

EMBRACING IDENTITIES IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING: CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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Abstract

Despite increasing scholarly interest in language learners' identities, little effort has been devoted to critically reviewing the latest research on second language learners' identities and providing future directions for study. This recent increase in research then raises an important set of questions: (a) How have second language learners' identities been portrayed and explained in empirical research?, (b) What are the general trends in language identity research, and what are the key factors that have driven such development?, and (c) What are the limitations of current studies and the future directions for research on second language learners' identities? To answer the above questions, the paper critically reviewed and analyzed 109 major studies about second language learners' identities since the 1990s. This critical review of current studies of second language learners' identities aimed to address an important issue related to ESL/EFL students' identity, which may be used to shape an international agenda on how to best support and meet the needs of these students. It also enables educators, school administrators, and policy makers at all levels to better understand the increasing number of second language learners and their multiple identities, as well as providing researchers a new perspective on conducting research in language learners' identities.

Keywords: *bilingual literacy, English language learners, language learner identity, multiple identities, second language acquisition.*

Introduction

English has become a global language in the last century. Since the process of globalization has accelerated the spread of English as a global language, the number of English language learners has been dramatically increasing throughout the world. In fact, there are approximately 400 million speakers of English as a first language, 600 million speakers of English as a second language, and 600 million speakers of English as a foreign language (Crystal, 2010). Even though English language learners have different purposes for learning English and different sociopolitical backgrounds surrounding English language teaching and learning practices, it is clear that both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learners enter the classroom with previously acquired linguistic and cultural repertoires from diverse backgrounds. Because second language acquisition and practice entail not only the acquisition of new linguistic skills and conventions but also acceptable ways of using languages and of behaving, valuing, and thinking to be a successful member of the new discourse community (Gee, 1996), second language acquisition often includes a multilayered and ongoing negotiation of identities (Davidson, 1996; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000, 2010, 2017; Norton Pierce, 1995). Not only ESL learners physically exposed to the new cultural and linguistic community but also EFL learners gradually learning new cultural and linguistic norms experience a process of identity negotiation, renegotiation, and transformation throughout their language learning trajectory.

Despite the current growth in literature on second language learners' identities, little attention had been paid to this issue until quite recently. Since earlier approaches tend to focus on the cognitive and linguistic aspects of second language learning, the issue of language learners' identities had been rarely addressed in studies published before the 1990s (Block, 1997). Even though previous approaches can demonstrate various linguistic and cognitive aspects of ESL and EFL learners' language acquisition, such as the acquisition of different vocabularies, phonological and phonetic variation, and linguistic conventions of the English language, they fail to conceptualize how language learners interact with the variety of sociocultural discourses they encounter and construct their identities in the process of language acquisition. Norton Pierce (1995), who problematizes the lack of research on the issue of language learners' identities, argues that researchers need to develop a theoretical framework to understand second language learners' identities in relation to their language learning context. Other scholars have also criticized the essentialist and oversimplified views of previous studies of language learners' identities (e.g., Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001; Braine, 1999; Firth & Wanger, 1997; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko, 2006), which depict the language learner as a mere recipient who "must be willing to identify with members of another ethnolinguistic group and take on very subtle aspects of their behavior" (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, p. 135).

With the increasing acknowledgement of the socially contextualized nature of language learning (Fairclough, 1995; Kress, 1988), a large volume of recent literature has examined various issues of language learners' identities. While Norton Pierce's (1995) work on language learners' social identities, investments, and language learning has stimulated other researchers to conduct empirical research on the issue of second language learners' identities, Firth and Wagner's (1997) article arguing for more research on the interrelations between identity and language learning initiated the rise of identity studies in the field of second language learning (see Block [2007] for more details). Combined with different theoretical approaches, the issue of language learners' identities and language learning has become a vibrant one that has generated numerous synonyms of *identity*, including "subjectivity" (Weedon, 1987), "agency" (Butler, 1993), and "a stylized persona" (Rampton, 1991).

Despite the increasing interest in language learners' identities, little effort has been devoted to critically reviewing the latest research on second language learners' identities or to indicating future directions of research. Since the last significant review was made in 1997 (Firth & Wagner, 1997), over 200 articles have been published on language learners' identities. In addition, there has been a considerable increase in research, focusing on diverse groups of language learners, not merely those who use English as a first language. Based on the critical analysis of 109 major studies about second language learners' identities, this study critically analyzed and reviewed the recent increase in research on second language learners' identities, and discussed potential future directions for research on second language learners' identities.

