Constructing Learner Identity: A Poststructuralist Perspective

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Abstract

The term "identity" is often used as if it were something relatively permanent, unitary, and uncontroversial. Yet recent thinking on it, as some scholars report, has challenged such assumptions (Norton, 1997; Johnston, 2003; Deaux, 2001). Rather, identity is seen, among other things, as fundamentally relational in nature, and thus as negotiated through language and other forms of social interaction; as contested, a site of conflict; and as being in constant flux and change. This paper looks at the implications of constructing identity for teachers and teacher educators of the English language. Constructing this identity, to the author, is an obligation for teachers since recognizing students' multiple identities certainly exert positive effects on teacher's teaching Such a change has implications for the strategies we encourage learners to develop, the materials we use and the outcomes we seek to achieve.

Key words: Identity, poststructuralism

1. Introduction

A quick look at any research engine on the internet will give us the impression that there is so much research concerned with the relationship between learning and identity. Diane Hoffman (2005) gives a graphic description of the situation stating that identity has become the bread and butter of our educational diet (cited in Falsafi, 2010, p.9). Sfard and Prusak (2005) define identity, "as a set of reifying, significant, endorsable stories about a person" (p. 14). They further add these stories are products of a collective storytelling. Similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991) claim "learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: They are aspects of the same phenomenon." They also claim learning is an experience of identity. Learning forms identities and identities shape learning. In Wenger's (1999) terms, learning enables participation in communities of practice, and participation in communities of practice enables learning. Through this participation individuals become members of communities and achieve a sense of recognition (cited in Falsafi, 2010). A sense of recognition, in Wenger's terminology, is the same as identity. However, the term identity is widely used and can mean many different things to different people.

2. What is social identity?

Identity is sometimes used to refer to a sense of integration of the self. It may also be associated to Erik Erickson's identity crisis as a part of his stage model of psychological development. The fact that a person is in challenge to achieve his or her identity is undeniable. But the definition that we are more concerned with is the one proposed by Hoggs and Abrams (1988) as a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (cited in Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category (p. 225). As Stet and Burke (2000) put, much of the social identity theory deals with intergroup relations—that is how people come to see themselves as members of one category/group in comparison with another group.

As Falsafi (2011) contends, individuals are considered and consider themselves as belonging to a context depending on how they are recognized in them. For example, the more

someone is recognized as a good professional, the easier it is for him or her to maintain a sense of belonging in the profession. Nevertheless, Coll and Falsafi (2010) state that failure to learn causes feelings of doubt about belonging. If a small boy, for instance, fails to learn to play football as expected, the sense of belonging in the football team might be vanished. They further add, "educational systems need to provide students with spaces, means and educational support to explore how they pave their way into different communities through a process of learning" (pp. 211-233).

3. Theories of identity: towards an attempt to construct identity

In discussing how to construct identity, a helpful starting point is with theories in which the relationship between language and meaning is understood as constitutive rather than descriptive. There was always a matter of concern between what a teacher does in the class and between what a teacher knows; that is, the theory that informs the knowledge of teacher. For ages, studies of SLA viewed classrooms as an acontextual experimental laboratory (Breen , 1985, cited in Cross, R, 2006, p. 2) dominated by a psycho-cognitive view of acquisition which the role of external context was kept to minimum. The lack of awareness of context emanates from the lack of interest on the part of cognitive perspectives to understand what language teachers bring to the classroom. Nevertheless, according to Cross (2006), understanding identity is useful in resolving some of the problems that arise from the lack of assonance between theory and practice. To remove this incongruity, researchers show much interest in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory.

The fundamental concept of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is that social interaction, through language, is prerequisite to cognitive development (Brown, 2000). This implies the fact that the mind develops through interaction with the world. What is worth emphasizing is that the mind develops through interaction not in interaction.

A key concept in this perspective is the notion of mediated activity: the idea that, as Cross repeats (2006) we do not act upon or interact with the world but through the use of mediatory tools, notably language. What is undeniable is that in the process of interaction, a person's action is goal-directed; a person is constantly moving away from a world of objects to a world of

social relations which constitute a context for the use of those objects (Cross, 2006); in moving towards his or her goals, there is an attempt to stabilize his or her identity.

