Exploring Language Learners' Identity Development in Intercultural Contexts: Current Landscape and Ways Forward

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Abstract

The "social turn" in second language acquisition brings into focus the concept of identity that captures the relationship between the language learner and the social world (Norton, 2000, 2013). This paper presents an overview of the issues related to identity development of language learners in study abroad and online intercultural contexts. It discusses recent findings, affordances, and challenges in researching identities in the two dynamically constructed intercultural contexts. The methodological approaches to the investigation of identity in these contexts were also summarized to reflect on the current scope and analytical lens. This paper concludes with a discussion of challenges and future directions in the studies of identity with regard to intercultural communication and language learning in a globalized and complex world.

Keywords: Identity, Intercultural Communication, Study Abroad, Online Intercultural Encounters

Identity, intercultural communication, and language learning

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), there is a research shift from focusing only on students' learning outcomes to paying more attention to the language socialization process that shapes the second language (L2) learners' experience (Kramsch, 1993, 2002). This "social turn" in SLA brings into focus the concept of identity that captures the relationship between the language learner and the social world (Norton, 1995, 2000, 2013). Instead of viewing language learners as test takers and passive vessels for input and output, contemporary poststructuralist SLA scholars portray them as active social members and agents in charge of their own learning trajectories (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Kramsch, 2002). These poststructuralist researchers value the voices of individual L2 learners and argue that an exploration of individual narratives during their L2 learning journey, especially when learners are exposed to language rich contexts in different cultures, can greatly contribute to our understanding of L2 learning and L2 learners (Norton, 2013).

Due to the globalization and advancements of networking technologies, people are frequently crossing national and cultural borders both physically and virtually. Navigating information and communicating in a multilingual and multicultural globe motivates the needs for language learning. Although research on language learning usually has a heavy reliance on classroom contexts (Plonsky, 2016), language learning eventually ends in the real world where we use languages to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds and navigate the world we live in (Kramsch, 2002). The changing contexts and needs for language learning have extended the field's investigative scope to consider important skills and attitudes needed for preparing L2 learners for intercultural communication—intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Much scholarly effort has been invested in the development of definitions and models of

ICC (e.g., Byram, 1997, 2012; Deardorff, 2009) that center around "empathy, perspective taking and adaptability" (Deardorff, 2009, p. 265). Understanding ICC takes into account the complex interplay of identity in intercultural interactions. Research has shown that identity factor has a strong impact on intercultural engagement (e.g., Iino, 2006; Kinginger, 2008). In-group/out-group identity conflicts are often found to negatively influence the quality of intercultural communication (Diao, 2014; Kinginger, 2013), preventing the development of cultural empathy and adaptability. An inclusive identity orientation and higher degree of identity security were argued to lead to fruitful intercultural interactions and greater cultural flexibility (Kim, 2007, 2009). As a foundational point for investigating ICC, the concept of identity itself has been evolving over time, revealing the complex and dynamic nature of itself and ICC. Identity was broadly defined as self-understandings and often marked with socially constructed labels that are often categorical and static, such as "at-risk learner" or "outsider" (Urrieta & Hatt, 2019). Static category-based identity distinction (e.g., gender, race) has been challenged by recent empirical findings showing that identity is multilayered, co-constructed, changing over time, sometimes a site of struggle instead of static and categorical (Lam, 2004; Norton, 2000, 2013). These emerging findings free researchers from pinpointing identities to one single category and encourage them to study identity as a more dynamic and negotiable multilayered entity of an individual. Understanding the fluid nature of identity is crucial in helping learners reframe power, develop ICC and global engagement, and navigate through various spaces in today's world (Darvin & Norton, 2015). According to Urrieta and Hatt (2019), identity is now defined as "self-perception that is both existential and categorical, both individual and sociocultural, and that shifts and develops over time." (p.11)

The importance of identity factor in ICC and SLA has been recognized by scholars from both fields. As learning languages and constructing ICC are becoming more intertwined in contemporary world, identity serves as a valuable lens to help us better the quality and utility of education at the intersection of SLA and ICC. Viewing L2 learners as agentive users and global communicators, and most importantly, whole persons, requires us to reexamine the changing needs, contexts, and means in linguacultural education. Mutually, language learning and intercultural communication in the changing multilingual and multicultural contexts catalyzed by globalization and advancements of technology now play a role in identity reconstruction and expansion.