Methodology of Literature Review

The literature review was conducted following five-stage grounded-theory method (Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller, & Wilderom, 2013). Based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), Wolfswinkel et al. (2013) introduce five-stage grounded-theory method for rigorously reviewing literature, including (a) define: defining the criteria for literature selection and determining the appropriate materials, (b) search, (c) select: refining the sample, (d) analyze: analyzing the selected literature using coding, and (e) present: (re)structuring the content based on the analysis.

Data Collection: Define & Search

In order to identify and critically review research that is pertinent to this research, five major databases were used as a main tool of data collection, including Elsevier, ERIC, Google Scholar, Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts, and Proquest, to search for relevant research. These databases were selected because they are frequently used to researching the second language learning and teaching literature, and provide comprehensive international coverage of the given topic. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles and books published in English; any unpublished dissertations and working papers were not included. The literature review was conducted using three criteria: (a) each study uses language learner identities as its primary focus of analysis, (b) the participant(s) of each study is an English language learner who uses English as a second or foreign language, and (c) each study contains a comprehensive method section, offering details of the research procedure. The literature review did not include literature on students with special needs such as deaf students, as supporting the language acquisition of these students requires more specialized attention and care.

Data Analysis: Select, Analyze and Present

The search returned 220 articles. In order to select studies appropriate for inclusion in the review, the editorial comments and abstracts were used as a guide. 109 studies were identified as major and significant studies that required in-depth reading and further analysis. In addition, researcher consulted various scholars and colleagues who specialize in second language learning and teaching for insightful comments and sources. The selected studies were analyzed and categorized using open-coding, the analytic process of examining, comparing and contrasting, conceptualizing and categorizing data. While the initial open-coding analysis provided possible patterns and emergent categories, the axial coding allowed the researcher to identify main categories and topics, and to make connects among different literature. Using the grounded theory approach of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the researcher enabled to work with data and draw generalizable patterns and meanings from the data themselves rather than imposing constructed hypotheses.

Second Language Learning and Identities: A Post-1990s Perspective

Despite the impression that might be conveyed by the aforementioned increase in research linking identity and second language learning, the issue of language learners' identities is not in fact a brand-new issue in the field, as the notion of identity has been discussed and explained in terms of different definitions and theoretical paradigms over the years. Three major paradigms have previously been used to explain language learners' identification with the target language and their attitudinal manners: (a) the socio-educational model of motivation introduced by Gardner (1985), (b) a variationist sociolinguistic approach that argues for pre-given and fixed identities, and (c) the sociopsychological paradigm of social identity theory introduced by Tajfel (1974, 1981) that explains identity as based on group membership and in-group identification. Even though the significance of these paradigms may lie in how they help researchers shift their focus from the linguistic and cognitive aspects of language learning to language learners, many researchers have criticized the oversimplified and over deterministic nature of these paradigms (e.g., Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001; Canagarajah, 2006; Firth & Wanger, 2007; Pennycook, 2001, 2010).

Challenges to Earlier Approaches

In problematizing the simplistic, static, and reductionist approaches of previous studies of language learning, recent studies have started to apply more critical approaches to examining language, language learning practices, the language learning environment, and language learners' identities. In recent years, many scholars have begun to adopt theories from other academic domains, largely from psychology and sociology, to destabilize the static view of previous identity studies and to conceptualize the multilayered and dynamic nature of individuals' identities. In particular, Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal work *Communities of Practice* and their theory emphasizing individuals' active participation in language learning have been widely taken up in identity studies to explain the on-going and constant tensions and transformations in the second language learning trajectory (e.g., Marx, 2002; Morita, 2004; Norton & Kamal, 2003). Their theory helps researchers reorient identities to power-laden social practice and see the language learner as "an actor articulating a range of forms of participation in multiple communities of practice" (Eckert & McConnell-Cinet, 1998, p. 490), not a member of one group or community.

While Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory challenges the essentialist categories of the earlier approaches discussed above and acknowledges language learners' social engagement, Weedon's (1987) conception of *subjectivity* broadens our understanding of language learners' identities. By emphasizing the interrelationships among language, individual consciousness, and social power, Weedon (1987) defines subjectivity as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (p. 32). Many scholars have adopted a notion of *subjectivity* that entails a multiple, controversial, and changing nature of the subject to capture the development and negotiation of the identity of second language learners (e.g., McKay & Wong, 1996; Morgan, 2004; Norton Pierce, 1995, 1997, 2000; Siegal, 1996). Various theoretical frameworks advocated by Anderson (1991), Bakhtin (1934), Bourdieu (1977, 1991), and Foucault (1972) have also frequently been taken up in empirical research linking second language learning and identities in relation to power, social positioning, and political arrangement.