This idea was crystallized in Vygotsky's (1978) famous triangular model of "a complex, mediated act" which is commonly expressed as the triad of subject, object, and mediating artifact, and lead to Leontiev's activity theory which Engestrom (1987) presents it in the form of an activity system with the emphasis on the nature of relationship between the subject, tools and their object. Cross (2006) maintains each constituent of this system can be understood with reference to the wider social, cultural and historic context from which that system has emerged. This gives rise to the principle of Vygotskian genetic analysis that "behaviour can be understood as the history of behaviour (Vygotssky,1994, p. 70).

Vygotsky's genetic framework of analysis is comprised of four levels—the phylogenetic, cultural, historic, ontogenetic, and microgenetic. This paper is not a place to deal with these stages but introduce briefly the fourth stage. It is within the microgenetic domain of development that the teacher's activity system occurs on daily basis in the classroom (Cross, 2006); in fact, *m*icrogenesis refers to an unfolding of the mental content through qualitative different stages. As a result, the learner's identity is going to be shaped.

As Sinha (1999, cited in Coll and Falsaf) argues there are no natural born learners; the learners are constructed by learning situations. The learning situations provide the learners with experience that is meaningful for the learners. Such a constructivist perspectives pursue the fact that learners are in constant attempt to make his views meaningful. In order for meaningful learning to take place, the individual needs not only to make sense of the learned subject matter and the learning situation, but also make sense of himself in the specific learning situation. As a result, the educational experience includes the construction of meanings about oneself as a learner, that is to say, a learner identity. These meanings are constructed throughout multiple and diverse educational experiences that mediate the construction of meanings about oneself as a learner in new learning situations. In fact, new educational experiences do not only depend on previous knowledge, but also on previous learning experience as a whole. These experiences are identified as mediators between the teaching and the final results of the learning process, indicating that the previous experiences mediate the construction of meanings of that which is learned as well as meanings about the educational experience as a whole.

4. Historical perspectives of identity

Throwing a glance at the literature of learner identity, we see poststructuralist theories of language are becoming attractive to researchers of identity. These theories are in contrast with structuralist theories of language associated with the work of Saussure's (1959) distinction between parole and language. For him the building blocks of language are comprised of the signifier (signs) and the signified (mental concept). Saussure asserted that neither the signifier nor the signified preexists and that the link between them is conventional. In contrast, poststructuralists argue that structuralism cannot account for struggles over the social meanings that can be attributed to signs within a given language (Norton, 2011).

In other words, poststructuralists claim in a system one cannot claim a meaning that can be attributed to signs in a given language. The meaning of 'woman', for example, is not intrinsic but is given from its difference from other signs, such as 'man' or 'female'. The signs 'criticism' and 'terrorism', for instance, can have different meanings for different people within the same linguistic community. In fact, for structuralists, signs are conceived as having idealized meanings and communities as being relatively homogeneous. Saussure's principle, therefore, is that meaning is produced within language not reflected by language. In contrast, poststructuralists claim that linguistic communities, as being heterogeneous, are sites of struggle in seek for truths and power. It has already been discussed that language is the site where the speaker creates his/her identity in relation to the social world.

The work on social identity is inspired by the works of four poststructuralists: Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), Pierre Bourdieu (1991) Gunther Kress(1993), and also Christine Weeden (1997):

To Bakhtin (1981) language is not as a set of idealized forms independent of their speakers or their speaking but rather as situated utterances in which speakers are in struggle with others to create meanings. For him the notion of individual speaker is a fiction, as the utterances are constructed jointly. He steadfastly pursues the idea that language development is a matter of appropriating the words of others. To him speakers need to struggle to appropriate the voices of others and to bend those to their own purposes.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977), focuses on the importance of power in structuring speech and asserts that there are the unequal relationships between interlocutors. He states 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 network of social relationships. When a person speaks he not only wishes to be understood but also to be believed. However, speakers' abilities to command a listener are unequally distributed because of the symbolic power relations between interlocutors.

