

Research Nexus and Implications of Learner Identity in Foreign Language Education

Tenglong Gong^{1,2*}

¹College of International Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing 400715, China

²School of Foreign Languages, Xinjiang Education Institute, Urumqi 830043, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China

*Corresponding author: Tenglong Gong, petergong2023@outlook.com

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Abstract: One of the most obvious markers of an individual's identity is their language. However, in some ways, the relationship between identity and language acquisition seems to be missed. In fact, a lot of studies have shown that identity may influence the reasons behind language acquisition, especially in bilingual or multilingual societies. Learning English can provide EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students with a good sense of identity and encourage them to practice their agency, which can improve learning efficiency and effectiveness. This paper examines how the efficacy and results of language learning are influenced by the learner's identity.

Keywords: Learner identity; Motivation; English learning; Foreign language education

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1. Introduction

Acquiring proficiency in a foreign language is a comprehensive, culturally and socially embedded process that involves identity construction, creation, development, or modification. Making sense of oneself in various circumstances and over time is a multi-layered process ^[1]. It has been established that identity plays a major role in motivating language acquisition. Identity formation has also taken the front stage in this regard. Identity is generally considered to be an intrinsic aspect of human learning. Human learning is an essential and necessary component of social activity, and it is constantly connected to the formation of identities ^[2]. In this case, identity suggests a complicated, long-term interaction between people's involvement in communities of practice. Lave and Wenger ^[2] defined a community of practice (CoP) as a collection of interactions within a community, activity, and environment that have developed over time and are related to other overlapping and tangential CoP. From the standpoint of social constructionism, the process of constructing an identity is seen as dynamic, interactive, discursively produced, and located within a context ^[1]. This means that identity can be built, generated, developed, or altered; these factors include a person's knowledge, their ability to speak a foreign language, and the efforts and awareness of their teachers ^[3]. Moreover, possible selves ^[4] and self-discrepancy ^[5] are two previous ideas that shed light on the relationship between identity and learning and the formation of the ideal self. The ideal self,

the ought-to self, and the learning experience are the three components of Dörnyei's ^[6] motivational self-system model, which takes these theories into account. In this concept, the ideal self is the most powerful element and is characterized as an exceptional motivator. In order for students to reach self-actualization, there needs to be a concentrated effort made to lessen the disparity between their ideal and real selves.

Since Huang's ^[7] research on the topic, identity in the context of foreign language teaching has become more research-worthy. The results showed that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in China have the capacity to overcome psychological limitations and beyond the proficiency of instrumental language in order to create their own sense of self. This provides a foundation for rewording "who am I?" in a variety of discourse styles, such as choosing or creating a social role, self-perceptions of learning competencies, inner goals, etc. In this sense, an individual's choice of selfhood is influenced by context. When learning a foreign language, the learner's identity may be formed or constructed primarily by the present learning circumstances. Given this, the backdrop affects how each person chooses to identify as themselves. The immediate learning context in the case of a foreign language may be quite important in the process of building a learner's identity. As a result, when EFL learners started learning English, they developed a sense of identity early in life. Beyond the fundamental requirement for control, EFL learners may also need to comprehend the importance of identity, which could significantly influence their learning.

2. Definition of learner identity

"The self" is the definition of identity ^[5,8]. Identity is defined as "who we are" ^[3,9] or "who one is" ^[5,10] in a more general meaning. It is a multifaceted, continuous process that involves asking oneself questions like "who am I" as a learner. According to Teng ^[11], identity is also seen to be a verbally enacted discursive product that enhances social positioning.