Language Ideologies and Poststructuralist Identities

The poststructuralist approach and its conceptual framework have been widely adopted in the field of second language learning to capture the complex nature of second language learners' identities. Because poststructuralism values deconstruction, reflexivity, and multivocality and rejects generalizability or absolute truth (Grbich, 2004), it views individuals' identities not as fixed and pre-given entities, but as contextualized, unfinalized, and fragmented ones. As the poststructuralist approach views language learners' identities as fluid, multi-voiced, and conflictual, it provides a useful lens to examine how second language learners who have already acquired a linguistic and cultural repertoire and previously developed identities may find themselves marginalized or destabilized and undergo a process of identity conflict, negotiation, renegotiation, and transformation in their language learning trajectory (e.g., Duff, 2012; Golombek, 2005; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko, 2002)

From a poststructuralist perspective, Kramsch (2000) states that the term *language learner identity* in second language research includes language learners' cultural identity, social role, and discursive voice, which explain their selective choice of which role or identity they would like to display and claim across different contexts. Norton (2000) defines *identities* as expressing individuals' own understandings of their relationship to a world that is socially constructed and constantly negotiated. Elsewhere, Norton (2010) also describes individuals' identities as a site of struggle in that "[e]very time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating

our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space” (p. 2). Similarly, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) argue that language learners’ identities and negotiation of identities are closely interwoven with power relations, political arrangements, and language ideologies. In elaborating these characteristics of poststructuralist identities, notions of *a floating identity* (Canagarajah, 2009), *identity politics* (Woodward, 2002), and *a third space* (Bhabha, 1994)¹ have newly emerged to explain the complex nature of second language learners’ identities.

Second Language Learning and Identities: Post-1990s Research

As previously discussed, empirical research examining second language learners’ identities has gradually increased since the 1990s by critiquing the epistemological narrowness and essentialist approach of previous studies. Although the socio-educational model of motivation and socio-psychological paradigms are still used in second language research, recent studies have increasingly utilized poststructuralist theoretical conceptions such as community of practice, symbolic and cultural capital, language ideologies, imagined communities, and negotiation of identities in order to conceptualize second language learners’ identities (e.g., Giampapa, 2003; Hunter, 1997; Kanno, 2003; Kinginger, 2003; Lam, 2000, 2004; Marsh, 2002; McKay & Wong, 1996; Morita, 2004; Norton, 1995, 1997, 2000; Norton & Kamal, 2003; Park, 2009; Pavlenko, 2003; Ryan, 2009; Tsui, 2007).

Motivation vs. Investment in Second Language Learning

Before the notion of identity came to be widely used and discussed in the field of second language learning, previous research mainly used the socio-educational model of motivation to conceptualize language learners’ identification with the target language and their attitudinal manners. With a growing recognition of the multiplicity and diversity of individual language learners, many scholars, however, started to realize that not all language learners are motivated by the same factors or conditions but have different desires to satisfy by learning and acquiring the target language. In particular, recent studies that integrate psychological considerations of individual language learners with their sociopolitical contexts have challenged the traditional constructs of intrinsic vs. extrinsic and integrative vs. instrumental motivations on the grounds of their oversimplified and overgeneralized approach.

In problematizing the static nature of motivation, Norton Pierce (1995) and Norton (2000, 2010, 2017) introduce the notion of *investment* to explain the multi-layered and agentive nature of language learning and use. In her analysis of Canadian immigrant adult language learners, Norton Pierce (1995) and Norton (2000, 2010, 2017) found that language learners selectively invest in target language learning, and their investment decisions were largely based on whether language learning could eventually bring about a symbolic and material resource as a reward. In criticizing a notion of motivation that cannot explain language learners’ dynamic and multiple traits of personality and inspired by Bourdieu (1991), she introduces the concept of *investment* to complement the traditional construct of motivation. Unlike the traditional notion of motivation, which views language learners as ahistorical and unitary, the newly coined notion of investment explains language learners’ selective efforts in developing their target language

¹ The notion of *a third space*, coined by Bhabha (1994), explains how language learners create and construct their own hybrid space and identities rather than being assimilated or acculturated into one particular language or culture. Drawing on insights from the idea of floating signs in cultural studies, Canagarajah (2009) introduces the notion of *a floating identity*, which views an individual’s identity as a floating signifier that allows people to move across different identities and communities. Taking a more radical approach, Woodward (2002) proposes a conception of *identity politics* that argues for examining the politically and historically constructed and imposed dimensions of individuals’ identities.

proficiency in relation to their sociocultural histories and environment, personal desires, and multiple identities. Because the notion of investment posits language learners as continuously (re)organizing their identities and their relation to the world while speaking, it explains language learners' identities as constantly changing across time and space and views language learners as an active agency. Investment in the target language can thus be understood as investment in language learners' identities, which are a site of constant struggle and negotiation.

