Can the Dimensions of Identity, Investment and Empowerment Increase Social Inclusion for Second-language Learners? – Moving Towards the Creation of a Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Much of social research in language learning in the past twenty years has been devoted to explore issues of identity construction and its sociological implications in terms of mobility and inclusiveness. There are a large number of studies on the areas of culture and identity, and how they relate to the investment and empowerment of language learners (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Norton, 1997, 2000, 2013, 2015; Norton & Davin, 2015; Ushioda, 2011). Some of these have been pivotal in the development of identity research for the past two decades and have laid the foundation upon which further research has been done: Norton (1995) proposed her Classroom-Based Social Research, in which learners become ethnographers of sorts under the encouragement of teachers; Brunton and Jeffrey (2014) examined some of the factors that might lead to empowerment with foreign students in New Zealand (2013), Diaz, Cochran, and Karlin (2016) conducted a study in American classrooms to investigate the impact of teachers' behavior and communication strategies on students' achievement and feeling of empowerment, and more recently Howard (2018) investigated the impact of teachers' attitudes in the construction of socio-cultural identities in African-American students. Such research has provided a wealth of insight and suggested practices, but in this researcher's opinion they have come short in providing any definite answers as to how to implement them or the outcomes they might yield. The purpose of this paper is to shed new light on how the aforementioned dimensions of identity construction, empowerment and investment can result in greater social inclusion for second-language learners. The paper analyzes each dimension separately, provides a theoretical background that links them to language learning, and then discusses some possible implications for teachers and researchers on how to further recruit students' investment and enhance their sense of empowerment and inclusion.

Key words: Classroom-based Research, Empowerment, Identity Construction, Inclusion, Language Learning, Mobility, Pedagogy of Inclusion

WHY LANGUAGE LEARNING?

In his book 'Language and Identity', John Edwards (2009) suggests that identity is a summary of all our individual traits and characteristics, and that it defines our uniqueness as humans. Unlike others after him, however, he also suggests that this uniqueness does not arise from possessing components that are strictly our own, but rather from what he called "a deep and wide range of human possibilities".

Amongst these possibilities, and because it is central to the human condition, we find language. Some researchers have deemed it of such importance so as to consider it inseparable from identity and intrinsically linked to the human condition and self-development. Others have found evidentiary support to link language learning and the construction of one's identity (Drummond & Schleef, 2016; Edwards, 2009; Joseph, 2004; Norton, 1997).

What is certain is that as arbitrary as languages are, they provide individuals with a sense of belonging and community; since as the early as the 20th century researchers have noted how certain groups have used their language to protect themselves from outside influence and even to be able to maintain their traditions and culture (Dzvinchuk & Ozminska, 2018; Morris, 1946; Steiner, 1994). It follows then that a common language (a lingua franca) serves as a means by which to bridge a gap between communities that might be otherwise isolated from each other. Not only English is at play here as the international language for business and diplomacy, but there is also the case of Arabic all across the Middle-East and North Africa, and Chinese throughout the Malay Peninsula all the way to Singapore. In both of those cases the religious and cultural implications are broad and have repercussions in employment, social mobility and more importantly, social and cultural integration, as this paper will later explore.

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

To understand what social inclusion is, let us begin by grasping its opposite. The UN 'Report on the World Social Situation' (2016) defines social exclusion as *"a multidimensional phenomenon not limited to material deprivation; poverty is an important dimension of exclusion, albeit only one dimension"* (p.17). When we talk about social exclusion we mean to describe any context or situation in which an individual is unable to fully take part in the life of their community, be it socially, culturally, politically or economically. By contrast, social inclusion is

> *a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights* (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p. 9).

In other words, social inclusion seeks to improve the conditions of individuals so they are more able to participate fully in the life of the society they belong to.

Let us explore the role of language in such process. Some scholars (Grin & Vaillancourt, 2000; Kymlicka & Patten, 2003; Laitin & Reich, 2003; Patten, 2001, Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008) consider languages a human right to be recognized as an individual asset, while others view them as human capital which might enhance a person's possibilities to improve their job prospects (Grenier, 1982; Lazear, 1995; Pendakur & Pendakur, 2002; Warman, Sweetman, & Goldman, 2015). Regardless of this seeming dichotomy, however, what is clear that both of these notions fall under the concept of social inclusion, since language knowledge has the potential to help the learner gain greater opportunities and access, thus enabling them to participate more fully in their societal life.