In what follows, I first explore the recent findings and dynamic aspects of identity development of L2 learners in study abroad and online intercultural contexts. I then summarize methodological approaches to the investigation of identity in these contexts. I end with discussion on challenges and future directions in the studies of identity in regard to ICC and language learning.

L2 learners' identity development in study abroad context

A language socialization perspective has moved beyond the acquisition of linguistic forms to conceptualize language learning as a journey of becoming a person in society (Ochs, 2002). In study abroad contexts, language learners are viewed as individuals in social contexts who might experience potentially critical experience in which identity development can be observed through personal narratives (Benson et al., 2013). Study abroad contexts are not only viewed as an environment for authentic language and cultural immersion, but as a site to trigger identity development for new ways of interpretating and learning linguistic and cultural practices

at home and abroad. Research has also shown that study abroad is not a "magic formula making possible an effortless process of easy learning" (Kinginger, 2013, p. 352). Based on empirical findings, students' study abroad experiences are extremely varied. Identity-related conflicts were found to have noticeable influence on study abroad quality and the acquisition of certain linguistic and pragmatic competence (Diao, 2014; Iino, 2006; Kinginger, 2008). Studies that focused on how learners were received in study abroad contexts and how learners coped with these identity-related conflicts demonstrated the process-oriented nature of identity and an evolving conceptualization of the L2 learner as a whole person.

Conflicts involving a "foreigner" identity were documented in the literature of study abroad. Iino (2006) examined the intercultural interactions among American students and their Japanese host families during a summer program in Kyoto. Some extreme cases were observed in which the American students were positioned as *gaijin* (foreigner) and complained that they were treated like "babies or dolls" (p. 162). One of the participants in the study explicitly pointed out that he could take advantage of the *gaijin* situation by showing no awareness of Japanese cultural norms. Another student used a highly culture-bound formulaic Japanese expression to accompany the presentation of a gift for the host family, however, the family's first reaction was to laugh, partly because the student's behavior violated their belief that this expression is unique to Japanese and cannot be learned by a *gaijin*. This foreigner identity conflict shows the fact that identity is co-constructed, challenging the Western conceptualization of individual based identity (how we position ourselves). Similar ideas from different cultures that identity is co-constructed through the community were collected in Deardorff (2009). Thus, the negotiation of identities during study abroad not only depends on student's self-position and interpretation of host culture, but also on identities (foreigner identity in this case) imposed on them by interlocutors from host culture. Parallel to this finding, Diao (2014) documented an American student who was positioned by his roommate as "foreigner" during study abroad in China, which resulted in isolation from the local and failure in pragmatic acquisition. Such identity conflict might cause a drop in learning motivation. In some cases, some students might accept and even enjoy the foreigner status that prevents them from accepting and appreciating a different culture.

National identity is never the only identity present during study abroad. Although the notion of national identity based on spatial entities has been criticized by scholars, evidence presented in empirical studies reveals that prioritizing one's own national identities might withdraw students from meaningful intercultural engagement during study abroad. For example, Kinginger (2008) reported a female American student's national identity-related conflicts during study abroad in France. The conflict was triggered by the US-led invasion of Iraq and French-bashing by the American media at the time. When the French host family asked her opinions on the invasion, she interpreted it as hostility toward her country. Eventually, she distanced herself from the host family and refused to engage interculturally. In this case, lack of respectful negotiation of difference might play a role. Especially when the sojourn is short term and the student does not have sufficient language proficiency to negotiate and interpret the meaning during communication. In addition, without a more open intercultural mindset, students might tend to interpret cultural practices of the host country based on their own cultural understanding and background, which, might lead to a sense of national superiority and negative influence on linguacultural learning.