McKay and Wong (1996) also show the complex relations between identities, investment, and agency among four adolescent Chinese immigrant students in grades 7 and 8 in the United States. Their findings demonstrate that language learners have multiple and contested identities beyond their imposed identity as ESL students, and their historically constructed needs and different desires lead them exercise different identities and determine their investment in the target language learning. Based on their findings, McKay and Wong (1996) argue that language learners' investment is highly selective in learning and developing the language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in that each language learner values each of these language skills differently according to his or her desires, agency, and identities. Other scholars have also adopted the construct of investment to understand second language learners' selective investment in learning the target language in relation to their memberships in different communities, their multiple identities, and their personal interests (e.g., Flowerdew & Miller, 2008; Haneda, 2005; Hunter, 1997; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002).

Multiple Identities, Negotiation of Identities, and Identity and Power

The trend of recent research is to broaden the older ideas of fairly unitary or binary identities to recognize identities as socially shaped and contextual. Before the 1990s, traditional conceptions of *acculturation* or *group identity*² were widely used to describe language learners' attitudes, personal variables, and identity-related characteristics in their language learning process. Because these approaches explain identity as based on group membership and in-group identification, they tend to generate a dichotomy between the in-group and out-group or associate one language/ethnic group with only one identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). These previous approaches do not recognize multiple memberships or identities of language learners, but allow language learners the single identity option of being an insider or outsider and treat them simply as language learners who need to assimilate/acculturate in order to become insiders. This binary and essentialist division, for example, generates the group categorizations of *native speakers of English* and *non-native speakers of English*, one of the most vibrant and on-going topics of discussion in the field of second language learning (see Braine, 1999; Holliday, 2005, 2006; Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009). With an increasing acknowledgement of the important role of language learners' multiple identities, the traditional approach of categorizing language learning into a certain identity group has been criticized for its unidirectional perspective on acculturation and its reductionist, static, and homogeneous views (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001). In critiquing this oversimplified and essentialist grouping of native and non-native

² Based on the basic premise of group identity propounded by *social identity theory* and Schumann's (1978) *Acculturation Theory*, the Acculturation Model posits that language learning entails an acculturation process and that to be successful language learners, they need to acculturate to the target culture and community by fully acquiring appropriate language skills, social norms, and cultural rules (Hamers & Blanc, 1989). Second language studies based on the Acculturation Model explain language learners' identities as a type of social integration with the target language group.

Along with the nature of intergroup identification derived from social identity theory and language attitude studies, some scholars theorize language learning as "a process of becoming a member of a certain community" (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). With the rigid categorization of "ingroup" and "outgroup," this approach defines identities as "what we are" and "what we are not" (Wenger, 1998). Because it generates a binary group categorization and inherent group affiliation, second language studies based on the theoretical framework of group membership have viewed language learners as members of one particular group that is divided by language, ethnicity, culture, and other variables.

speakers of English, Firth and Wagner (1997) argue that researchers need to frame language learners as having multiple identities and as undergoing a continuous process of identity negotiation, construction, and transformation.

Negotiation of Identities in Second Language Learning

To conceptualize second language learners' multiple identities and their identity construction in learning the target language, many scholars have taken up the conception of *negotiation of identities* in their research (e.g., Fuller, 2007; Giampapa, 2003; Kanno, 2003; McKay & Wong, 1996; Miller, 2003; Morita, 2004). Negotiation of identities explains language learners' identities as being constantly contested, negotiated, and renegotiated in relation to different ideologies of language, sociopolitical arrangements, power relations, and language learners' perceptions of themselves and others (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2003). The role of negotiation of identities is particularly important in second language learning contexts where language learners bring their previously acquired identities into the class. Because language learners' previously acquired identities and repertoires may conflict with dominant norms or not be recognized in a new discourse community, language learners tend to go through a process of negotiation and renegotiation of their identities, which sometimes causes a process of transformation or resistance.

