

## **LEARNER IDENTITY IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A REVIEW**

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### **Abstract**

Inclusive education is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. (UNESCO Guideline for Inclusive Education). Second language learning process is complicated and contemporary identity research can provide very useful insight to teachers and policy makers to have more inclusive ESL classrooms. This paper offers review of some important articles related to the theory of learner identity. Having reviewed significant research works on learner identity in context of English as second language classroom, the reviewer got convinced that being familiar with students' multiple identities certainly exercises positive influence on teacher's classroom interaction and student motivation strategies. It helps the teacher to make better choices to empower learning in an ESL classroom. In addition, this paper offers some strategies for the teachers to guide the language students through their changing identities.

**Keywords:** Learner Identity, ESL classroom, Identity Construction, Changing Identities

### **Introduction**

Inclusive education is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives (UNESCO Guideline for Inclusive Education). Second language learning process is complicated and contemporary identity research can provide very useful insight to teachers and policy makers to have more inclusive ESL classrooms. Learner identity includes the range of socially constructed elements that are deeply interlinked and imbibed in the learner such as gender, ethnicity, social class and background which is potentially significant for L2 learning. Further this concept shows that a person can have several identities. It can change with time and surrounding factors.

In earlier decades considerably important volume of research works on language learning focused on exploring the personality traits, motivation and learning styles of the learners. One of the very important research construct in the recent language research is identity of learners. (Block D. 2007, Menard- Warwick J. 2005, Ricento T. 2005, Swain, M., & Deters, P. 2007, Zuengler, J. & Miller, E. 2006).

A learner's identity is defined as "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 45). Further this concept shows that a person can have several identities. It can change with time and surrounding factors.

A learner's identity is very closely connected with his/her language learning process as it is a major area where the learner understands his/her relationship to the world. In addition, language is an essential part of one's culture. It is also called 'a site of struggle' as there are divergent situations from which language learners can take part in social life.

Benson defines second language identity as any aspect of a person's identity that is connected to their knowledge or use of a second language" (Benson 17). Evidently, the second language classrooms are considered to be very crucial places where identities are formed and altered (Norton 2).

### **Language Learning and Identity Construction:**

Contemporary research works of Bonny Norton and other researchers like David Block (2007), Aneta Pavlenko (2004), Kelleen Toohey (2004), Margaret Early, Peter De Costa (2016) and Christina Higgins (2009) provide noteworthy insights into learner identity concept strengthened by post poststructuralist theory in second language acquisition (SLA). There are several other useful concepts like agency, imagined identities, subjectivity and resistance having gained attention in this context. Bonny Norton's fruitful research work ranging from 2000 to 2014 serve as foundation for all these research works. Some significant concepts related to learner identity are presented here in brief:

1. The researchers observed a powerful relationship between language and identity.
2. According to Norton and Toohey, a learner's engagement, more specifically 'investment' in language learning process in the classrooms is affected significantly by his perceptions, hopes and desires for future (Norton and Toohey 420).
3. The learner identity researchers and theorists demonstrate how learners can, but sometimes cannot, appropriate more desirable identities with respect to the target language community" (Norton and Toohey 414) which may limit or enhance opportunities for learners to for various language learning activities like listening, speaking, reading or writing.
4. It is interesting to see that the identity researchers also explore how power working within society, controlling human action of learning. It is important as it affects learners' access to the opportunities to practice listening, speaking, reading and writing which is essential for second language learning process (Cummins, 2000; Pennycook, 2007). In addition, these social conditions and contexts are always in a process of change (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 415).
5. As stated earlier Language learners can assert alternative identities by reframing their relationship with the other participants in the dialogue, there by changing their access to the practices and resources available within the context. If they do well in their intention for stronger identities, their language achievement may be enhanced (Norton and Toohey 415).

6. The construct of investment (developed by Norton in the mid-1990) stands for the historically and socially constructed commitment of learners to language learning which is in complete contrast with the notion of instrumental motivation.

The bottom line of instrumental motivation perceives the language learner as having a unitary and a fixed personality. The ‘investment’ considers the language learner as having a complex identity which changes across time and space. It is also made visible during social interaction (Norton and Toohey 415).

7. “Masked by language problems lay the much deeper problems of adjusting to new intellectual culture, a new way of thinking and of processing knowledge to meet the expectations inherent in second language educational system” (Ballard 150). This is particularly true in Indian context in relation to students from rural area or from less education family background or from some unprivileged communities.

### **Major research insights into L.I. and ESL**

Having reviewed concept of learner identity in second language education in detail, here is some research based data that suggests that language teaching is most effective when the teacher recognizes the multiple identities of students in the class. Moreover, the teacher can develop some inclusive pedagogical practices that enhance students’ investment in the language practices of the classroom. There are some research studies conducted to understand the extent to which identities and investments constitute the learners’ engagement with written or oral texts. Some other research studies wanted to investigate how the particular relations of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation may impact the language learning process.