In the subject of language education, a number of researchers have attempted to define identity ^[12,13]. For example, Norton ^[13] defined identity as a person's understanding of their relationship to society, how that relationship might be created throughout time and space, and how they figure out their future possibilities. Her research is mostly linked to a setting where native speakers of the target language interact with non-native speakers. It is stated that the most salient issue becomes one of power relations between language learners and native speakers. Her case studies also showed how the individuals' jobs and personal environments had a significant impact on their eagerness and desire to engage with other members. The definition of a learner falls within the target language community. As a result, the idea of identity at least encompasses two fundamental concerns: our feeling of self and our place in society ^[9]. The topic of identity construction in the context of language education was also discussed by Hawkins ^[14]. Hawkins contends that identity construction is a process that involves ongoing negotiation between the individual and the community. In other words, people co-construct their perceptions of society and themselves through interactions and discussions with other people in placed situations, bringing their own lived histories to bear on events.

These interpretations also shed light on identity studies in relation to teaching foreign languages. Research on the connection between identity and foreign language education, for instance, should take into account the interpretations of identity that were previously explored, such as the idea that identity is complex, contradictory, fragmented, and elusive. These interpretations become more pertinent in the contemporary context, which indicates a growing interest in identity and language acquisition studies. This particular scenario may have arisen due to the increasing focus on recognizing the individuality of EFL learners as the central node in complex social networks. This situation implies that there is a need to close the disparity in the research that

has been done on second language acquisition and foreign language learning contexts. Identity has gained more research value in the context of foreign language education, especially since it was discovered by Gao *et al.* ^[10] that Chinese EFL students are capable of overcoming psychological barriers and developing their self-identity beyond the level of instrumental language proficiency. Most notably, learning a foreign language may have effects on identity building that are comparable to learning a second language. As a result, there are different ways to rephrase the question “who am I?” These include choosing or creating a social position (a speaker, writer, or reader), understanding oneself in terms of learning competencies, pursuing personal goals, etc. In this regard, cultural and contextual factors influence an individual’s choice of identity. As stated by Halliday ^[15], the term “context of situation” denotes an immediate learning setting, whereas “context of culture” refers to a more extensive socio-cultural framework. In the context of learning a foreign language, the immediate learning context may be more important in the development of the learner’s identity. Understanding the connection between identity and foreign language education is highly essential.

3. Learner identity and language learning

The majority of earlier research on the connection between identity and language acquisition has been conducted on immigrants in Western nations who are learning a second language. Studies on immigration or second language acquisition have generally focused on a variety of topics that have profound effects on an individual’s sense of “who one is.” These concerns include, among other things, nonparticipation and resistance, positioning in power relations, negotiating in target language communities, participation in dominant discourses, engagement in target language communities’ activities, and access to the social networks of their living communities ^[14,16]. Existing research also attempted to analyze the influence of the immigrant community on the capacity of learners to develop new identities through new languages ^[17]. They offered insightful explanations of how language acquisition and identity formation are related. They also asserted that identity creation provides benefits for learning while pointing out the complex, conflicting, fragmented, and elusive nature of identity.

It should be noted that there are significant differences between the two major situations (the situation involving a second language and the situation involving a foreign language). In the context of second language acquisition, for instance, the power dynamics between native and non-native speakers are prominent. This may not become a big issue in the foreign language situation since native speakers are seldom physically accessible to direct the access to the words of other individuals in communities of practice.

In the context of teaching foreign languages, there have also been several additional noteworthy research ^[18,19]. The reciprocal relationship between identity development and language acquisition is highlighted by the research. Firstly, the formation of the learner’s identity is influenced by the learning of a language. For instance, Murray and Kojima ^[19] used a life history research approach, narrating the story of an adult Japanese woman who was learning German and English, to examine how learning a foreign language outside of the classroom can be crucial to the development of a learner’s identity. The study found that when students study a foreign language in the setting of their own culture, they develop a sense of self. Furthermore, a student’s experience as a language speaker and learner brings them personal fulfillment, which fortifies their identity. In this sense, self-perception and personal goal and fulfillment are linked to identity. Day ^[20] reports that participating in classroom activities and learning a language in socially structured classrooms shape learners’ identities. Similarly, Toohey ^[21] proposes that during language learning, learners’ identities are molded, contested, and produced. The research mentioned above demonstrates that learning a language involves a

socialization process where learner identities are formed rather than just a cognitive academic endeavor.

