

# IDENTITY IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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## Abstract

The paper presents a literary review and summarizes the relationship between identity and language learning and their interconnectedness with the cultural and social background of the learners. Along with it, it also sheds light on poststructuralist, constructivist as well as other aspects and perspectives on identity.

**Key Words :** Language, Culture, Identity, Second Language Learning,

## Introduction

Language gives humans an upper hand over animals. It is one of the ways in which individuals can express their identity and recognize that of others. Language can be acquired naturally or learnt through formal instruction. Prior is usually the case in first language whereas second case refers to learning a second language. A language group can be as big as a nation or as small as a family. The people in those groups communicate using their shared language which can be their national language or their own personal language. In the first case everyone knows the shared history, events and facts. In the second case it's only the close group's members who know the allusions of particular words, events, jokes etc. Both are varieties of same language but have different identities associated with them. One is national identity whereas other is personal identity. Individuals can have multiple social and language identities. This is so because a person can be a doctor, a poet, social worker, a father, a brother, a husband all at the same time. The language variety he uses with his mother and family is going to be different from the language he will use with his colleagues and juniors. By speaking the acceptable language of the group and recognizing the allusions make them an insider.

Since English has become the lingua franca the context in which the ESL learners participate through interaction in an English discourse become a crucial aspect in forming multiple identities of the learners. Identity can be categorized and constructed at three levels. First is psychological level which refers to how we relate our sense of self and its relation with others, second level is social which refers to how our immediate society perceives us and the third level is anthropological level which is based on one's ethnicity. According to the researches conducted in the fields of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics the personal and cultural identities of second language learners start overlapping as soon as they engage in second language acquisition. This is because individuals are dynamic as they are continuously evolving. This evolution in their 'being' comes through 'language use'. It is

through this language use that their identities are continuously reconstructed as they participate in multiple discourses. This further leads to acquisition of multiple identities.

### **Structuralism and Constructivism; Paradigms on Identity**

Structuralism on a sociological and psychological ground perceives identity as an entity that has an inherent and enduring structure. It is related with objectivity and realism. Constructivism on the other hand questions and rejects objectivity and fixed structures. According to structuralist essentialist perspective, identity refers to a group category, outside an individual such as nationality, gender, cultural traits etc. It signals towards a linear cause effect relationship between language learning and other influential factors. It is monocultural in nature. In constructivism, identity is like a discursive construct that takes place in specific communicative events. It is highly affected by the negotiation between the individual and his/her environment with the use of language ( de Fina Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006 ).

According to Le Page and Tabouret - Keller (1985) every act of identity consists of a linguistic act involving awareness of identity dimensions. The relationship between language learning and other factors is complex and multiple, therefore instead of assuming clear cut distinctions between speech communities ( monolingual - bilingual), types of learners (ESL/EFL) and target language proficiencies (high and low) constructivism talks about learners' affective filters, investment, learning environment etc. The constructive perspective is based on social identity theory according to which identity is social, personal, bipolar ( Tajfel ;1998). It is more about independent and interdependent self (Markus and Khityama ;1991). The shift from structuralism to constructivism came with Gumperz's *Language and Society and Identity 1982* and Page and Tabouret Keller's act of identity theory ( 1985 ). Bourdieu ( 1991) went on to call himself a structuralist constructivism and constructivism structuralist in addition he also came up with concepts like cultural habitus, cultural capital. Constructivism has face criticism in this area and is challenged on the grounds like lack of theory, inappropriate methods.

