

Language Learning in TESOL: Learner Identity and the Differences

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Abstract: In this paper, there are certain key factors that have a huge impact on learner identity. The difference in identity may either contribute or impede the process of language learning in EFL/EAL settings. Language socialization may be an effective strategy for facilitating the formation of learner identity in language learning.

Keywords: EFL/EAL; Learner identity; Language socialization

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1. EFL/EAL learning

This study illustrates an English learning course consisting of 20 international students, age ranging from 15 to 35. These students who are all Asians, come from India, Vietnam, Japan, and China. More than 50% of the students are Chinese. Female students account for 50%, while male students account for the other 50%. The teachers are from Australia; one of them has a typical Australian accent, and the others have British accent.

The English language course includes speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The course aims to help students to adapt to their future university life. Speaking and listening primarily focus on everyday life; for instance, how to buy a transportation card, or how to check in a hotel. Reading and writing mostly focus on academic research; for instance, how to read a long scientific essay, or how to write an academic critical analysis. From these four aspects of basic language learning, the teachers assist these students to improve their English level. The textbook contains a variety of topics on economy, education, medicine, tourism, and so forth ^[1].

Therefore, the EFL/EAL course is taken as the main context in this study. The English learning setting is common and conventional in Australia, and every learner has his or her unique identity.

2. Learner identity in EFL/EAL and its influence on the learning process

Learner identity is changing and dynamic. According to Murray and Christison, identity refers to how learners evaluate their past and future ^[2]. The external environment and the interaction with people can greatly influence learner identity. Defining the relationship between social contexts and English culture reflects the learners' identity. In other word, learning English and dealing with social settings are generally influenced by various factors, such as nationality, gender, age, culture, classroom environment, and so forth ^[3].

Nationality is an important factor that can greatly influence learner identity. Nationality includes all the past experiences and knowledge of a learner. An individual with different cultural background may have different world values and ideas. The inability to adapt to a new nation will result in a negative effect on English learning ^[2]. For example, all the students in the course came from different countries, and without doubt, each country has a different accent. It is difficult for an international student to pick up another country's accent. When speaking English with a strong accent of one's home country, feelings of inferiority may arise. The international students from other countries, however, did not seem to have this problem. Gradually, with the encouraging environment, disregarding one's accent and speaking more in public helped in the learning process.

Age is a basic factor that forms learner identity. Murray and Christison asserted that age is an important factor that influences learning, and age can change the identity of a learner ^[2]. Some experts believe that learning English at a younger age is better. Moreover, a few students in their 20s feel that their language learning potential is lower than that of younger learners, and they tend to feel cautious when answering questions; some are not even willing to communicate with the teacher in front of the younger students. Compared with the enthusiasm of the younger students, the older students tend to be quieter. The reason for this may be the lack of confidence among these students, or they do not want to be ridiculed by others. Age is a clearly a key factor that hinders the development of language learning. In this class, a 35-year-old student often mentioned about his old age and his shortfall in memory comparing to those of a younger age. His learning was hampered by his viewpoint. In addition, he experienced more anxiety and frustration than others. Learners are under a lot of stress because of their age and employment, as they want to avoid making mistakes and preview the learning materials before classes. Especially being an older English learner and also an English teacher, learners like this do not want others to think of them as unprofessional teachers or as worthless adults. These learners are under more stress than those who do not teach English. The fear and anxiety about speaking in public are genuine. However, this stress factor may work as a motivator, while learners' age and job identities may encourage them to put greater effort into learning ^[4].

3. Learner identity issues and their solutions

Issues of cultural identity is a complex problem. Toohey and Norton mentioned that English is generally seen as a language belonging to Europe and America, in which people from other countries will face challenges to be part of the "English family" without any discrimination ^[5]. In other words, other countries have different cultures from the English culture. Especially for Asian learners, there are vast differences between the English culture and the Asian culture. For example, Asian students tend to be quiet when the teachers are speaking. However, teachers hope that students would ask more questions when they do not understand. Although teachers are continuously encouraging this, only a few learners would ask questions in the learning process. It is not easy to change this mindset, because it is a cultural identity. Barnett and Antenucci claimed that cultural identity may have a negative effect on EFL/EAL learning ^[1]. One of the Chinese learners from the class shared that he felt pressured and uncomfortable at times because the teachers have been pushing him to ask questions. If he does not change his mindset, his reluctance in class may extent to learning English itself ^[6].

Classroom environment plays an essential role in learner identity. This external factor may cause problems that hinder EFL/EALD learning. Learner identity can be promoted or hampered by the external environment ^[1]. Digital technology and modern teaching facilities are not the only important aspects in a classroom, but a friendly and open environment is also conducive to learning. A friendly environment is important because it helps students to relax and offers a sense of safety. In a relaxed environment, students may feel more comfortable speaking English without any worries of being judged for making mistakes.

Teachers' care and encouragement may benefit in ensuring a sense of safety and in creating a relaxed environment. For instance, teachers should forbid students from laughing at different or even strange accents. When a student speaks in front of 20 other learners, he or she may be nervous or afraid of being mocked because of his or her accent. Showing patience and encouraging the student allows the student to calm down and feel more at ease. This is helpful for promoting learners' language level. By using various modern technologies, such as 3D videos, learners will immerse themselves in vivid situations while learning and practising a language. Toohey and Norton agreed that if teachers take control of all the materials and order the students to do nothing but follow their instructions, learner identities such as community engagement and interaction will be limited ^[5]. In the process of learning English, teachers should encourage students to speak more and create a friendly English-speaking space, alike this course ^[7].