Furthermore, language learning is impacted by learner identity. According to Norton^[13], a person learning a language is an individual with a complex and evolving identity who engages in ongoing social interaction rather than a unified and fixed personality. The difficulty and fragmentation of identity have an impact on students' commitment to language acquisition. Therefore, identity can influence language acquisition either favorably or unfavorably. Low self-identity learners may exhibit resistance to language acquisition or stop taking part in the process altogether. Conversely, people who have a strong sense of who they are as learners could put forth more effort to acquire a language. Hirst^[22] went on to say that learners oppose language acquisition when there is a mismatch between their ideal and real learning communities.

Language acquisition and the formation of learner identity appear to be related, according to the theories and studies stated above. Identity is complex, contradictory, fractured, elusive, and ever-changing, as previously mentioned. It can be significantly formed, reconstructed, maintained, and contested. Identity includes "stability within changes or changes that take place along the lines of continuity," as Phan^[23] noted. A comprehensive understanding of identity would be impossible if identity continuity or change were the only focus. Investigating learner identity and foreign language acquisition in greater detail might still be necessary.

4. Factors that affect learner identity

The identity process of EFL learners is a multifaceted process that involves the negotiation and interaction of at least five factors over time. These factors include the asymmetric power dynamics between teachers and students, learners' internal emerging sense of professional agency, learners' situated institution system and "hidden" conventional practices, and learners' investment in their identity.

4.1. Asymmetric power relationship between teachers and students

According to Yuan and Lee^[24], learners' negotiation of identities in connection to their conflicting emotions is influenced by the unequal power dynamics between teachers and students. Students are frequently exposed to a wide range of negative emotions due to the unequal power dynamics between them and their teachers^[25,26]. Teachers can have a fear of losing their position and authority in the classroom, which might prevent them from listening to student suggestions or having faith in students' capacity to learn. Teachers have the ability to repress their students' unhappiness without allowing arguments to arise, which has helped the students become more identified as "obedient English learners" in the classroom. This may also be explained by the fact that instructors typically impose their will on their charges and that students are not allowed to challenge them. Due to the unequal power dynamics between professors and students, students are forced to hide their emotions in class, which may be harmful to the formation and growth of their identities as learners.

4.2. Learners' level of cognitive awareness

The way in which students build their identities is also influenced by their cognitive awareness. A greater degree of cognitive awareness is essential for both the formation and growth of learners' identities and their EFL education. To go to the next level, a person must also be able to integrate and accommodate cognitive processes^[27]. The process of incorporating fresh environmental inputs into an already-existing mental paradigm is known as assimilation. In contrast, accommodation is the process of adapting pre-existing cognitive structures to new knowledge while supporting the process of developmental growth. On the other hand, students with a diffuse-avoidant learning style, who have a lower level of cognitive awareness, are more likely to be doubtful of their own self-perception and reluctant to face their identity conflicts.

4.3. The learners within the institution system and the concealed customs

Identity development is also impacted by the hidden traditional behaviors and the situated institution system of learners. One illustration would be the Chinese society's highly structured, hierarchical, and collectivist structure, which has an impact on educational methods. The most common teaching approach used by Chinese educators is top-down, consisting of teacher-centered, textbook-centered, grammar-translation methods, and exam-oriented education. This might have added to the students' unfavorable feelings. Some of them may exhibit non-participative behaviors and lack confidence in the classroom because they would rather listen to the teacher than participate in class discussions or ask questions. The environment in the classroom, which is a reflection of the educational system, can have a significant impact on students' identity development. It is possible that an EFL classroom lacks an enjoyable, productive, and inspiring atmosphere for learning. Students not only have to deal with an unfavorable environment in the classroom, but also external risks resulting from organizational climate, policies at school, and other sources. In this situation, students could drastically lose who they are as learners. Furthermore, institutional pressure to perform well on exams can cause students to become disengaged from a new learning community and lose their sense of control and fulfillment in the process. The concealed traditional English learning methods used by students are closely tied to the educational system and have an effect on the achievement of the ideal self^[28]. Some EFL students, for example, could exhibit a high sense of ought self because they think they should be more like English learners.