While McKay and Wong's (1996) study shows how adolescent immigrant students selectively invest in and display their identities based on their desires and social position, Hunter (1997) demonstrated how Robert, a Portuguese-speaking ESL student in grades 4 through 5, developed multiple identities across different contexts, including an ESL class, peer group, and discussions of pop culture. Based on these findings, Hunter describes Robert as undergoing a constant struggle over multiple positions and continuously negotiating between different identities that he has developed and acquired through school, social relationships with his peers, and his interests in pop culture. Moving from the classroom to digital literacy contexts, Lam (2000) examines how an adolescent Chinese immigrant student actively engages in the construction, negotiation, and transformation of social identities on the Internet, which are somewhat different from those she displays in the classroom. In a recent study of language learners' use of instant messaging, Lam (2009) also shows how an adolescent Chinese immigrant student negotiates her social relationships and identities affiliated with the multiple communities of a local Chinese immigrant community, Asian American youth, and relationships with her friends in China. The findings of her studies (Lam, 2000, 2009) successfully demonstrate the dynamic process of second language learners' construction and negotiation of their multiple identities, and their agentive role in selectively constructing and claiming their identities across different discourse communities and domains. Some scholars who frame their research using a more linguistic-oriented approach have explored second language learners' negotiation of identities based on their language choice, code-switching/mixing, and crossing (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2006; Bailey, 2001; Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Fuller, 2007; Miller, 2000; Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010).

Identity and Power in Second Language Learning

Under the influence of critical thinkers such as Bourdieu (1991), Foucault (1972), and Simon (1992), poststructuralist approaches allow researchers to understand language learners' identities in relation to power and ideological discourses. In fact, many scholars insist that language is irreducibly ideological, reflecting the sociopolitical interests of dominant groups and embedded power relations (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Gal, 1989; Heller, 2003, 2010; Pennycook, 2001, 2017), and the language learning context is thus a locus of the production and reproduction

of symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1991; Heller, 1995). Revisiting Eckert's (2000) Belten High data on jocks' and burnouts' identity¹ practices, Davies (2005) argues that individuals may not always have the option of accessing the linguistic and cultural practices of the target community or an open choice to develop and negotiate their identities accordingly. While acknowledging the multiple identities of language learners and the possibility of negotiating identities, Davies points out that not all the identities that language learners have are negotiable.

A similar view can be found in Wenger's (1998) article, which states that the inability to negotiate identities can occur under asymmetrical power relations by causing nonparticipation and marginalization. In emphasizing the power-laden nature of language and identity, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2003) propose three types of identities: *imposed identities* (non-negotiable identities in a particular context), *assumed identities* (accepted and non-negotiated identities), and *negotiable identities*. Bringing these critical discussions into the field of second language learning, Norton (2000) articulates the complex relationship between power and identities, stating that "power can serve to enable or constrain the range of identities that language learners can negotiate in their classrooms and communities" (p. 9). Inspired by these critical views, recent studies linking second language learning and identities have examined second language learners' identities while taking into consideration power relations, sociopolitical arrangements, and surrounding ideologies.

In emphasizing the active role of language learners, some scholars have studied how individual language learners actively engage in negotiating their identities against imposed ideological discourses, and thereby find their own identities through transformation (e.g., Choi, 2017; Flowerdew & Miller, 2008; Morita, 2004; Phan, 2008; Shin, 2012; Tsui, 2007). Morita (2004), for example, explored how six first-year master's students from Japan negotiated their identities, claimed their agency and positionality, and brought about a personal transformation while entering and studying at a Canadian university. Using a notion of *agency*² that emphasizes the active role of individuals, Morita demonstrates that these six students actively shaped their own positionalities and negotiated different identities in second language learning contexts rather than accepting their imposed roles and positions. Because these students constructed and negotiated their identities based on the difficulties they faced in a new academic discourse community, she explained that the negotiation of second language learners' identities is not limited by socially and institutionally imposed roles but is affected by individuals' agency and personal desires that eventually help them develop locally constructed identities and positions.

With an increasing number of EFL teachers participating in teacher education conducted in ESL educational settings, researchers have started to pay attention to the issue of how these EFL teachers/students negotiate and construct their identities in these new academic discourse communities. In a study of Vietnamese teachers of English, Phan (2008) shows how EFL teachers, who can be perceived as second language learners in an Australian educational setting, construct and negotiate their professional, social, and personal identities throughout their language learning trajectory. Based on two years of observing these teacher participants, Phan reports that their professional identities as English teachers were challenged and marginalized in their new academic discourse community, but they gradually negotiated, renegotiated, and reconstructed their identities by actively interacting with different discourses and bringing their multiple identities into a negotiating process. These findings highlight the fact that EFL teachers/students do not passively accept their imposed identities and social roles but go

1 This ethnomethodological study of Eckert's (2000) shows how different communities of practices have somewhat different practices (e.g., the type of activities associated with them, linguistic behavior, and the use of particular phonological variants) to display and maintain their identities as jocks and burnouts, which can limit or allow new incomers to develop and negotiate their identities as jocks or burnouts.