The February 2018 "Statement for a Multilingual World" issued by the Salzburg Global Seminar, gives some interesting numbers I think worth exploring. For instance, in a number that illustrates how multi-lingual our world really is, there are 7,097 languages in the world; yet about one-third of them are endangered and only 23 dominate and are spoken by more than half of our planet's population. There are also 244 million people who are considered international migrants, of whom more than 20 million are refugees (a number that has continued to increase since 2000) who are in need of access to jobs, schools and opportunities but who also face stringent language requirements in order to qualify for such access.

The statement also points out the need for targeted policies that can improve social cohesion in order to achieve further social and political diversity, given a recent shift towards denying the right for communities to maintain their linguistic identity.

A report by Lo Bianco (2017) on multi-ethnic conflict in Thailand and Myanmar, two countries with a history of language-based conflict, illustrates how language is being used to defuse conflict through a method he calls *"facilitated dialogue"* (p. 2), in which a facilitator assist the parties involved in achieving a higher degree of understanding through a structured program of sharing views and collaborating through language.

Because inclusion depends largely on understanding, it is important to also grasp that how teachers conduct themselves with students can shape the level of that understanding learners are able to achieve; two pedagogical interventions that can be explored in this study are further clarity in explaining, as detailed by Dachyshyn (2008), and assisting learners in ways that are both encouraging and non-discriminatory, since students, as I have detailed, are already in a position of disadvantage and inequality.

THE DIMENSION OF IDENTITY

In trying to explain 'identity' beyond the broadness of the dictionary definition in light of the available social research up to that point, political scientist James Fearon dissected years of former literature and presented us with a new analysis of the word. He defines identity as:

> *(a) a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviors, or (b) socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (or (a) and (b) at once). In the latter sense, "identity" is modern formulation of dignity, pride, or honor that implicitly links these to social categories.* (1999, p. 2)

He further elaborated on this definition by suggesting that broadly speaking, identity is both a set of individual attributes that prompt us to action, as well as a social category designated by labels, such our nationality, sexual orientation and family role. Fundamentally, Fearon's ideas on identity is that it orients and structures behavior, be it because of the social norms that rule an individual's existence or be it because of a sense of self-respect (individual identity). This is actually a foundational aspect of second language learning and a key tenet of this research.

Early on, Norton (1995) presented us with her theory on investment: a social construct which she used to explain the learner's relationship between the language learner and the social world; each learner brings their individual resources: education, languages, culture, money and material possessions, and they invest in the language learning process with an understanding that these resources will increase in the future in the form of access, jobs and social mobility.

She later linked these notions to the process of identity construction in one of her most seminal works and in it, defined 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 the future*' (Norton, 2000, p.5). This last point, she argues, is particularly important when connecting the concept of identity as it relates to language learning, since one of the most powerful motivations in language learners is the idea of a 'desirable future identity'; in the words of Heller, it is through language that 'a person gains access to a powerful social network that give learners opportunities to speak' (Heller, 1996).

We can see that there seems a common thread and an agreement that from the perspective of post-structuralist researchers (which I share) identity is not rigid; it can be shaped, reshaped, abandoned, re-acquired, aspired to and negotiated

This viewpoint is also shared by Tabouret-Keller (1997), Omoniyi (2006) and Mahboob (2017); the first defined identity as a 'dynamic process shaped by social action' (p.12), while the second theorized that identity is continuously created and re-created depending on the individual's social, historical, economic and institutional circumstances. He further elaborated in this notion of the individuals' renewal of identity as it becomes influenced their "social interactions, encounters and wishes" (p. 3). Mahboob, on the other hand, explored how embedded ideologies impact the process of identity construction as learners become more aware of conflicting cultural features in the language learning journey: as these ideologies become more visible, so does the learner's own sense of self becomes shaken.

This poststructuralist approach, however, is disputed by Block, who claims that so much emphasis on the social/external aspect of identity construction neglects the importance of the self and what Elliot called 'the ambivalence of identity' (Block, 2006, p.35, Elliot, 1996, p.8). According to them, ambivalence is a state natural to human beings which is brought about not so much by the environment as by 'life trajectory and individual choices'. Additionally, poststructuralists seems to ignore the root and origins of the concept of identity, which lie in the early works of Sigmund Freud and William James; it was them who addressed identity issues as more psychological than simply social.

