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Second Language Learning and Identity: Participation, Recognition, and Power Relations

José Oswaldo Villa Camarilloⁱ

Abstract

This article reflects on the relationship between second language learning and learners' identities. Drawing on studies of identity, participation, and power relations, it examines how using another language may expand opportunities for expression and interaction while also exposing learners to new forms of recognition or exclusion. It argues that learning a language does not necessarily produce a separate identity; its effects depend on learners' experiences of participation and the social conditions in which learning takes place. The discussion highlights the need to consider these conditions in language teaching.

Keywords: *second language learning, identity, participation, power relations.*

Aprendizaje de una segunda lengua e identidad: participación, reconocimiento y relaciones de poder

Resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la relación entre el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua y la identidad de quienes la aprenden. A partir de trabajos sobre identidad, participación y relaciones de poder, examina cómo el uso de otra lengua puede ampliar las posibilidades de expresión e interacción y, al mismo tiempo, situar a los aprendientes ante nuevas formas de reconocimiento o exclusión. Se sostiene que aprender una lengua no produce necesariamente una identidad distinta: sus efectos dependen de las experiencias de participación y de las condiciones sociales en que ocurre el aprendizaje. La reflexión plantea la necesidad de considerar estas condiciones en la enseñanza de lenguas.

Palabras clave: *aprendizaje de segundas lenguas, identidad, participación, relaciones de poder.*

Introduction

Language learning takes place within social relationships. As people use a language, they encounter ways of communicating, shared practices, and expectations about who can participate in different settings. Learning another language may therefore create opportunities to interact with new groups, but those opportunities depend on the social contexts in which learners use it. This connection between language and participation provides a starting point for examining identity.

Using another language, however, does not always give learners equal opportunities to take part in social interactions. They may be able to communicate in a new setting yet find that others question their competence, limit their participation, or assign them a position they do not accept. Such experiences raise a question for this article: how do opportunities to participate and be recognized relate to learners' sense of identity?

To examine these experiences, this article draws on Norton's (2000, p. 5) understanding of identity as a person's relationship to the world, developed across time and space and connected to their sense of future possibilities. This definition allows us to consider how learners see themselves, how others position them, and which forms of participation become available to them. It also provides a way to discuss language learning without treating identity as a fixed set of characteristics or if all speakers of a language share the same culture.

Studies of language learners offer different ways to examine this relationship. Kanno (2003) explores the experiences of Japanese students returning home after studying abroad, while Miller (1999) examines language and social identity among migrant students in Australian schools. Although their settings differ, both studies draw attention to learners' experiences as they move between social environments.

This article examines how second language learning relates to identity through studies of learners in different social settings. It argues that learning another language does not automatically produce a separate identity or the same kind of change for every learner. The discussion first considers identity and belonging, then examines how participation and relations of power may shape learners' experiences, and finally reflects on the implications for language teaching.

Research Synthesis

Kanno (2003) follows four Japanese students who spent their adolescent years in North America before returning to Japan for university. Their accounts show how they negotiated their bilingual and bicultural identities across these settings. Miller (1999), in turn, examines how migrant students in Queensland high schools used spoken English to participate in school life and represent themselves. Her study draws attention to how other people heard these students and to the school practices that shaped their opportunities to participate. Read together, the studies suggest that learners' identities are shaped through their interactions in particular social settings.

The studies by Kanno and Miller raise a further question: why are some learners heard and recognized more readily than others? Drawing on Bourdieu, Norton (1997) explains that the value given to speech is tied to the social position of the speaker. Norton (2013) also points out that gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation may affect how learners are positioned in classrooms and communities, sometimes limiting their opportunities to participate. These ideas help explain why speaking another language does not, by itself, ensure that a learner will be heard or accepted in a new setting.

Norton and Toohey (2011) describe identity as “multiple, changing, and a site of struggle” (p. 414). As learners enter different social settings, they may encounter new relationships and possibilities for participation. These experiences can bring different aspects of their identities into focus, although they do not necessarily change how every learner sees themselves.

Identity and Belonging Across Social Contexts

Norton and Toohey (2011) note that much language learning research in the 1970s and 1980s treated learners' personalities, learning styles, and motivations as relatively fixed individual characteristics. Later research has paid closer attention to the social and historical circumstances in which learners use a language. This shift matters because it directs attention beyond what a learner knows or wants to learn: it also asks which opportunities to speak and participate are available to them in a particular setting.

Learners' relationships with communities are not limited to the groups in which they currently participate. Norton and Toohey (2011) distinguish between communities' people encounter in everyday life and those with which they imagine a future connection. For someone learning another language, that imagined connection may influence where they hope to study, work, or build relationships. Considering both present and hoped-for forms of belonging helps explain why learning a language can matter to a person even before they have opportunities to use it in those settings.

Belonging involves more than being a member of a group. West (1992) connects identity with desires for recognition, affiliation, and security. From this perspective, a person may participate in a community yet still struggle to feel that their presence and contributions are valued. This distinction matters for language learners: having access to a group does not necessarily mean that their contributions will be recognized or valued.

Learners may also maintain ties to several communities at once. Kanno's (2003) account of Japanese returnees illustrates how living across linguistic and cultural settings can involve negotiating these connections over time. Learning another language may open possibilities for new relationships without requiring learners to leave existing ones behind. The question is how they experience belonging and recognition across those settings, rather than whether each language gives them a separate identity.

Language Use and Opportunities for Participation

Learning another language may give learners access to conversations and activities in which they could not previously take part. Access, however, depends on more than understanding the words being used. Norton and Toohey (2011) argue that the social positions available to learners can expand or limit their opportunities to participate. For example, a student may understand a discussion in the classroom but still find it difficult to contribute if others dismiss their accent or do not invite them to speak. What matters for identity is not simply exposure to another language, but the learner's experience of taking part and being recognized in those interactions.