2 According to Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), *agency* is "never a 'property' of particular individual" but is rather "a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large" (p. 148).

through an intense process of identity conflict, fragmentation, accommodation, negotiation, and renegotiation in order to shape their own positionalities and identities.

While such an emphasis on the active negotiation and renegotiation of language learners and teachers' identities can be found in other empirical studies (e.g., Canagarajah, 2004; Ortaçtepe, 2015; Pavlenko, 2003; Tsui, 2007; Xu, 2013; Zacharias, 2010), recent studies have captured language learners/teachers' resistance against imposed ideological labels. Using an autobiographical narrative, Braine (1999) shows his resistance against the power-laden and imposed label of a "non-native speaker of English learner and teacher" and his own struggle not to be perceived as such. Focusing on ESL high school students in the United States, Tamil (2008) reports the resistance of English language learners positioned as ESL students. Unlike school-sanctioned ESL students who follow instructions and participate in classroom activities, some students in this study showed their resistance to being positioned as an ESL student by not preparing for classroom activities or by participating in proscribed activities. Similarly, Canagarajah (2004) demonstrates how language learners resist the unfavorable identities imposed upon them through their literacy activities.

Identities, Imagination, and Imagined Communities in Second Language Learning

To extend language learners' identities beyond socially contextualized positionalities, the poststructuralist notion of *imagination* has been taken up in second language research to explain the complex relationships among language learners' desires, investment, and identities. The initial discussion of imagination in an educational setting stemmed from Vygotsky's (1978) insight that imagination as a high mental function plays a significant role in children's and later adults' language development. More recently, Simon (1992) addresses the fact that imagination can be a central component of language learning because it makes learners determine what kinds of practices are worth struggling for and urges them to put forth efforts to achieve their desired or anticipated visions of community life in the future. Developing his claim, Wenger (1998) highlights the crucial relationship between imagination and identity, conceptualizing imagination as "a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176).

Adopting notions of *imagination* and *imagined communities* provided by Anderson (1991), Norton (2001) explains ESL adult language learners' selective investment in learning the target language and inherent participation/non-participation in English class. While viewing the concept of imagination as ideological and identitarian, Norton argues that second language learners' non-participation in the language classroom can result from a disjuncture between their imagined communities and their teacher's pedagogical aims, and their unique investment in the target language is closely related to the imagined communities they want to join in the future. Echoing this contention, recent studies have also examined the unique role of second language learners' imagined communities and inherent imagined identities in second language learning and teaching contexts (e.g., Early & Norton, 2012; Kanno, 2008; Kendrick & Jones, 2008; Kinginger, 2003, 2008; LoCastro, 2001; Norton & Kamal, 2003; Pavlenko, 2003; Ryan, 2009; Song, 2012).

Using notions of imagination and imagined communities, Norton and Kamal (2003) explored how Afghan refugee students aged 12 and 13 who participated in an English language learning program in Pakistan viewed developing English literacy and becoming competent speakers of English and how their perceptions affected their English language learning. Their findings show that these students have three imagined communities related to English language learning: (a) *imagining a literate community*, where being literate is considered a major key to personal and national development, (b) *imagining English as a language of possibility*, in that English as an international language can provide them greater opportunities to participate in the global world, and (c) *imagining a global future* in which advanced technologies and globalization

break down national and ethnocultural boundaries. Norton and Kamal (2003) insist that these imagined communities and imagined identities envisioned by language learners reflect their current social and political instability and afford them the chance to situate themselves in future imagined communities where proficient English literacy allows individuals to attain success and national development.