4. Realization of language socialization

Language socialization refers to using a suitable language in a suitable social context ^[8]. New knowledge is derived from interactions in social settings. There is no language if there is no social context. English learning could be influenced by social and political factors. Classroom is not a real social setting, as it is limited by space and the teachers. For example, when learners are asked to converse based on a restaurant setting, with one student playing the role of a customer and the other as a waiter or waitress, these students do not really have an idea of what to talk about. Hence, it is not an effective speaking practice. If teachers can prepare more restaurant-related materials, like videos and texts, or even different kinds of menus, the speaking practice will be more natural if the students imitate the real restaurant setting. Giving another example, if a learner has the opportunity to study abroad for a few months, especially in English countries, their English-speaking ability will undoubtedly improve; however, if the learner studies English in Japan or China, they have less opportunities to practice speaking in real social situations. Although the learner has excellent reading, writing, and listening skills, the learner's speaking skills could be a huge issue. In regard to this, realization of language socialization may not be easy as it requires practical environment and conditions.

Cultural model plays a helpful role in language socialization. Gee asserted that learners should understand the cultural model in detailed situations and as specific identities ^[6]. For example, in Japan or China, classrooms are usually quiet. All learners need to do is to listen to the teacher, take notes, and keep quiet. They are usually not allowed to speak unless being asked to. In Japan or China, teachers have the authority and power in classrooms, and students think that teachers are incapable of making mistakes, thereby believing everything that is taught by them. This is very different from that in Australia, in which most teachers encourage students to express their own opinions and interact during classes. Students in Australia are usually comfortable in interacting with their teachers. In another example on the topic of transportation, the cultural model in China is that since there are many people taking the public bus, you may not board the bus if you do not push your way in; however, this is considered rude in Australia. All these are different cultural models. Learner should come to understand how Australian public transport works, and then practice speaking the language. Gee also proposed that as a beginner in language learning, the learner needs to learn relative meanings in social contexts, the language used for social interaction, and so forth ^[6]. This shows that learning English is not just about grammar and pronunciation, but also about real-life situations and social settings. An advanced English learner may be unaware that he or she is in fact a beginner. For instance, a student may not be familiar with the term "pork," thinking that "pig meat" is the correct term. However, exposing himself or herself to a market setting, the student will come to realize that the proper term is "pork." From this, it can be concluded that practice is the best teacher. In this course, the

teachers tried to imitate real market settings to help students familiarize themselves with the real English market. This practice is beneficial in promoting the use of social language [2].

5. Benefits of language socialization

According to Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen, various school cultures mirror the society [8]. Culture can become a part of learner identity. Different spaces in different social settings may have different language interactions. Gee asserted that teachers should impart social language, and not just language alone [6]. To learn social language means that there is no language without a specific social setting. For instance, when practicing English listening, most vocabularies are academic and professional. It is irrational to recite all these words because spoken English is not that academic. The vocabulary used in speaking is easier than that of listening. Therefore, social language helps students to learn English as a local person, and not as a foreigner [5].

According to Ellis, motivation plays a key role in the process of language socialization [3]. Since different learners have different learning motivations, different learners have different language learning behaviors and outcomes. Learning motivation can be divided into internal motivation and external motivation. External motivation can be reflected in a student studying hard to gain his or her parents' approval; however, if a learner learns a language to improve his or her language level, this can be regarded as internal motivation. In most situations, students learn English for the purpose of sitting for examinations, while some learn to work better. No matter what the purpose is, the final goal is to use English proficiently in real life. Socialization of language can help people use English better in real social contexts. García-Pastor believes that the internet and social media help to promote the diversification of social interactions among English learners [4]. For example, watching English movies or videos could be beneficial in language learning. There are some real and vivid situations that attract learners' attention to imitate the way they speak. Movies or videos, as a medium of language learning, could be an effective way of improving learners' English-speaking level. Instagram is very popular especially among young people. Through Instagram, people can look for information that sparks their interest. A learner may come to know another learner or native speaker with whom to exchange information or practice English. In that way, they can enhance their English acquisition process. This is a good method to socialize while learning a language. Other than that, learners will come to understand the cultural model and cultural contexts of other people through information exchange [8].

Motivational influences include goal setting, intention formation, initiation of intention enactment, actional processes, and post-actional evaluation. Teachers help learners in determining what they want to achieve, clarifying those goals, and encouraging learners to achieve them. In addition, an objective assessment can be provided after finishing a task. This is post-actional phase, where teachers can help students behave better, engage better, and build their confidence. Analyzing past experiences is also vital for learners to reflect on their style, motivation, social aspect, and social nature. This may be helpful in maintaining motivation. Motivation is dynamic in nature, and whether an individual is highly motivated, or the opposite is affected by certain situations. This means that certain motivations are suitable for some situations, but may not be suitable for other situations, depending on the event.

How can teachers motivate students to learn the target language in classrooms? First, teachers can create basic motivational conditions or a favourable environment, which is very important for language learning. Teachers should try their best to set certain conditions that can help students adapt to and engage in lessons. Second, generating students' initial motivation is the key. In order to cultivate this kind of motivation, changing the belief and mindset of learners might encourage them to put in more effort to learn. Third, maintaining motivation is also essential, as having sustainable motivation might help students

cultivate a good habit of language learning. In the meantime, setting goals could also be effective. Finally, teachers should engage students in self-evaluation. Through self-evaluation, students will have a clearer understanding of what they did in an activity, what they had gained, and what they are lacking. The awareness of these aspects may help cultivate motivation and improve language learning.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, various factors affect learner identity, and these factors interact with each other. Hence, learner identity is continuously changing. The identity of learners has a significant effect on the EFL/EAL process. Language socialization is beneficial to language acquisition; hence, both teachers and learners are attempting to use English as much as possible in social settings.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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