The contemporary research on learner identity offers few implications for language learning process. (A) Although the teacher works with best intentions, classroom practices can create lesser student identities preventing students’ access to language learning opportunities as well as other stronger identities. (B) Teachers’ language practices can add power to existing inequality among diverse learners of English.

Ramanathan (2005) examined how students who have studied into either Gujarati or English-medium schools during their schooling period adjusted while studying in English-medium higher education institutions. Her findings showed that the students from English medium instruction through high school were better prepared to succeed in English-medium colleges than those schooled in the vernacular.

The English curriculum for the English medium students consisted more of creative analysis of English literature, while the English curriculum for the vernacular medium students, used grammar and translation extensively. This research suggests that “pedagogical language practices that are ritualized and allow for little meaning-making on the part of students may limit the learner’s language learning progress and access to more powerful identities” (Norton 17).

A research project in the context of Uganda showed that the multimodal pedagogies like drawing, photography and drama for teaching the English curriculum helped the teachers with inventive methods of authenticating students’ literacy, experiences, and cultures, and is highly effective in supporting English language learning in the classroom (B. Norton 11). The reason behind it was that the use of innovative methods helped the students to reject their opinion of English as restrictive and non-natural medium of instruction when they started using it for communication, expression, and acquired ownership of meaning.

Morita explored the academic discourse socialization experiences of L2 learners in a Canadian university. Using qualitative multiple case study method, the research examined how L2 learners negotiated their participation and membership in their new L2 classroom communities. This research used students' self-reports, interviews, and classroom observations for analysis of the students' perspectives about their class participation across the curriculum for the duration of one year. The study found that students faced major challenges in negotiating their competency, identities, and power relations. The students made efforts to shape their own learning and participation by using their personal agency. Morita (573).

A study on ESL students' perceptions of successful teachers by Tam Thi Thanh Vo (Vo) adopting quantitative research methodology found that the ESL students highly value respect and rapport from their instructors. The research also showed that the students gave importance to the fact that their teachers explain everything clearly, engage students in learning, and care about their students. An interesting research study by Eliana Hirano(2009) claimed a symbiotic relationship existing between learning difficulty and learner identity. It is a longitudinal case study of an adult EFL learner who perceived himself as having trouble learning English. It also showed that pedagogical actions selected by the teacher received successful results in generating the transformation of the student's identity and thereby removing learning difficulties to some extent. This study tried to show that learning difficulty is not seen as intrinsic to the learner; rather, it is seen as socially, culturally, and historically constructed in the interactions the learner has experienced and is, therefore, subject to pedagogical intervention.

A study conducted in India related to socio-pedagogical factors affecting language skills among engineering college students by (Chandrakanthi, 2003) found socio-economic status, family environment and personality traits to be significant factors affecting the language skills among the selected engineering students. Also, the influence of pedagogical factors such as study habits, locus control, learning approaches, learning styles and learners' effectiveness significantly influenced the language skills of the students.

Studies by Butler (2009) and Goldenberg, Rueda, & August, (2008) have confirmed that parents, their proficiency and positive attitudes towards foreign/second language learning seem to have positive influence on students' motivation in the process of foreign/second language learning. Some factors of home that deeply influence second language learning are educational, economic and social background of family.

### **How Shifts in Identity Impact Language Learning**

Norton defines identity as "multiple, a site of struggle, and changing across time and space" (Norton, 2015) It influences investment, or the sociological counterpart of motivation.

### **Strategies for the teachers to guide the language students through their changing identities.**

Teachers can incorporate activities which help students explore their changing identities. Ullman argues that educators should help students process their changing identities, so that they can learn English more easily and effectively. In order to support students, Ullman presents six different teaching activities that give students an opportunity to share and explore their identities, become aware of how their identity evolves over time and in different environments, and help them engage more actively in learning English.

1. Portfolio Writing
2. Dialogue Journal Writing
3. Large-Group Discussions
4. Small-Group Conversations
5. Improvisational Dialogues
6. Important Discourse

### **Conclusion:**

Being familiar with students' multiple identities certainly exercises positive influence on teacher's classroom interaction and student motivation strategies. It helps the teacher to make better choices to empower learning in an ESL classroom. The review of these research data highlights the diverse journeys that our students walk as they navigate learning English and achieving their educational and career goals. All of our students come from different backgrounds and have different life situations, goals, motivations and abilities. A teacher has to understand student's collective identity and strive to validate them thereby partnering with students to help them thrive and adapt to a new language and culture. By allowing our students to learn English through activities that encourage self-discovery, we can make their transition to this new life easier.

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