In another study with a similar focus on study abroad and national identity conflicts, Gao (2011) documented the arguments in English language classrooms in Britain when Chinese students encountered peers from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan who challenged their beliefs and

values of Chinese territory and history. It was found that in some cases, the Chinese students seemed to reinforce their national identity, which resulted in conflicts and feelings of hatred for each other. While in other cases, they started to shift their national identities away from the political discourses to ones that were more open and inclusive. Interestingly, their stances and identities did influence their attitudes and investment in English learning and use—they put more effort in learning and using English because they wanted to voice their opinions on the Taiwan issue with the rest of the world. Further, the national identity related conflicts also provided these Chinese students with opportunities to critically reflect on their values. When the students encountered and integrated new values into their thinking, they began to mindfully review on both sites of ways of thought, which contributed to identity reconstruction. The results from this study showed that identity can be a site of struggle during study abroad. The findings also suggested that students are constantly constructing and reconstructing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the world during study abroad.

The changing nature of identity was further illustrated in the micro-ethnographic studies in which researchers tracked students' pre-, during and post- study abroad performance and mindset (e.g., Jackson, 2008; Pitts, 2009). For example, Jackson (2008) examined 14 Hong Kong students' language and cultural development during a 5-week sojourn in England. She found that some students gained a deeper level of self-awareness after the short sojourn. They became more aware of their sense of self and expressed their wish to acquire a more global identity with a broader world view. This self-awareness was found to be important in triggering identity shift. In Pitts (2009)'s ethnographic study of US students' 15-month sojourn in France, some students documented their perceptions of changes in their identity across the sojourn. Their identities shifted in many ways. For example, some students enjoyed exploring a new identity. Some felt more "at home" in Paris than in the US. Others reflected on what it meant to be "American" and a "global citizen". These identity changes, sometimes new emerging identities were found to be articulated in life upon return. Most students experienced a more complex and multifaceted identity enrichment. Everyday talks were found to have essential roles in helping students adjust to their new context and reflecting on their identities.

In a short-term summer homestay immersion program for American high school students in China, Kinginger (2015) examined the experiences of these student living with their host families. She found that, in two cases, the focal students became very engaged in the routine communicative activities of their hosts. Although their speaking ability was limited, they were able to develop intimacy with the host families using humor. From the host side, the families viewed home stay as an opportunity for them to learn about US culture. Both sides expressed willingness to communicate and learn together, thus, leading to a mutual inclusive cultural mindset. Developing a good relationship with local people were found to support identity exploration and construction during study abroad. However, this process was unpredictable and required effort from both parties.

Although the literature has shown that the quality of study abroad can vary significantly based on individual perception and social interactions. It also demonstrates that study abroad can provide potentially significant access to linguacultural learning and personhood development through awareness and evaluation of self-understandings. The L2 learners presented in these studies were viewed as individuals with histories, emotions, and intentions. These studies reflect that learning (including but not limited to language learning) is about personal transformation and a trajectory of becoming (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Identity development, indeed, can serve as a

valuable epitome of learning experience and quality during this highly unpredictable intercultural journey.

Expanding the landscape: L2 learners' identity development in online intercultural encounters

Although access to internet remains unequal in the world, technology-mediated activities have become ubiquitous. Thus, participatory media and networking technologies have made possible intercultural encounters regardless of space and time. Today, online forums, massively multiplayer online games, fandoms, social media, multimedia sharing sites, etc., provide us with new spaces and communities for multilingual and multicultural interactions. For L2 learners, their opportunities for exposure to foreign cultures and languages have been radically expanded. However, it has been noted that this added mediational layer further complicate the dynamics of intercultural communication (Thorne, 2003). This new kind of dynamic intercultural communication has attracted many researchers. Many studies conducted in virtual spaces portrayed learners' identity development in this changing context of intercultural experience (Codreanu & Combe, 2018; Hull et al, 2010; Kim, 2016; Lam, 2000, 2004; Lee & Barton, 2011; Schreiber, 2015). These studies have shown that technologies have been seamlessly integrated and normalized into collective and individual beings, breaking down divisions between online and offline worlds and between production and consumption of knowledge. This breakdown/merging means that language and culture learning is becoming more agentive, personalized, and dynamic, and that people's intercultural experiences in both contexts have also become more connected. Therefore, these online intercultural encounters can be valuable sites to understand language learners as individuals.