A wealth of research by Norton (2000), Toohey (2000), Bayley and Schechter (2003), Hall (2003) and Kanno (2003), has shown that the individual choices mentioned above can be (and usually are) influenced by the social structures in place, thus creating a seemingly inseparable bind between them, which was best explained earlier by Fearon even before such research was made available. It can be concluded then that there is enough evidence to say that identity is neither a purely internal psychological construct nor an entirely social one, but a composite of both. An important part of this study relates to how these social structures (and the inequality contained within) can be offset through empowering learners and help them navigate the complexity of the structures in place.

If we look at the identity in relation to language learning, we can see that this a particularly important issue: second language users are not only continuously involved in negotiating and reshaping their identity based on external social constructs and internal processes, but they are also exposed to unequal relations that become evident depending on nationality, background, sexual orientation, religion, membership and language background. And this gains importance if we consider that, at least from a sociolinguistic perspective, learning truly takes place when participating in communicative events.

Although both Norton (1995) and Weedon (1997) established early on the need for teachers to become actively involved in assisting students in the process of identity construction neither offers concrete answers that are transferable to other contexts: my experience in Asian countries has proven time and time again that, for instance, Japanese or Saudi students are highly unlikely to engage, as they suggest, in self-directed efforts to socialize in English outside the classroom, to say nothing of them keeping journals or reflecting on their identity struggle (because struggle they do). Although it has been my empirical observation that pedagogical practices can be and are often transformative, the question remains how and which ones.

Pennycook (2012) argues for what I believe to be the first of these practices, which relates to our mindset as language teachers:

We do not actually 'speak languages,' we are not in fact 'native speakers' of things called 'languages' (Canut, 2007). Rather, we engage in language practices (Pennycook, 2010), we draw on linguistic repertoires, we take up styles, we partake in discourse, we do genres.
(p. 98)

A study by Lovaas (2014) drew on these notions in an examination of how L2 speakers may construct identity, arguing in favor of Pennycook's "resourceful speaker" concept, which he defined as ""both having available language resources and being good at shifting between styles, discourses, and genres" (p. 99). She investigated how two women, Natalie (teacher) and Ana (student), both bilingual users of English and Spanish, were able to constantly shift their identities as the conversation veered into certain areas, keeping a record of how they effectively navigated styles, discourses and genres as it suited the conversation. This, then, brings us to a second pedagogical practice of value: encouraging learners to draw on their linguistic repertoire to renegotiate their identity (even if a temporary one); by doing this, Lovaas argues, the learner is validated as a *resourceful speaker* and the balance of power shifts, with the exchange becoming more balanced and the participants having asserted their identity through their interaction.

An even third dimension concerning identity construction is the notion of power dynamics in the classroom, or to look at more simply, how valued learners feel at different stages of their interactional process, both by fellow learners and by teachers. Here we come to a key term, what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) labeled as "linguistic capital"; this can be explained as the accumulation of a person's language resources and the role these resources play in navigating preexisting social power dynamics.

In his seminal work "Language and Symbolic Power", Bourdieu (1991) claimed that languages form a wealth of sorts; the same way a language benefits and affords possibilities to the members of that linguistic community, the opposite can be said to be true: for those outside of the group belonging to the linguistic majority, there are reduced possibilities of access thus creating an unequal relation of symbolic power.

This inequality present in language learning has a wide range of repercussions, from documented poor external perception and stigmatization of the speaker to lack of access and attainment in education; drawing on Bourdieu's earlier theories on cultural capital and cultural reproduction,

Cromley and Kanno (2013) looked deeply into this issue from the perspective of language learners.

We can see the connection between empowerment and identity construction in the following statement by Czuba and Page (1991, p. 1):

> *... empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important.*

This brings us to the next dimension.

THE DIMENSION OF EMPOWERMENT

To understand what empowerment really means as far as language learners are concerned and why it is important, it is first necessary to go back to 1981, when Julian Rappaport proposed his empowerment model while examining what he called '*the paradoxical nature of social and community problems*' (1981, p. 2). He exemplifies this by situating freedom and equality: the more freedom you give people in a group, he claims, the more power the strong will be able to accrue and exert, to the detriment of the seemingly weaker members. Hence freedom is annihilated.

Language learners are faced with very particular challenges, in that, as we have examined before, the lack of linguistic capital has a direct impact in the degree of social belonging (or freedom) they experience; there is an inherent inequality because of this lack of resources, and that is why a key to this research is finding ways to empower learners in the unequal world they find themselves in.

