak. She further suggests that learning a new language can be a stimulating experience that involves the whole person: physically, cognitively, and emotionally. According to the post-structuralist

perspective, identity is viewed as being unstated, contextually driven, and emerging within interactions of a given discourse (Miyaharay, 2010).

Norton's construct of "investment," which complements the concept of motivation in SLA (Dornyei, 2001), is inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1991), and signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners with the target language. Learners are often ambivalent about learning and practicing the language. If learners "invest" in the target language, they understand that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and linguistic and cultural material resources, which will increase the value of their cultural capital. While psychologists might ask, "To what extent is the learner motivated to learn the target language?" the identity theorist asks, "What is the learner's investment in the target language practices of this classroom?" A learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but may have little investment in the language approach of a given classroom or community, which may, be racist, sexist, elitist, or homophobic. There may also be important discrepancies between a language learner's conception of good teaching, and the practices of a given classroom. The construct of investment has gained considerable interest and research in the field of SLA (McKay & Wong, 1996; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Pittaway, 2004; Haneda, 2005; Cummins, 2006; Potowski, 2007; Arkoudis & Davison, 2008; Norton & Gao, 2008).

Learners Negotiate their Identity in the Process of SLA

Norton (2012) claimed that in the language classroom, learners negotiate their identities as language learners through interactions with peers, instructors, and authentic language use situations. They may draw on their existing identities, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic repertoires to shape their identities as language learners. Identity construction and negotiation theory explores how individuals construct and negotiate their identities through interaction with others and engagement in various social practices. Learner identity in the language classroom is shaped by language ideologies, including beliefs about language proficiency, native speaker norms, and cultural authenticity, attitudes, and assumptions about language and its use within society. Learners may internalize and negotiate these ideologies as they navigate their language learning journey and construct their identities as language learners.

Norton (2000) observed inconsistencies in the predictions made by studies of motivation in SLA, on the one hand, and what she found from careful ethnographic observation of language learners, on the other framework of identity in language learning has contributed significantly to the understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of learner identity. Her work underlines the importance of considering learners' investment, agency, and sociocultural contexts in promoting inclusive and empowering language learning environments.

Norton (2010) argueed that language learners possess a linguistic repertoire that consists of multiple languages, varieties, and styles that they use for different communicative purposes. Learners' linguistic repertoires reflect their diverse language experiences and identities, which may include elements of their native language(s), heritage language(s), and the target language being learned. She highlights the importance of affiliation with language learning communities and the role of social relationships in shaping learners' identities. Learners' sense of belonging and inclusion within language learning communities influences their motivation, confidence, and willingness to engage in language learning activities. Norton proposes that language learners have access to various identity options or ways of positioning themselves within the language learning context. Learners may adopt different identities (e.g., as language learners, language users, cultural insiders/outsiders) depending on their social interactions, experiences, and goals.

Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) consider the powerful role that personal narratives play as mediating artifacts as people undertake to reform an identity. The engagement in language learning is an investment that suggests different sets of questions about a learner's commitment to learning the target language. In addition to asking "To what extent is the learner motivated to learn the target language?" The teacher or researcher can also ask "What is the learner's investment in the language practices of this classroom?" A language learner may be highly motivated but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community, which may, for example, be racist, sexist, elitist, anti-immigrant, or homophobic.

Alternatively, the language learner's conception of good language teaching may not be consistent with that of the teacher, compromising the learner's investment in the language practices of the classroom. Thus, the language learner, despite being highly motivated, may not be invested in the language practices of a given classroom. The learner could then be excluded from those practices or choose not to participate in classroom activities. In time, the learner could be positioned as a "poor" or unmotivated language learner by others (Norton & Toohey, 2001). As people participate in different culturally specific activities, they enter different social relations and encounter, and learn how to employ and ultimately appropriate, different mediational means. Furthermore, in the author's case studies, he has observed that the decision to invest time and effort in learning a new language prompts significant reflections on the motivations and commitments of the learners involved. This decision initiates a transformative process that leads learners to contemplate what drives them to engage in language acquisition, how they envision their future selves with enhanced language proficiency, and which personal and cultural values they aspire to express and uphold through their language use. Exploring personal narratives within language learning contexts unveils a complex interplay between linguistic acquisition and identity construction. It highlights that language learning is not merely about acquiring new words and grammar rules, but also about reshaping one's sense of self and cultural identity. Learners actively participate in this dynamic process, continually shaping and reformulating their identities through meaningful engagement with the target language and its associated cultural contexts. For instance, learners may find themselves navigating linguistic and cultural boundaries, negotiating between their native identity and the identity they cultivate through language learning. This negotiation influences how they perceive themselves and are perceived by others within diverse linguistic communities. Moreover, language proficiency becomes a tool for expressing cultural values, beliefs, and experiences, thereby enriching interpersonal interactions, and fostering cross-cultural understanding. The process of learning a language becomes a journey of self-discovery and personal growth, where learners develop not only linguistic competence, but also a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and global interconnectedness.

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