Post structuralism is a movement in philosophy that affected most of the subjects ranging from science to arts and humanities. The movement is post modern in it's sense of attending to the dynamics of social divisions. According to post modernists one version of any accepted idea, principle or belief is partial knowledge. This movement led to a weakening of scientific vagueness that further led to challenging the modernists' lopsided view of science as a "tool to challenge inequality ". This perspective was embraced by many language researchers. This era was post sausserian in nature. According to Saussure language is a self regulating system and the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not arbitrary as the meanings given to a word or a sign are produced within language through differences between other signs. On the other hand post structuralists radicalize such ideas by bringing in the notion of dynamism and instability. According to post structuralists like Derrida there are differences in the complex system of language sometimes they are in action or affect the person using language and sometimes they do not. Sometimes these differences can effect themselves but one thing is certain they are not prescribed in brain. The attention of such thinkers is more on extra linguistic factors like intention, circumstances rather than intrinsic factors. The language texts are deconstructed, the reading audience is no longer passive with authorial self. They deconstruct the text and

meaning. In this manner language and texts are conceptualized and meanings are created within language and the meaning of self are produced within discourses. Discourses assign value to semiotic activities like gestures, oral and written texts, images etc. An individual therefore becomes de-centred and textualized on the basis of language used by him/her and the experiences that he/she had as revealed by the discourses of which he/she was a part.

In ELT the post structuralist perspectives have strategic implications. One of them is judging the theory of culture and identity in relation to their origin, local articulations and exclusions. Norton (2000) talks about language learning as a shared responsibility and refers to L2 competence as "the right to speak" and "the power to impose reception" (Bonny Norton; 2000).

## Identity

SLA, theorists have faced a problem describing the relationship between language learner and larger social processes. Therefore traditionally identity has been viewed as a unitary product that is fixed, in applied linguistics.

An individual is believed to have affective variables with an either introverted or extroverted personality and that this attitude towards target language community indicates his level of motivation and his anxiety level indicates how much cognitive input he can take (Schumann; 1978, Krashen 1981). The social distinction signal towards community differences between L1 and L2 speakers. According to post structuralist perspective on identity it is unstated, contextually driven and emerging with interactions of a given discourse (Miyaharay; 2010). Identity is therefore a kind of "becoming", a process, a nexus and the post modern world considers identity to be fluid, multiple, subject to change, recreating, co constructed with the help of discourse and language. It includes social influences and individuality of a person. According to researchers Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Luk and Lin (2007) an individual possesses multiple identities, each identity type is triggered in a particular situation and a context. These identities are multiple and incoherent and not fixed or static.

A precise definition of identity is yet to be achieved. Ha (2008) puts forward that the notions of identity in the West is different from the notion of identity in the East. The former view identity as "hybrid and multiple" the later refer to as a "sense of belonging". According to Wu (2011) identity refers to the way others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves in relation to the social context determined by the social practices carried out by the individuals and society.

Norton (2000) talks about identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how the person understands possibilities for future use". Bonny Norton talks about Martina in *Language Learning, Social identity and Immigrant Women* (1994). Martina is an immigrant woman who came to Canada in 1989 from Czechoslovakia, with her family. She played various roles of a wife, a mother, an immigrant, worker at a restaurant and a language learner. All of these duties performed by her made the society assign her various labels which in turn became her identities. Bonny Norton puts forward the multiplicity of the post structuralist

perception of identity and further argues against sharp distinctions between the language learner and the social world. Pennycook ( 2003, p.528 ) elaborates on the relationship between language use and identity by saying that "it is not that people use language varieties because of who they are but rather rather perform who we are by ( among other things )using varieties of language . "

On the other hand Haneda ( 2005 ), defines identity as " a) membership in a community in which people define who they are by the familiar and the unfamiliar , b) a learning trajectory in which they define themselves by past experiences and envisioned futures, c) a nexus of multi membership in which people reconcile their various forms of membership into one coherent sense of self, d) a relation between local and globe". These two seem to be one of the most comprehensive and elaborative definitions. Norton covers in all sense an individual's perception about himself and perception of the society about the individual. Haneda's definition covers all the aspects ranging from community membership in terms of who they are, the effect of their past experiences and how they envision their future as who they are and what they expect themselves to achieve on the basis of who they are. The multiple identities possessed by an individual are a result of multiple discourses in which an individual participates and his or her relation with self, society and the globe.