Gurther Kress (1989) in theorizing language as text within the context of a particular genre highlights that language is not a neutral medium of communication, but takes on different meanings when the relationship between speakers change, together with shifts in relations of power (cited in Norton, 2011, p. 175).

It is worth a moment to note that language itself has no power; what makes it powerful is people, those who use it. Kress's insights are certainly inspired by the work of Michel Foucault (1980, cited in Norton, 2011) who uses the phrase "capillaries of power" indicating that power operate in subtle and often invisible ways in society. Foucault makes the case that power frequently naturalizes events and practices in ways that come to be seen as "normal" to members of a community. Put differently, to Kress (1989), social relationships are central to his theory of language. In effect, since language always takes place as texts, it is inevitable for a text to take a generic form. The generic form arises out of the action of social subjects in particular social situations. In Kress's terms, a genre is constituted within and by a particular social occasion that has a conventionalized structure and that functions within the context of larger institutional and social processes.

In elucidating the concept of identity, it is worth a moment to have a look at Weeden's (1997) concept of subjectivity. Weedon, as a feminist poststructuralist, is centrally concerned with the conditions under which people speak within contexts. In fact, she centralizes the role of language in the analysis of the relationship between the individual and the context, insisting that language not only defines institutional practices but also serves to construct our subjectivity (cited in Norton, 2011, p. 173). Accordingly, Norton (2011) maintains:

> Subjectivity signifies a different conception of the individual than that
> associated with humanist philosophy, which presupposes that every person

has an essential, fixed, and coherent core: "the real me." The term "subject" is a particularly helpful one, as it reminds us that we are often "subject of" a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of relative power) or "subject to" a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of relative powerlessness). The central point is that our subjectivity must always be understood in relational terms, and our subject position is constructed within diverse discourses or sites of practice. (p.172)

In a nutshell, Christine Weeden (1997) appropriates the poststructuralist theory of subjectivity, defining it as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (1997, p.21). To this feminist poststructuralist, the concept of subjectivity is multiple, contradictory, and dynamic across historical time and social space. This subjectivity is open to change. Thus from the hermeneutic perspectives on identity, language is made and remade in conversation and identity is dialogically created in those conversations. Drawing on Weedon's concept of subjectivity, Pierce (1995) presents three defining characteristics of social identity: the multiple nature of identity, identity as a site of struggle, and identity as changing over time. Social identity in Pierce's (1993) work refers to the relationship between the individual and the larger social world, as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services and law courts (Norton, 1997).

5. Language learning and identity construction

Much of the research in recent two decades concerns the ways in which identity is constituted through and by language and how these processes occur in broad social discourses with prescribed power relations. Second language learning researchers have developed frameworks for exploring how a learner's identity influences and is influenced by the various settings in which learning takes place. Within sociocultural perspectives, as the author said in advance, identity is not viewed as fixed, invariant attribute in the mind. Rather, identity as a contingent process involves dialectic relations between learners and the world around. Thus, in a classroom it is not accurate to classify the students as nonlinear thinkers, introverted as identity is

not a fixed trait, although people might share common beliefs and practices. The representations of these beliefs are highly imposed by outsiders. As Tajfil (1981) understood, social identity is derived from an individual's membership in a social group or groups. If a person's emotional needs, for instance, are not met in a particular group, that person can change his or group affiliation(s), although that might not always be possible (cited in Antonio, 2005, p. 895).

One objective of L2 learning is to validate learners as interlocutors in a new speech community. Effective teaching and learning can develop only when individuals perceive each other as valid interlocutors. For many learners, the first place they can receive such validation in their L2 is in the language classroom. Hence, the ESL teacher is a bridge between the classroom as a micro context and society, as a macro context, whose cultures the language represents. To construct the preliminary stages of identity construction can be shaped in the class where the teacher is far from an information broker whose responsibility is merely to fill up the vessel (the mind) of the students. ESL instructors are to facilitate a safe space in which cultural awareness can be mediated and discussed. In line with certain trends in recent decades, much identity research rejects unilateral transmission of information that places emphasis on the objective and unbiased nature of dialogism between the teacher and students. In this view, teachers have to understand the knowledge of those participating in the studies. In sum, as Boxer and Corets-Code (2000) elucidates, for the dialogue to be worthwhile, the teachers need to make the language classroom a safe space for expressing stereotypes, challenging them, and possibly transforming them.