While Norton and Kamal's (2003) study conceptualizes the dynamic relationship between language learners' imagined communities and sociopolitical arrangements, Pavlenko's (2003) study connects language learners' imagined communities and identities with the discourse of *native-speakerism*.¹ Drawing on an insight from Anderson (1991), Vygotsky (1978), and Wenger (1998), Pavlenko examines the imagined communities and identities of pre- and in-service ESL and EFL teachers/students who participated in a second language acquisition seminar as part of an MA TESOL program at an American university. This analysis of 44 teachers/students revealed that the participants tended to have two imagined communities at the beginning of the seminar: (a) a *native speaker community*, where the discourse of native-speakerism is prevalently exercised by validating the superiority and professional legitimacy of native speakers of English, and (b) a *non-native speaker/second language learner community*, which those who could not become legitimate members of the native speaker community are forced to join. She explains that the dominant discourses of native-speakerism in the field of second language learning have resulted in language learners' unavoidable internalization of these essentialist discourses, which eventually allow them no choice but to create binary imagined communities of native and non-native speakers and label themselves non-native speakers/second language learners. The second language acquisition seminar reported in the study, however, exposed students to various academic theories and discourses and allowed the students to interact with them through classroom discussion, as well as helping them develop a critical lens that eventually freed them from the essentialist discourse of native speakerism. Pavlenko (2003) stated that the seminar and classroom discussions gave students the chance to reframe their own identities and reimagine themselves as members of an imagined *multilingual/second language user community* where their multicompetence and multilingualism were considered an asset. In other words, language learners' imagined communities and identities can be expanded and altered by interacting with surrounding discourses, which can bring about a process of transformation. Other scholars have also adopted notions of imagination and imagined communities to explore second language learners' identities across different educational settings, including computer-mediated communication (e.g., Spiliotopoulous & Carey, 2005), multimodal communication (e.g., Dagenais et al., 2009), pre-immigrant programs (e.g., Barkhuizen & de Klerk, 2006), and study abroad (e.g., Kinginger, 2004).

Second Language Learning and Identities: Future Directions

Recent studies linking language learners' identities and second language learning have successfully shifted a major focus of second language research from a cognitive and linguistic-oriented approach to a sociocultural and critical approach that allows researchers to understand second language learning in relation to sociopolitical arrangements, the diverse background of language learners and their agentive roles, and power relations. In order to conceptualize the multilayered identities of second language learners in a constantly changing and evolving world, future research needs to address and critically discuss the following issues.

1 Phillipson (1992) defines *native-speakerism* as a power-laden and ideological discourse that depicts native speakers of English as ideal teachers of English language and culture and marginalizes non-native speakers of English teachers by questioning their professional legitimacy compared with their native counterparts.

From Multiple Identities to Metro-Identities

Many scholars have used the notion of multiple identities to describe second language learners' multi-memberships and belongings across different communities. Most research findings have successfully conceptualized different identities that second language learners develop, negotiate, and construct in their language learning process. Norton (1995), for example, explains that Martina's (one participant's) investment in English stems from her social identity as a mother and main caregiver in her family among her multiple identities. If language learners are in constant negotiation of multiple identities, as previously posited, how can we make a clear-cut distinction between identity A and identity B? How can we say that Martina's investment in English is directly and solely explained by her identity as a mother, and not by anything else? In problematizing the overwhelming use of the term *multiplicity*, Otsuji and Pennycook (2010) argue that notions of multiplicity, diversity, and hybridity tend to pluralize languages, cultures, and identities rather than complexify them. In the same vein, Zuberi (2001) insists that "the notion of 'hybrid' can become as fixed a category as its essentialist nemesis" (pp. 239–240). Similar concerns have been raised by other scholars who warn of the hidden danger of using the notions of multiplicity and hybridity, as these terms can create fault lines and boundaries (e.g., Heller, 2007; Kubota, 2014; Makoni & Pennycook, 2005).

To prevent researchers from creating another essentialist perspective dividing language learners' identities into static categories, such concerns and critical examinations of the overwhelming use of multiple identities need to be addressed in second language research that examines second language learners' identities. In fact, some researchers point out that "multiple" identities cannot fully explain the complexified identities of transnational language learning or new global elites¹ (see Reyes & Lo, 2009; Vandrick, 2011). Avoiding the fixity indexed in the notion of multilingualism, Otsuji and Pennycook (2010) propose the term *metrolingualism*, which can be conceived of as "the paradoxical practice and space where fixity, discreteness, fluidity, hybridity, locality and globality coexist and co-constitute each other" (p. 252). The newly coined notion of metrolingualism, inspired by the term *metroethnicity* (Maher, 2005), includes the mobilization of fixity and the possibility of alternation that cannot be explained by multilingualism. Following this argument, I suggest that researchers conduct research using the term *metro-identities* to conceptualize the identities of second language learners, including ESL, EFL, and other transnational language learners.