As the medium has changed, so has the way how communication is enacted. Affordances of digital technologies (e.g., multiple modes and creative genres) were found to expand leaners' self-expression repertoire, which facilitated the construction of multilingual and multicultural identities. For example, a study of a Serbian university student who was also a rap artist found that multiple semiotic modes (e.g., music, visual) available on social media platforms supported intercultural engagement regardless of language proficiencies. In this study, Schreiber (2015) described how Aleksandar, the Serbian-English bilingual, used music and rap videos to engage both non-English speakers in Serbian and non-Serbian speakers in the world. With the support of a variety of modes, language barriers, as he described, became relatively unimportant. During his intercultural interactions online, he gained more confidence in articulating his 'global artist' identity when he remixed multiple linguistic codes. He did not see himself as having separate identities fixed to particular languages. Instead, he constructed an identity that embraced linguistic and cultural hybridity and diversity.

Similarly pointing out the multimodal nature of online intercultural sharing, Lee and Barton (2011) investigated user-generated multicultural communication practices (English L2 users with Chinese/Spanish L1) on a global photo sharing site with a special focus on identity. A new form of intercultural communication—asynchronous intercultural communication was made possible by this digital medium. Thus, imaging audience was a salient practice when participants composed and imagined potential audience from different cultural backgrounds that they might come across. It was found that both languages were present to navigate and negotiate across local and global cultures. The site helped L2 users create new forms of literacy practices and cultural portfolios that traverse national borders. During online intercultural sharing, these young people

were found to utilize their multilingual and multicultural funds of knowledge to articulate a "glocal" identity—a person who is able to globalize the local and localize the global. Unlike in study abroad contexts, national boundaries are blurred in online multicultural spaces. Therefore, the distinction between the "host" and the "guest" has been minimized. As global networking environments embrace and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity, L2 learners are given more agency to explore an identity that is more fluid and dynamic, that acknowledges their local knowledge fund and appreciates global cultural diversity.

New online communities provided by digital spaces not only empower linguistic and cultural hybridity and diversity, but also reveal the dynamics of identity co-construction during intercultural encounters. When communicating in digital spaces, L2 users are likely to be involved in online *affinity space* (Gee, 2004) where people from different places of the world sharing the same interests connect with each other. Such communities were found to help L2 users gain social support and nurture their identity development. For example, Lam (2000) documented the identity change of a transnational youth who was marginalized in ESL classrooms in the US. As an immigrant youth with limited English, Almon was frustrated by the exclusion in school. However, he was able to get involved in an online J-pop (Japanese pop culture) group, where people from different cultural backgrounds communicated and shared their interests on Japanese pop stars and culture. With the support from online chat mates, Almon negotiated a new identity as a global English user. Such new identity allowed him to overcome the exclusion and marginalization in formal classrooms and encouraged him to perceive languages and cultures with a more open mindset. This shift in identity empowered Almon to become a more confident global communicator.

In another study conducted in online multicultural *affinity space*, Kim (2016) explored an online discussion forum about Korean dramas. She found that a group of young people, without Korean heritage background, gathered in this virtual space to support each other's interest on Korean dramas that was not well accepted in their local contexts. They shared their inquiries, comparisons, discussions on cultural issues remixing different cultures, histories, and experiences. These idea exchanges encouraged young people to think and reflect on different cultural practices in both local and global contexts. Therefore, this online intercultural space was found to provoke fruitful intercultural conversations and help participants develop a more inclusive glocal identity when they navigated across different cultures online and empowered each other's motivation for Korean learning.

However, online intercultural encounters are not always smooth. It was also noted that potentially harmful cultural discourses that occur online could prevent meaningful intercultural communication. For example, based on the analysis of YouTube comments triggered by an intercultural topic video created by an American L2 French learner, Codreanu and Combe (2018) found that although vlogs had the advantage of allowing learners to share cultural perspectives with people around the world, it did not always ensure a healthy and fruitful conversation. From some of the comments, they found that national and regional borders tended to persist in the minds of some viewers, and these could lead to extremely tense and harmful interactions that might influence the L2 learner's motivation and learning behavior. The anonymity enabled by the medium even worsened the tensions. Conversing interculturally in a digital world with unknown others requires skill, courage, and imagination (Hull et al., 2010), thus it is actually very challenging. A research (Hull et al., 2010) focusing on Indian multilingual young people's intercultural practices and cosmopolitan identity development in social networking sites found that even everyday intercultural practice, such as extending simple greetings, were not always

smooth as youths' different cultural background bumped against each other. They argued that cosmopolitan identity triggers were emergent and unpredictable, distributed among the interlocutors, the activities, and the artifacts. Core to developing an inclusive cosmopolitan identity was learning to negotiate the rough intercultural moments, which required offline scaffolding and conversations about culture, identity, and communication.