4.4. Learners' agency

The development and construction of identities are also mediated by learners' agency. According to Vitanova^[29], when experiencing one's subjectivity, subjects can shift between discourses of agency and identity, reflect on how they place themselves, and negotiate, alter, reconstruct, or even resist identities. This argument outlines the implicit relationship between agency and identity, showing how agency influences how an individual constructs their identity. It was also noted by other researchers^[2,30] that learners who are exposed to communities of practice more frequently are more likely to create or reconstruct an identity. However, other scholars contended that identity development is a prerequisite for agency. For instance, Holland *et al.*^[31] proposed that students form identity—more or less conscious perceptions of who they are—that enables them to gain agency, or control, over their own conduct. Therefore, although the exact nature of this relationship is still up for debate among experts, agency and identity are intertwined.

Prior experience is always necessary to validate the attainment of agency^[32]. In addition, the accomplishment of agency is invariably focused on the future through a blend of short- and long-term goals and principles. While material and structural resources may limit learners' agency, responding positively to external threats can support learners in monitoring and controlling their own emotions as well as directing their thoughts and behaviors. Even while some students may feel doubt and frustration after starting college, their deliberate steps toward pursuing “emotional intelligence”^[33] or self-actualization may help them keep an eye on their own emotions. It might also influence how they think and behave, guiding them toward a suitable future career choice. It suggests that students who master “emotional intelligence” skills would be able to control their emotions and utilize them to encourage adaptive behavior. While some students may conform to the expectations of their teachers and the surrounding circumstances by keeping their emotions in check, others may find ways to uphold their own values and mentally commit to reflective and agentic learning. By utilizing “agentic work”^[34] and “tactical compliance”^[35], students can infuse positivity into their English learning process and rediscover their motivation and confidence. Alternatively, students may obstruct the steps that demonstrate agency due to unpleasant emotions and apathetic attitudes resulting from a troubled relationship with the learning environment. They may be excluded from the learning environment by the educational system

and ineffective teaching strategies, even though they are eager to attempt novel approaches to learning English. Their professional autonomy may finally be suppressed by this alienation from the learning community, which would also impede the formation of a learner identity. It is interesting to note that some students may still actively project their future vision into another sector and regain their proactiveness and determination despite the detrimental effects of outside threats and demoralizing emotions. As a result, an “imagined identity” was developed ^[36,37]. In overcoming the current obstacle and pursuing improvements in the future, this transition reflects the future-oriented characteristics of a learner’s agency and identity ^[38].

4.5. Learners’ investment in their identity

Identity creates a connection between the individual language learner and the larger community as a methodology for the study of language learning. The way we think about students and the subject positions they hold is changed by the many identity categories, and investment is the tool we use to analyze the social contexts in which students display multiple identities. To invest in learning, learners must manage their resources and create and preserve their identities. Students will be more motivated to study the language if they have positive learner identities. According to Norton and Gao ^[39], investment describes how learners relate to the target language in social and historical contexts and their perhaps conflicted motivation to acquire and use it. Investing in a learner’s identity is equivalent to investing in the target language. According to Norton ^[40], a community may provide a wider variety of identity alternatives down the road if it is the community that language learners envision or aspire to. As a result, the community might also be, in some ways, a reconstruction of earlier communities and relationships that were formed historically. In this setting, a learner’s commitment to the target language may be seen in the context of an imagined community, which takes on a new identity in and of itself. Identity production is influenced by the social negotiation of identity, which coexists with personal agency ^[39]. When paired with earlier studies ^[12,41], a positive teacher-student relationship can result in the formation of learner identity as well as coercive or collaborative power. Understanding the institutional factors that either promote or impede learners’ investment in the English language should be a component of effective English language education. This will show how learners use a range of information, abilities, and understandings to support this investment. As an approach to the study of language learning, identity builds a relationship between the individual language learner and the wider community. Investment is the tool we use to analyze the social environment in which the learner displays many identities. The different identity categories offer us a fresh perspective on the learner and the subject position in which he or she finds himself or herself. To invest in learning, learners must organize their resources and create and preserve their identities. For students, a positive learner identity encourages greater effort in language acquisition.