### **Relationship Between Language, Culture and Identity**

It is important for a linguist to understand the relationship between language, culture and identity, especially the ones who are involved in the research related to the issues of the group heterogeneous students. The relationship between the three is complex and an intriguing one. Culture is dynamic. Banks ( 1998 ) defines culture as "cluster of attributes such as values, beliefs, behaviour patterns and symbols unique to a particular human group." It is a transactional process and keeps evolving. The people who practice a particular culture associate themselves with it while redefining, recreating and restructuring it.

Language plays an important role in transmission and expression on cultural values and beliefs. Language acts like an instrument to restore, promote, redefine culture whereas culture is dynamic and transactional. It is related to culture on intrinsic terms. The construction of knowledge by people is shaped by their mother tongue and native culture.

Language and identity are inseparable. If people communicate through language establishing a sense of self, then identity construction is a process which takes place through social and cultural perspectives. Cultural identity is affected by one's ability to use language in a context.

Social construction of knowledge is nothing but a symbolic representation of the world that is created by people as they use language to interact with others. According to Watson - Gegeo and Gegeo ( 1999 ) " language is essential to identity, authenticity, cultural survival and people's learning and thinking process" ( as cited in Sandra Patricia Mercuri ; 2012 )

Therefore if an individual learner is not allowed to use his mother tongue under the English only ideology, it limits their potential for knowledge construction. This is so because recreating knowledge through a non native language while learning it makes learners loose

their genuineness of their selves and identity. It breaks connection between the three constructs of language, culture and identity.

### **Identity and Language Learning**

The identities of second language learners are regarded as " multiple, contextually situated and constructed in the process of recognizing and being recognized within particular discourses...afforded by the contexts in which they learn and communicate." ( Yueh Chin Chang ; 2014 )

However according to structuralist and positivist approach we cannot say that identity changes are exclusively attributable to language learning. The constructivist view believes that it is no surprise that identity change is associated with other factors as well . Identity change and language learning influence each other. According to theoretical beliefs students have a choice regarding the situation in which they engage in target community discourse. But the second language theorists have not probed into the ways in which power relations limit the opportunities to practice language learning in a target community. Unequitable distribution of power relations among learners makes them motivated or demotivated, introvert or extrovert.

Norton talks about reconceptualizing the notions about individualization and personality of learners so that it problematizes the dichotomous distinction between the context of learning and learners. He argues that "SLA theory needs to develop a conception of identity that is understood with reference to larger and frequently inequitable social structures...reproduced in day to day social interaction". She foregrounds "the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by language learners' identity".

### **Literacy practices and Identity**

According to Scarcella ( 2003 ) literacy of an individual refers to a learners' potential to gain proficiency in LSRW of a language. Gee ( 2002, 2008) places importance on literacy as well as social skills and practices. He puts forward a student's primary discourse meaning a language gives them a sense of self and it should be valued otherwise it will affect their identity. When ESL/EFL students come to educational institutions speaking their first language which is not English their primary discourse is replaced by secondary discourse of the institution. In such a situation the English language learners do not have equal opportunities to negotiate their identity. This is because the principles and rules of learning are decided by the educational administration and the English - only ideology places speakers of other languages at a disadvantage in comparison to native speakers.

According to Clark and Ivanic ( 1997 ) due to much emphasis on standardization student writers who have difficulty with mechanics of writing are condemned. Such writers were labelled as basic writers. The learners are unaware of the social and political realities that are the reasons of reinforcing such labelling. It was in 1990s when the issue of language conflict was raised and scholars like Lu ( 1991) and Harris ( 1997 ) stated that second language learners and especially writers often face difficulties in terms of race, class and

gender being held at "points of conflict among competing discourses". The independent thought of viewing oneself as a writer is thus, clearly related to the status and a sense of power that second language learners have based on their life experiences. In academic writing identity is constructed through social interaction and negotiated ( Masumeh Rahimivand and David Kuhi; 2014 ). According to Ivanic ( 1998 ) identity construction in academic writing involves discourse to facilitate interaction and to convey social values and linguistic and textual features.