      In these online intercultural contexts, we can see that "the L2 learner" may constitute only a very small part of the identity of language learners. On the one hand, this reflects a nuanced, fluid, complex view of identity development in intercultural contexts — the learners are persons with their own interests and goals. On the other hand, it suggests that educators should be proactive in scaffolding and motivating learners to wisely navigate online intercultural contexts and find affordances for agentive language learning. The literature and the reoccurring theme of intercultural conflicts in both contexts suggest that students should be engaged in explicit intercultural conversations that involve critical reflections on cultural mindset, identity development, and ways of learning and using languages.

How is identity researched? Challenges and ways forward

      From the above discussions, we can gain a glimpse of the complex and dynamic aspects of identity development of L2 learner-users in different physical and virtual intercultural contexts. Therefore, it is challenging for researchers to capture the fluidity of identity. A number of applied linguists who do work in study/work abroad contexts use introspective techniques (e.g., interviews, narratives, diaries, reflections, etc.) and approaches such as ethnographic or case studies (e.g., Kinginger, 2008; Norton, 1995) to investigate identity. Narrative-based approaches help researchers gain in-depth understanding of one's perception of the sense of self. However, narrative-based data is highly subjective. Researchers are faced with challenges of keeping trustworthiness when coding and interpreting participants' narratives. For researcher-elicited data (e.g., semi-structured interview), chances are participants may give socially acceptable response rather than their real thoughts, especially in a face-threatening situation. In addition, because researchers' interpretation of data is also mediated by their own cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and experience, researchers may interpret the data the way in which they seek what they want to find in the data. It requires constant reflection on researcher positionality. Multiple data sources might help increase the validity of identity research. Many researchers have begun to be mindful of data triangulation. Natural interaction data (e.g., conversation recording) has been taken in account in identity research (e.g., Diao, 2014; Iino, 2006). With a multidimensional data collection, researchers can gain a more holistic understanding of identity development.

      In online contexts, data triangulation is also found in several studies (Hull et al., 2010; Lam, 2000; Lee & Barton, 2011; Schreiber, 2015). Researchers further include participants' artifacts (e.g., social media post) to triangulate participants' perceptions of self with performance and mediational products. One major challenge faced by researchers focusing on virtual spaces is the accessibility to self-narrative data. For example, in Codreanu and Combe (2018) and Kim (2016), researchers were only able to access the publicly available interaction data. With only online practice data, it is difficult to gain a whole picture of identity. It is worth pointing out that the identity people articulate online may only represent one layer of the entity. Additionally, without checking with participants, this kind of analysis faces more risks of subjectivity and bias.

Thus, the lack of perspective data from participants influenced the trustworthiness of their findings.

Another limitation of studies on online contexts is the lack of longitudinal research that reveals the changing-over-time nature of identity development. Except Lam (2000) that documented the identity development process of the transnational youth, many studies seemed to privilege the content of identity over the process of development. Unlike study abroad context, in which researchers can conduct data collection before, during, and after the study abroad sojourn with a clear and specific timeline, online ethnographic study needs to adopt a more longitudinal design to capture the identity development over time.

In both study abroad and online contexts, there is still a gap between theory and analytical framework. Although the poststructuralist view of a more dynamic notion of identity has been widely recognized among contemporary scholars, it has posted a huge challenge in data analysis. Contemporary researchers may need to reexamine the analytical lens used in understanding learners' experience in intercultural contexts. For example, Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which is often used in investigating one's intercultural experience, was developed based on the linear assumption that people tend to move across stages of development in hierarchical order (from denial to integration). However, the nuanced identity development in the process might not be easily captured by linear stages. We may need more dynamic models in terms of identity development that combine multiple stages and recognize language learning in intercultural contexts as a journey of becoming.