5. Reflections on learner identity and EFL learning

Based on the numerous definitions and interpretations of identity that have been discussed thus far, it is concluded that identity is multiple, dynamic, contradictory, elusive, and fragmentary; that identity can be significantly constructed, reconstructed, maintained, and negotiated; that identity can be transformative and transformational; and that identity can be socially mediated.

EFL learning and learner identity have been popular subjects. Identity construction and rebuilding may be significantly impacted by learners’ traditional practices and structural learning settings. EFL students could require social acceptance, emotional support, and a feeling of community inside a new learning environment. Our understanding of the intricacies of learner identity can be strengthened by taking into account identity development and student demands ^[42]. Many elements, including feelings, accomplishments, customs, abilities,

contentment, and dissatisfaction, could be the focus of an analysis unit in this situation. In addition, identity is multidimensional, and students may have overlapping aims and desires at the same time when going through transitional phases ^[43].

The formation of identity is a historical and social process, and it influences EFL instruction and whether learners' imagined and real communities and identities align. As a result, creating an imagined identity can encourage a student to be more involved in their language studies. In this sense, selecting English pedagogy or creating a curriculum that is acceptable for students with varying backgrounds, language proficiency levels, objectives, and expectations requires an awareness of students' needs and their imagined worlds.

When analyzing learner identity, it is important to take into account the power dynamics that are present in the connection between teachers and students. Establishing a transparent and democratic interaction between educators and learners is crucial in order to enable a seamless transfer of learning from one learning community to another. In addition to giving instructors the tools they need to educate, this kind of relationship will enable them to keep an eye on the range of emotional outbursts that their students experience in the classroom. The establishment of a strong professional organizational atmosphere inside the school and the laying of the groundwork for adjustments and reforms could result in improved EFL teaching and learning. In light of this, educators, administrators, curriculum developers, and legislators ought to be prepared to establish a forum where students' opinions can be heard.

Lastly, educators might have to concentrate on problems that learners have when adjusting to a new learning environment. Teachers give their students the tools they need to keep an eye on, consider, and grow from their emotional flux. In order to accept, alter, or reject the discourse practices incorporated in a new learning community, students must develop emotional intelligence. Ultimately, they must establish a connection with this new learning community by managing, mediating, and controlling their emotions. Consequently, educators have the opportunity to demonstrate how they managed their emotions when they were students. Furthermore, specific tactics like "emotional diaries" ^[44] and "emotional support" ^[45] might be implemented to provide students the chance to control their own emotions. Teachers should foster a pleasant learning environment in the classroom, provide opportunities for students to participate in activities, assist students in developing positive identities as language learners, and inspire students to learn. However, in order to inspire students to continue investing in language learning throughout their university studies, educators and colleges must recognize the needs of their students as well as their imaginative worlds. To that end, they must create curricula and pedagogies that are appropriate for students with varying backgrounds, language proficiency levels, goals, and expectations. For instance, in order to satisfy their future demands, language programs for social or professional contexts must be offered in addition to academic ones.

6. Conclusion

Identity can have an impact on the motivations driving language learning, particularly in communities where people speak more than one language. Studying English can help EFL students develop a strong sense of self and practice agency, which can increase their learning efficacy and efficiency. This paper aimed to clarify the definition of identity, the connection between learner identity and language learning, the five factors influencing learner identity, and the implications for teaching and learning foreign languages. It is proposed that a positive learner identity motivates students to work harder at their language studies. To prepare students for language learning and the future, teachers should choose curricula, resources, and practice exercises that take into account the ways in which learners' identities are changing.

Disclosure statement

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