Second language learner's therefore negotiate meaning with others and make use of social and affective factors while constructing knowledge while reading and writing. They use strategies on interpersonal level, make use of discourse knowledge. According to Ivanic there are four aspects of identity in writing. They are

***Autobiographical Self*** - This refers to the writer's self history reflecting who he/she in the text. It is determined by the writer's cultural, linguistic and educational background.

***Discoursal self*** - This is about self representation in text. According to Ivanic ( 1998 ) it is "constructed through the discoursal characteristics of a text that reflect values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they we're written.

***Authorial self / Self as an author*** - It refers to the writers voice that they want their audience to hear in terms of their position, opinion, belief so that they can write with authority. The sense of authoritativeness is important part of discoursal self in academic writing.

***Possibilities for selfhood in the sociocultural and institutional context*** - It is related to the circumstances in which students compose a text. It is an abstract notion regarding writer identity and refers to "abstract, prototypical identities available in socio - cultural context of writing" ( Ivanic; 1998 ). This makes writing an institutionally and socially determined act. It is possible that the writer chooses to construct the discoursal self and authorial self by opting for a possibility that is supported by particular socio cultural and institutional contexts in which the writer composes a text. On the other hand a writer may even have to struggle to choose one among the many possibilities available.

According to Ivanic identity construction through discourse, knowledge creation and sharing are interwoven. Self representation in academic text can be authoritative and non authoritative, conscious and unconscious as writers try to express and embrace full membership of the academic discourse and express a standardized identity to the audience. Therefore literacy practices are important when it comes to learning a second language as it covers cognitive, social and psychological ability as well. In terms of cognitive aspect, academic writing is difficult as writers have to remember facts and have to be good at analyzing concepts.

## Conclusion

Identity has been defined differently over the past years. In general it can be understood as how we perceive ourselves in relation to the world, people around us and time and space . It accounts for similarity and differentiation among people. Personally people are viewed as

agents who are self-conscious, socially identity is about an individual's interaction with the external environment. Identity construction entails use of language and identity development of an individual is believed to be a part of the person's practical consciousness and unintended action consequences that are transformed into discourse consciousness. An ideal learner in an ideal situation is reflexive and interculturally aware which he or she uses to construct identity. identity therefore consists of items that are given and predetermined like gender, social class and items that are constructed like profession. The traditional view of identity perceives it as fixed and unitary whereas a post-structuralist view perceives it as contextually situated, dynamic, variant, multi-dimensional, negotiation of selves and coherent.

In second language writing there have been a number of studies to explore identity construction in ESL/EFL written texts, the strategies adopted by learners for doing so. The relationship between the culture, identity and beliefs is a dynamic one pertaining to the macro and micro processes. All the three of them play an important role in forming learners' own beliefs about ESL writing and also determine the processes by which they construct and reconstruct their identities. However it should be remembered that the task of adapting to a new academic setting and forming one's own identity and later on, acquiring multiple ones is a daunting task. The writers' identities keep shifting according to the available context. There can be instances where discourse elements won't match with one another " ( Soyoung Baek Burke; 2010). Therefore the educators should try to make the instruction more explicit so that the ESL/EFL students who are new to the academic literary practices can easily familiarize themselves with the academic discourse practices.

Practice in target language is important for learning it whether its first or second language of the speaker. The teachers should acknowledge the ESL/EFL learners are a heterogeneous group and have varied social and cultural identity. They might find themselves at a disadvantage in terms of power relations, motivation etc. The language and theorists should try to understand the ways in which learners respond to opportunities to speak the target language and how they create new ones. Attention should also be paid to their own investment in language learning and how they acquire new identities via multiple discourses.

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