Identity, Language Learning, and the Multilingual Workplace

Skills Norway
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Challenge

To what extent can new theories of identity and language learning inform classroom practice? What can we learn from workplace settings?

Weaving language learner stories from Mai, Martina, and Eva: theory, research, and practice...
How to theorize the complex relationship between the language learner & the social world?

To what extent do social relations of power - racism, sexism, elitism, homophobia - limit opportunities for language learners to speak?

Under what conditions does social interaction take place?
Extending Communicative Competence

“rules of use” → "the right to speech"
(Hymes) → "power to impose reception"
(Bourdieu)

The linguist takes for granted ... that those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen and those who listen regard those who speak as worthy to speak.

Bourdieu, 1977, p. 648
I was hoping the course would help me the same as we learnt [in the 6-month ESL course], but some night we only spend time on one man. He came from Europe. He talked about his country: what’s happening and what was happening. And all the time we didn’t learn at all. And tomorrow the Indian man speak something for there. Maybe all week I didn’t write any more on my book.

Mai, in Norton, 2013
Mai’s Classroom: Practices Imperfect

- Essentializing identity (ethnicity seen as only salient feature of identity)
- Focus on past not present and future
- Neglect of literacy as central to learning

Question: Was Mai “unmotivated”? What is Mai’s investment in language learning?
Investment and Identity

While motivation can be seen as a primarily psychological construct, investment must be seen within a sociological framework, and seeks to make a meaningful connection between a learner’s desire and commitment to learn a language, and their changing identity.

Norton, 2013
Motivation and Investment

**MOTIVATION**
assumes
- unitary,
- coherent,
- ahistorical

**INVESTMENT**
assumes
- complex identity,
- changing across time and space,
- reproduced in social interaction
Guiding Questions

● What is a learner’s motivation to learn the language?
  * motivation as character trait;
  learner personality
  language as system
  Primarily psychological construct

● What is the learner’s investment in language practices?
  * investment as construction;
  learner identity
  language as social practice
  Primarily sociological construct
Mai’s Investment & the Workplace

After work today when I was walking by myself on New Street then I met Karl who was go to the same school with me last course… I just told him about my job and the course I am taking. He said to me, “The good thing for you is to go to school then in the future you would have a job to work in the office.”. I hope so. *But sometime I’m scared to dream about that.*

Mai, in Norton, 2013
Defining Identity

I use the term identity to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future.

(Norton, 2013)
I feel uncomfortable using English in the group of people whose English language is their mother tongue because they speak fluently without any problems and I feel inferior.

Questionnaire, Dec. 1991

The first time I was very nervous and afraid to talk on the phone. When the phone rang, everybody in my family was busy, and my daughter had to answer it. After ESL course when we moved and our landlords tried to persuade me that we have to pay for whole year, I got upset and I talked with him on the phone over one hour and I didn't think about the tenses rules. I had known that I couldn't give up. My children were very surprised when they heard me.

Martina in the Workplace

In restaurant was working a lot of children, but the children always thought that I am - I don't know - maybe some broom or something. They always said "Go and clean the living room". And I was washing the dishes and they didn't do nothing. They talked to each other and they thought that I had to do everything. And I said "No." The girl is only 12 years old. She is younger than my son. I said "No, you are doing nothing. You can go and clean the tables or something."

Martina, in Norton, 2013
Reconceptualizing the Individual

traditional view  critical view

“personality”  “subject”

- good / bad
- motivated / unmotivated
- anxious / confident
- introvert / extrovert
- inhibited / uninhibited
## Assumptions about Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SLA Theory</th>
<th>Critical Theory</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unique, essential -</td>
<td>multiple, fragmented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coherent core -</td>
<td>site of struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fixed, ahistorical -</td>
<td>changing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inherent -</td>
<td>produced</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Language and Identity

Every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are, in other words, engaged in identity construction and negotiation.

Norton, 1997, p. 410
Eva in the Workplace

Everybody working with me is Canadian. When I started to work there, they couldn't understand that it might be difficult for me to understand everything and know about everything what it's normal for them. To explain it more clearly I can write an example which happened few days ago. The girl which is working with me pointed at the man and said:

"Do you see him?" - I said
"Yes, Why?"
"Don't you know him?"
"No. I don't know him."
"How come you don't know him. Don't you watch TV. That's Bart Simpson."