In an influential paper that attempts to define both power and empowerment, Czuba and Page claim that power "*does not exist in isolation but within the context of a relationship*" (1999, p. 1). And this is the crux of the matter: these relationships, naturally though not always intentionally unequal, are also changeable and then it follows that so is the power that pervades them. And empowerment is the process by which they change once people are equipped, both socially and motivationally, to take affirmative action in regards to the existing balance of power.

Empowerment, in the context of classroom learning (such as what this study is trying to investigate), has a number of other dimensions. Following up on an early paper by Shulman, McCormack, Luechauer, and Shulman (1993), later researchers (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996; Houser & Frymier, 2009) established three of them: that being empowered means to feel *motivated*, *competent* about what one is doing and that our actions have an *impact*. We can see how each of these dimensions has a prevalent presence in language learning and easily be related to the process of communicating in another language. Finn and Schrodt (2012) dissected and expanded on this by suggesting that empowerment can be enhanced and augmented through pedagogical practices that promote a deeper understanding between teachers and students.

There are two things these studies have in common: one, is that empowerment is consistently linked to teachers' attitudes and behavior as well as situational factors both in and out of the classroom; the other is that because of that very reason, the teacher's role is key in helping learners become more empowered by developing and using strategies that can help build self-confidence, and thus self-esteem, both of which are indelibly connected to our sense of self.

In establishing a conceptual framework for this study, which seeks to find ways in which teachers can assist students in their process of identity construction as language learners, it is important to note that in this researcher's opinion such assistance is intricately connected with actively engaging in practices that allow learners to feel empowered. Social inclusion in the way of understanding not only a second language but the target culture must be accompanied by the learners' ability to have an impact and to implement measures that achieve that inclusion.

CONCLUSION - THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF INCLUSION

The dimensions of identity construction, investment and empowerment, and how their interactions form this suggested framework can be illustrated using Figure 1:

Considering the above, and in answer to the question "can teachers assist second language learners achieve greater social inclusion", I propose that the dimensions of identity, investment and empowerment are inextricably linked and that in order to effectively assist second-language learners achieve social inclusion should actively engage in the practices below, all of which are aimed at building and constructing these intersecting dimensions:

a.   Assisting learners in gaining greater understanding of who they, their role as learners and their social context through regularly used questionnaires and semi-structured journals that help them reflect on their feelings and attitudes regarding themselves, others, their classroom and their communities (Bell, 1999; Cohen et al, 2007, as cited in Dörnyei, 2007).

b.   Developing positive relationships with language learners, based on collaboration rather than imposition, so as to help offset the existing power structure of the classroom
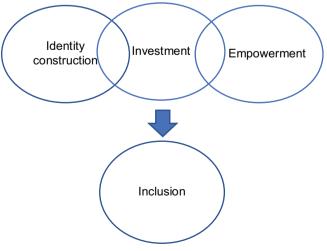

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

in which teachers are seen as hierarchically superior due to their greater linguistic capital (Diaz et al., 2016).

c. Exhorting learners to become active participants in learning activities by shifting the power flow towards them (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014); this includes the learners themselves making choices regarding their own educational input when applicable, and having an equal voice in the classroom. Examples of this can be negotiated grading, having focus groups, and collaborative language learning projects in which the teacher is just another participant, such as shared research, posters, digital storytelling and group writing.

d. Encouraging and supporting language learners' efforts to engage in learning activities outside the classroom as well, in order to help them become more autonomous and agents of their own learning process (Dörnyei, 2005; Ushioda, 2011). This includes finding opportunities to socialize with others, recording their personal experiences, gaining exposure to the language they are learning through music, videos, films and books, and keeping journal entries with the outcomes of these for personal reflection, written in their second language

e. Create a space where greater participation is possible. Dewey (1937) argued that "…absence of participation tends to produce lack of interest …(sic) resulting in lack of responsibility" (p. 314). This model claims that aiding learners gain their own voice, become empowered and be able to offset inequalities, and guiding them towards such participation is essential; for Luff and Webster (2014), such participation translates as opportunities for engagement fostered through the development of positive relationships and partnerships; exactly what type of opportunity and exactly how these positive relationships are fostered needs to be unearthed by individual teachers through the aforementioned questionnaires and journals. What is clear is that at the root of the methodological choices made lies the belief that democratic participations and engagement are an essential part of this conceptual framework.

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