From Research to Teacher Education and the Classroom

Even though many scholars recognize the importance of language learners' identities in second language learning contexts, little literature has discussed how theories of second language learning and identity can be applied to classroom instruction and language teaching practices. As the previously reviewed literature demonstrates, classroom practices can assign institutionally imposed identities upon language learners, result in non-participation or resistance, and expand the identity options of second language learners and bring about transformation (e.g., Dagenais et al., 2009; Hunter, 1997; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2001; Pavlenko, 2003). Norton (2010) emphasizes the urgent need to connect identity research and theories with classroom pedagogy:

Despite the best intentions, classroom practice can recreate subordinate student identities, thereby limiting students' access not only to language learning opportunities, but to other more powerful identities (p. 361).

¹ The term *new global elite* was introduced by Vandrick (2011) to refer to a group of students who have lived or studied in more than three countries, claiming that these students have recombinant identities and a strong sense of cosmopolitanism.

Other research has also highlighted the important role of teachers or classroom practices that may or may not allow second language learners' negotiation of different identities and access to the target language practices. In order to prevent the danger of the classroom becoming a site reproducing essentialist discourses and imposing institutionally and socially constructed identities on second language learners, more pedagogical discussion needs to address this matter along with well-designed research.

Another area that future research must address is teacher education for EFL teachers. As many scholars have reported, the discourse of native-speakerism has strongly influenced the professional identities of EFL teachers whose first language is a language other than English (e.g., Braine, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009; Kim, 2011; Llurda, 2009; Rivers & Ross, 2013). Pavlenko's (2003) study clearly demonstrates EFL teachers/students' internationalization of native-speakerist discourses and their negative influences on their professional identities, but it also shows that these essentialist identities that have been imposed and internalized by EFL teachers/students can be removed and reframed through appropriate teacher education. Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) also point to the urgent need to prepare a special program for EFL teachers/ students that can help them eliminate native-speakerist discourses. Future research, therefore, needs to examine the actual needs of teacher education for EFL teachers/students, explore possible curricula and materials for appropriate teacher education programs for them, and conceptualize the effects of different programs and curricula.

From Macro vs. Micro to Macro-Micro Research

Despite the increasing body of identity research that has been published in the past two decades, most studies have explored second language learners' identities at the microsocial level. Even some research that captured learners' identities and second language learning in relation to power, political arrangements, and ideologies has not considered the interrelationship between micro and macro contexts. Although many studies have shown how different language policies affect second language teaching and learning practices and how language learners negotiate and construct their identities in their second language learning, little research has demonstrated the interconnection of these aspects of second language learning.

As previously discussed, legitimacy is not the choice of individual language learners, but rather that of socio-politically constructed power in macro-level contexts (see Davies, 2005). Similarly, Canagarajah (2006) argues that it is time for identity studies to move from a romantic perspective that argues for "empowering" students without considering macro contexts to strive for a more macro-level understanding of language learners' identities, stating that even though language learners may still negotiate their identities at the micro-level of the classroom or educational setting, where relative autonomy exists, they may not allow such negotiability under the influence of more macro contexts. Such an emphasis on the urgent needs of micro-macro research can be also found in Pennycook (2001) and Hornberger and Johnson (2008). To provide a broader picture of the complex relationship between second language learners' identities and language learning, future studies need to demonstrate the interrelationship between the micro- and macro-contexts.

Conclusions

The notion of identity is hard to define, and the conceptualization of individuals' identities is even harder. Despite the complex nature of language learners' identities, the current education system tends too easily to label them "English language learners," "learners with limited English proficiency," "English as a second/foreign language learners," or "learners at risk" without further consideration of their diverse backgrounds or identities. Living in a

globalized world where the border-crossing becomes a mundane practice, the critical analysis and discussion presented in this paper urge educators, policy-makers and school administrators at all school levels to become critically aware of the importance of second language learners' identity construction and negotiation. As previously discussed, the oversimplified and over deterministic impositions of identities cannot fully conceptualize or appreciate the complexified identities of second language learners, and indeed can marginalize them.

The first step in appreciating diversity is to acknowledge second language learners' different backgrounds, voices and identities rather than treating these differences as a source of interference in language acquisition and school adjustment. Further, educators and school administrators need to develop appropriate classroom instruction and language teaching practices that could embrace second language learners' diverse backgrounds, and help them develop their unique voices and identities. On a macro level, language policy makers and practitioners should be aware of the significance of second language learners' identities in their language literacy acquisition and practice, and make principled decisions about how to promote multilingualism and metrolingualism. In addition, future studies need to address the ways in which educators and researchers could help second language learners not become trapped in institutionally or socio-politically imposed identities, how they could better support second language learners in finding their positionalities and identities in second language learning contexts so that their voices can be heard, and how they bring about a true appreciation of second language learners' diverse backgrounds and identities.

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