One distinct feature observed in social identity is self-similarity (Sade, 2011), that every teacher should grasp the significance of it while teaching. As Sade (2011) puts, "when a new social identity emerges, the others do not cease to exist (p. 46). As she further adds, "they influence and are influenced by the one that emerges" (p. 46). For example, the way a teacher thinks and acts is influenced by the way he/she is a daughter, a mother, a student and so on. When these identities interact with each other, influence and are influenced by each other, we can also say that they are self-similar (p. 46). Also, that the new identity is influenced influences each other. This signifies its fractal relevance. When a new identity emerges, it also influences the others, causing them to be reconstructed. This process contributes to making each individual distinct from the others. Thus, it is undeniable for teacher to conceive that they face, in a class,

with a group of students whose recognition of themselves are different, but considerable. As Morin (2008, cited in Sade, 2011, p. 47) has stated that each one of us is a society of several characters makes us unique and multiple at the same time. This view is pervaded by complexity theory that suggests the term identity fractals, instead of identity fragmentation (Sade, 2011). The latter evokes the idea of breaking into isolated pieces. The former, on the other hand, evokes the properties of fractals, and is able to bring to the concept the idea of the whole, which is emergent, ever changing, complex and achieved from the interactions established by the component parts.

In an attempt to develop individual's identity, Marcia (1976) identified two key processes occurring in identity development. First, it was necessary for the individual to actively explore the possibilities, a process involving the matching self-knowledge with knowledge of the world. The second process involves making decisions, or what Marcia called 'commitment' (cited in Head, 1997, p. 13). Sooner or later, the adolescent has to make decisions relating to such matters as career, if progress is to be made. From the interaction of these two processes Marcia postulated the existence of four possible identity conditions, which he called Identity Statuses. He defined the statutes thus:

> …an identity-achievement subject has experienced a crisis and is committed
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> to an occupation and ideology. He has seriously considered occupational
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> choices. With respect to ideology, he seems to have re-evaluated past beliefs
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> and achieved a resolution…. (cited in Head, 1997, p. 14)

The first two conditions of Marcia's (1976) Identity Statutes correspond to the obvious situations of identity achievement, in which the person has experienced crisis and made a commitment, and identity diffusion, in which neither process has been undertaken. Marcia, also, suggested that there were also two possible intermediate positions, the states of moratorium and foreclosure. Erik Erikson (cited in Head, 1997, p.14) had already used the word moratorium to describe a feature of contemporary society that it is often possible for a young person, particularly if undergoing higher education, to defer identity choices, and enjoy an extended adolescence. In addition, Marcia recognized that some identity decisions may be made by foreclosure, by seizing on a solution without subjecting it to personal scrutiny. He suggested that these two intermediate states represented possible resting points in the path of identity development.

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the theories about learner identity mainly use three aspects of the sociocultural approach to identity: those that place emphasis on discursive or rhetorical nature of identity, those which view identity construction as deeply embedded in activity and as part of social practice, and finally approaches that emphasize recognition as essential to identity construction (Coll & Falsafi, 2010). If we dare to say on what these theories are in common, we can claim that the power relations between participants in an interaction have a particular effect on the social meanings of the texts constructed within given genre, whether oral or written. Poststructuralist theories can help teachers, policymakers and many others in a myriad of ways, whether teachers are discussing the meaning of texts, or students, as Norton (2011) says, "are resisting essentializing pedagogical practices, it is clear that language has a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated" (p. 179).

Language classes are sites where identities are produced and changed and these identities are shifting and tied to language and learning. In fact, this process of formation is not linear; it is, rather, a process that is contingent. An individual's identity influences and is influenced by each other. Language classes have increasingly become global contact zones in which people with disparate historical trajectories and cultural identities meet clash and grapple with each other often in a highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.

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