When we reflect on the theory, we can see that challenges in the studies of identity also come from the debatable definition of identity. Identity is such a broad and complex concept that can include attitudes, beliefs, values, experiences, behaviors, among others. Such a diffuse set of investigative dimensions has brought up challenges in the studies of identity, especially in intercultural contexts. The current research rationale is developed based on an overreliance on scholarship in North American and European contexts (Deardorff, 2009). It has been pointed out in Deardorff (2009) that numerous cultural perspectives around the notion of identity should also be taken into account. In some cultures, identity is more understood through the community ("a person is a person through persons"). As we acknowledge the importance of co-construction in identity development, we should also broaden the investigative scope to include voices from the community and other interlocutors.

In reviewing previous studies on identity development at the intersection of SLA and ICC, challenges, along with new possibilities are identified. Study abroad remains an interesting field to explore students' identity development. Narrative approach including a combination of introspective techniques (e.g., journals, reflections, individual interviews, group interviews) can make a contribution to the understanding of identity development during intercultural experience. Apart from perspective data, observation data (e.g., recordings of conversation and interactions) and product data (e.g., blogs) collected over time can enrich the understanding of both the identity content and developmental process.

Intercultural encounters in digital spaces have revealed new possibilities, challenges, and dynamics. Digital spaces can serve as valuable research sites to investigate identity, culture, and language in an era increasing defined by virtual communication. An online ethnographic design including data triangulation will continue to benefit researchers. The emphasis on measuring identity development at different points is crucial in understanding the developmental process. Longitudinal studies that focus on individual's trajectory across multiple digital platforms (not

limited to one specific site) could shed some new light on a more holistic and natural identity development journey over space and time.

Both study abroad and online intercultural spaces are found to be of great potentials to foster L2 leaners' linguacultural learning and identity development. Surprisingly, few studies have explored learners' identity development through an organic combination of both intercultural contexts. Due to the increasing physical and virtual mobility, in a more naturalist setting, people are traversing and navigating across different cultures on a daily basis through both ways. Research can point to how identity development, physical intercultural communication, and virtual intercultural encounters may be intertwined. Future studies could investigate the dynamic identity development in a combination of study/sojourn/work/travel abroad and online multicultural interactions and communications. Such studies would require a longitudinal design and data collection from multiple sources, platforms, and voices.

Highlighting emergent outcomes and non-linear development, complexity theory, gaining more attention in SLA, might be suited for research in the area of identity development. The field of ICC needs to broaden its scope and enrich its analytical lens to consider insights from other areas when it comes to identity research. In addition, as we are preparing our students for global citizenship, it can be beneficial to also include a macro dimension in future research to better understand the complexity of identity situated in a global context. For researchers to better engage with complexity theory informed methods, reflecting on researcher positionality in intercultural contexts is crucial. The fact that "the researcher is always already entangled in the phenomenon researched" (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p.16) was foregrounded in complexity-oriented qualitative research. Such realization renders complexity researchers an obligation of being attentive to and acknowledging how they are entangled in the phenomenon studied. This self-reflective process was an imperative exploration of the role of the researcher's subjectivities and power dynamics in the collection and analysis of data to avoid static and dichotomous views of learning, culture, and identity.

Conclusions

Human interactions are extremely complex and dynamic, especially in today's globalized world. The needs to transcend boundaries, the changing contexts in which communication is enacted, and the recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity urge us to better understand our relationships with each other as we share the one planet. Therefore, learning languages and cultures goes further beyond classroom walls, especially in a time when global political tensions seem to rise (e.g., US-China relationship, global pandemic, technology ban, travel ban, etc.). Linguacultural learning has become a journey in which we discover ourselves, others, and the world. Identity, a site through which we explore and negotiate our positions in the world, indeed requires attention from scholars in both ICC and SLA. New possibilities and challenges will continue to motivate us researchers as we strive to unfold the dynamic nature of identity and support students academically as learners and socially as human beings.

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