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Introduction to the Theme Section: Doing the Identity Work in ESL Learning and Teaching

Since the so-called “social turn” in language education, issues of identity and language learning have been at the forefront of research in related disciplines, including the field of second language acquisition (SLA). While earlier theories of SLA perceived of learning a second language as an individual achievement and a cognitive event taking place inside the learner’s head, contemporary theories have placed greater focus on historical, social, and cultural contexts of learning. Within the larger frame of this perspective, privilege is given to meaning and meaning-making over mechanical skills and the methodology of “skills and drills” (Lankshear, 1997). The study of sociocultural contexts of language learning takes into account how learners negotiate and sometimes resist the diverse positions that the social, cultural, political, and institutional contexts offer them. Learning English as a second language in the US, for instance, implicates involvement in power relations that affect learner incentives to study or practice the language and in so doing, highlights aspects of learner identity such as race/ethnicity, culture, gender, and economic class.

Thus, as a negotiating act across various sociocultural and institutional domains and engaging with experiences belonging to different time scales, language learning offers a rich context for the study of identity formation in learners who at times participate in competing discourses. Moreover, within the sociocultural approach, such identity themes are seen to be relevant not only to language learners, but to language teachers and teacher educators, whose focus on personalities, learning styles, and motivations of individual learners can be supplanted by considerations of learner positioning vis-à-vis the unequal power dynamics of US society and their identity development in relation to these dynamics.

Given this background, articles in the theme section report on empirical studies on topics related to language education and issues

of identity surrounding it. Vafai's study starts by reflecting on the practice of ESL instruction within adult education programs as the legacy of the early 20th-century Americanization movement keen on assimilating immigrants to the social and economic roles of the time. The article continues with the current trends in ESL curriculum development for the adult immigrant student population and expands on the students' uptake of a new curricular model focused on the task of career readiness and transitioning to work. Within this context the article discusses the concept of "multiple identities" and various modes of belonging that relate to the task of English language learning. The study ultimately reveals a theme of resistance and highlights learners' sense of agency even as they move within the perimeters of an overarching system that imposes limitations.

The themes of learner identity and resistance are also reflected in Brad Washington's article involving a Cambodian refugee community of elders who make the natural and most direct link with English language development in terms of oral literacy and speech patterns reflective of their environment. For this group of learners, acquiring English as an additional language is linked to the relevance of language, race, and culture in the relationships within their neighborhood in Oakland, California. Washington also acknowledges his own place as a learner, participant in a conversation class, African American male, and a university professor who is challenged by an internal conflict stemming from a dual investment and detachment vis-à-vis his home city of Oakland, where ethnic and racial tensions exist among the communities of color.

This study is followed by Karen Gourd's account of tensions between open discussions and inclusive educational opportunities for English language learners in a US high school class. Drawing on Freire and Macedo (1995), Gourd argues for a need to reconceptualize teachers' roles in order to provide equitable educational opportunities. She questions the strategy of giving students the choice to speak or be silent, claiming that it hinders their chances for developing English and subject-area content skills and knowledge. According to her, questions that acknowledge the complexity of status, power, authority, language, and identity need to be asked daily such that we can value and support the language and content knowledge of all students.

Next, Yvette Lapyese continues to build on the themes of power, language, and identity but through the insights of Latina/o second-generation middle-class children enrolled in a dual immersion (DI) education program. Within this bilingual context and the special positionality it offers, Lapyese provides further evidence of the fluid and multifaceted nature of the identity-construction process that goes

beyond the traditional binaries and challenges mainstream conceptions of social “norms.” She ends on the hopeful note that once given the critical space to interrogate the relations of oppression, there exist spaces and opportunities to tackle the notions of privilege and position.

Concluding this theme section is Sara Garcia and Christina Favela Garcia’s report on a heritage language study using a community-based pedagogy within a high school context. The study involves a professional-development team that consists of a university “coach” and a classroom teacher who attended a DI education program similar to the program in Lapayese’s study. In a sense, readers can track the identity evolution of a Spanish/English bilingual student in a DI school into a Spanish-as-heritage language teacher within a high school campus where many of the students tackle academic and life challenges. Manifestations of cultural and ethnic identities belonging both to the teacher and students in this article are a final reminder that language is best understood with reference to its social meaning. After all, it is this conception of language that defines it as “discourse.”

Author

Maliheh Mansuripur Vafai, PhD, is a recent graduate of the Social and Cultural Studies in Education Program at the University of California, Berkeley. Her interests include teacher education, achievement and reform issues, immigrant education, and school-to-work policies.

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