It made me feel so bad and I didn't answer her nothing. Until now I don't know why this person was important. Diary extract: Eva, February 8, 1991
Eva’s changing workplace

Eva: "You don't watch TV?" And I felt "What are you doing?" I was thinking like "This strange woman."

Interview, March 17, 1991

Male customer: Are you putting on this accent so that you can get more tips?

Eva: I wish I did not have this accent because then I would not have to listen to such comments.

March, 1992
Eva: “Good” language learner

B. You were saying Eva that you are starting to speak to other people? The other people who work there?
E. Ya. Because before -
B. Is everybody there Canadian?
E. Ya. Because there everybody is Canadian and they would speak to each other,
not to me -- because -- I always was like - they sent me off to do something else. I felt bad. Now it's still the same but I have to do something. I try to speak.
B. How are you doing that?

E. For example, we have a half-hour break. Sometimes - I try to speak. For example, they talk about Canada, what they like here, the places which they like -

B. Like to visit? Vacations?

E. Ya. Then I started to talk to them about how life is in Europe. Then they started to ask me some questions. But it's still hard because I cannot explain to them how things, like ---
B. How do you actually find an opportunity in the conversation to say something. Like, if they're talking to each other, do you stop them?

E. No.

B. You wait for a quiet -- Then what do you say?

E. No. I don't wait for when they are completely quiet, but when it's the moment I can say something about what they are talking about.

B. When you started doing that were they surprised?

E. A little bit.
Language and culture are no longer scripts to be acquired, as much as they are conversations in which people can participate. The question of who is learning what and how much is essentially a question of what conversations they are part of, and this question is a subset of the more powerful question of what conversations are around to be had in a given culture.

McDermott, 1993, p. 295
An imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner’s investment in the target language must be understood within this context.

Norton, 2013
Relevance of Imagined Communities for Language Learning

- Introduces an orientation to the future into our educational discourse
- Highlights hope and desire in language learners’ identities
- Addresses the power of individuals to shape the future of society
- Explores the role of ethnicity, gender, and class in constraining or enabling individual learners’ capacity for imagining possibilities
Research to Practice

Implications for educators:
How can we ensure that our learners are invested in classroom communities, as well as imagined communities? What are the implications for “good” language learning?
Keeley Ryan: April 2012
(in Norton, in press)

Pre-Investment:  
25 students, 9 remained.

Post-Investment:  
29 students, 25 remained

“I began by imagining what a good English teacher would look like for my students …I altered my practice to reflect what I imagined their idea of a good school would look like”. (Term paper).
Towards an expanded model of investment

claiming the right to speak given the way power operates materially and symbolically in the digital era
IDENTITY

INVESTMENT
Capital

ECONOMIC: wealth, property and income
CULTURAL: knowledge, educational credentials, cultural forms
SOCIAL: connections to networks of power

(Bourdieu, 1986)
IDEOLOGY

Dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion

Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 72
Identity, investment, and language learning in an unequal digital world
Storybooks Norway

https://global-asp.github.io/storybooks-norge/

Rnebøker for Norge (beta)

Rnebøker for Norge er utviklet for lærere og foreldre og gjør 40 fortellinger fra African Storybook tilgjengelige med tekst og lyd på bokmål og nynorsk, samt de største innvandrings- og flyktningespråkene.
Language Learning in the Workplace

THEORY: The more time spent learning any aspect of a language, the more will be learned. Learning a language involves the opportunity for the new skills to be practiced; the result is fluency.

(Spolsky, 1989)

BUT: Under what conditions will language learners speak/read/write? How are opportunities to speak/read/write socially structured?
Conclusion: The Language Learner in the Workplace

Questions:
SLA Theory

Is she a good language learner?
Is he motivated?
How anxious is she?
Is he confident?

Questions:
Critical Theory

Under what conditions is he a good language learner?
Why is she motivated?
How is power implicated?