The distinction between access to a language and opportunities to participate also helps me reflect on accounts shared by students in the *Licenciatura en Docencia del Inglés como*

Lengua Extranjera at the Universidad de Guadalajara. Some students who took part in exchange programs described becoming more aware of different ways of living and interacting during their time abroad. Their accounts suggest that using another language in everyday situations can prompt learners to reconsider some of their assumptions. They do not, however, show that every student who studies abroad undergoes the same change in identity.

Theories about language and identity

West (1992) also connects questions of identity with the distribution of material resources. This brings another dimension to the discussion of language learning: opportunities to enter settings, practice a language, and be heard may depend on the resources available to learners. Bourdieu's account of the social value of speech, discussed by Norton (2000), helps us examine what happens when learners do have an opportunity to speak.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Norton (2000) argues that communication depends partly on whether speakers and listeners recognize one another as legitimate participants. A learner may struggle to express a thought because they are still developing their vocabulary. They may also hesitate to speak, or find that others disregard what they say, because of how they are positioned in a particular setting. These possibilities call for attention to both language proficiency and the social relationships in which language is used.

Weedon (1997) brings language, individual experience, and social power together in her account of subjectivity. This perspective helps us consider how learners understand their own experiences while also being affected by the ways others position them. Their sense of who they are is therefore connected both to what they can say and to the social meanings attached to their words.

More specifically, Weedon (1997) treats language as a space in which social meanings can be established and contested, including meanings through which people understand themselves. In a language learning setting, learners may encounter new ways of describing themselves, but they may also find that others assign them positions they do not accept. This tension connects learners' personal experiences with the relations of power discussed throughout this section.

As Norton (2013) explains when discussing Cummins, both dominant and subordinate groups can exercise power, although dominant groups have a greater sphere of influence (p. 49). This difference matters when learners try to use another language: the positions available to them in a particular setting can affect whether others invite them to speak and take their contributions seriously.

Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Language Learning

Ethnicity, gender, and class can shape the opportunities people have to use a language and be recognized by others. Drawing on Heller's work, Norton (2013) discusses how participation in social networks can be regulated through language. Knowing a language may help a learner enter a conversation, but it does not necessarily grant access to every group or activity. The relationships within a setting also matter people may be welcomed, ignored, or excluded in ways connected to how others perceive them.

This perspective invites language teachers to look more closely at participation. When a learner speaks little, the question is not only whether they know enough vocabulary or grammar. It is also whether they have been given a place in the interaction and whether others treat their contribution as valuable. Ethnicity, gender, and class should therefore be considered as part of learners' social experiences, rather than used to predict how any individual student will behave.

Social class also involves more than the resources a person owns. Drawing on Connell and colleagues, Norton (2000) considers how people use resources within social relationships and how relations of power are reproduced in everyday encounters. In language learning, this perspective directs attention to the time, support, and opportunities learners have to practice a language, as well as to how they are treated when they use it. These conditions may differ among learners without determining any one person's identity.

Implications for Language Teaching

Language teachers can create opportunities for learners to use another language in situations that matter to them. Learning an expression or understanding a cultural reference may help a student take part in a conversation, but these experiences do not affect every learner in the same way. Teachers can therefore ask whose experiences appear in classroom materials and who has opportunities to speak. Such questions connect language teaching with the participation and recognition discussed in this article.

McKay and Wong's (1996) study of four Chinese immigrant adolescents shows why teachers need to look beyond language skills alone. The students' engagement with English was connected to the different ways they were positioned at school and to the identities they sought to negotiate. Their experiences suggest that a learner's willingness to speak, read, or write cannot always be explained by proficiency or motivation considered in isolation.

In the classroom, teachers can respond by offering different ways for students to contribute and by paying attention to how those contributions are received. A student who remains quiet during a discussion, for example, may need more time to formulate an answer, but may also be unsure whether classmates will take that answer seriously. Giving students time to prepare, inviting them to draw on their experiences, and examining whose voices receive attention can make participation more accessible. These practices do not guarantee a change in identity; they address some of the conditions under which learners can use the language and be recognized by others.

Conclusion

Learning another language can open possibilities for communication, participation, and belonging. The studies discussed in this article show, however, that these possibilities develop social settings. Kanno's returnees negotiated their connections across countries, while Miller's migrant students encountered opportunities and constraints in their schools. Their experiences help explain why learning a language does not produce the same change in identity for every person.

Recognition is central to this relationship. Learners may gain the words they need to express an idea and still find that others do not listen to them or accept them as participants.

The perspectives discussed by West, Norton, and Weedon draw attention to the resources, relationships, and forms of power involved in such encounters. Identity can become meaningful to language learning through these experiences, including the ways learners understand themselves and the ways others position them.

For language teachers, this reflection suggests looking beyond whether students can complete a linguistic task. It also matters whose experiences are represented, who has room to speak, and how classmates and teachers respond. Creating more opportunities for participation cannot ensure that students' identities will change, but it can give them more ways to use the language, express what matters to them, and take part in the communities they encounter or hope to join.

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¹ Licenciado en Docencia del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera por la Universidad de Guadalajara, de la que egresó en 2022. Actualmente trabaja en el área de Finanzas y Operaciones de IBM. Tiene interés en apoyar la formación de nuevas generaciones y en continuar su desarrollo académico y profesional mediante cursos y certificaciones. Correo electrónico: jose.villa7366@alumnos.udg.mx