

Social Identity, Power Relations, and Target Language Community: a Pathway to Second Language Acquisition

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My children when they came here they didn't know that they were Jewish... my boy asked me "I...I'm Jewish?" or in the synagogue when they were taken my little boy asked the Rabbi at the end.... He put up his hand "Are you Jewish?"... the Rabbi!... and then I asked "Why did you ask the Rabbi that question?" He said "He couldn't speak Hebrew so I wasn't sure if he was Jewish or not... he spoke in English so how can I know?"....(Mc. Namara, 1987a, pp.220-221)

Abstract

If there is pessimism among second language acquisition (SLA) theorists on giving a theoretical and empirical account of the influence of social context upon the SLA process, this paper tries to show the link and create the bridge between the two. Two case studies are presented to give a clear picture of the second language learners' struggle to gain access to power and negotiate their status and right in society through the language. The right means the right to speak, to get a better job and to be treated equally.

Keywords: social identity, power relation, target language community

Introduction

Learning a second language is never simple. There exists not only the task of mastering the grammatical system of the language but also of how to utilize the system in real life situations. The work of linguists is complex since they seek to explain how the process is working. It is the internal learning mechanisms they are dealing with, things 'unobservable' and uncertain inside our head. This paper aims to elaborate the other side of the language learning process, the 'observable' part, namely the sociocultural context, and create a link from it to the 'unobservable'. Recent surveys show that there is a promising link between the two. Gardner (1998) mentioned that the acquisition of a second language is a true social psychological phenomenon in that it is concerned with the development of communication skills between an individual and members of another cultural community. Structuralists, like Bakhtin (in: Norton & Toohey, 2002) are even stronger in their claim that the notion of an individual speaker is fiction; language needs to be investigated not as a set of idealized forms independent of their speakers or their speaking

community but rather as situated utterances in which speakers, in dialogue with others, struggle to create meanings. In other words, interaction plays an essential role in second language acquisition (SLA).

It is plausible that the learning process involves internal mechanisms, but input and interaction play an equally important role in the outcome. Indeed, for some researchers, interaction itself constitutes the learning process, which is quintessentially social rather than individual in nature. Moreover, the second language ethnographers believe that learning is a collaborative affair, and that language knowledge is socially constructed through interaction (Mitchell & Myles, 2004: 255). Lantolf and his colleagues, quoted by Collentine and Freed (2004), contend that a comprehensive theory of SLA should incorporate principles derived from sociocultural theory.

Nevertheless the focus of this paper is not input or interaction, but where both elements take place, the social context. To be more specific, this paper aims to describe and rationalize how social identity, power relations, and the target language community contribute to second language acquisition (SLA). There are four notions to be discussed: (1) social identity, (2) power relations, (3) the target language community, and (4) contribution of the three to SLA.

The theory of identity was firstly developed by Tajfel (1974). Tajfel is a social psychologist, who believes that identity is derived from group membership. As McNamara (1997) notes, it was Giles and Johnson who further developed ethno linguistic identity theory, focusing on language as a salient marker of group membership and social identity. Other interactional sociolinguists, such as Gumperz and Heller (Hansen & Liu, 1997: 567-568) believe that "social identity and ethnicity are in large part established and maintained through language"

One may assume, as Noam Chomsky does, that questions of identity are not central to theories of language (Norton, 1997). However, current surveys in the area of sociocultural theory show more evidence that sociocultural ideas are central to the understanding of SLA. This idea is in line with Norton-Peirce (1995), who conceptualizes second language learning as a relational activity that occurs between specific speakers situated in a specific sociocultural context; therefore learners and their learning are socially constructed. She criticizes SLA theory as it has not developed a comprehensive theory of social identity which integrates the language learner and the social context in which the learning takes place. Furthermore, she said, "SLA theorists have not questioned how relations of power in the social world affect social interaction between second language learners and target language speakers". McNamara (1997) supports Peirce and claims SLA theories for the failure of SLA theorists to develop "a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context" (p.565). Aitkinson (in: Collentine & Freed, 2004) suggests a sociocognitive perspective on SLA. For him, learning is a part of everyday life, and intertwined with experiences, cultural knowledge, emotions, and self-identity.

With regard to social identity, Norton (1997) refers to it as how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future. In brief, social identity as discussed in this paper is

related to an individual's identity created from the language s/he uses within a social group. Language is a marker of social identity and a medium to gain self-confidence and power in the society. The emphasis in this paper will be on the process of gaining social identity through the second language learning process.

The second component is tightly related to social identity: power relations. Power, according to the Hobbesian approach, is intrinsic to social life. The pursuit of a good life, constrained by social interdependence, will inevitably lead to the use of power and counter power (Ng & Reid, 2001). It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different point in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak (Norton-Peirce, 1995). Since this paper deals with second language learning, power here means power relations emerging in the interaction between language learners and target language speakers. It includes the right to speak, the right to be equal with other members of society.

Target language refers to the language being learned by the second language learners. Community refers to a group of people whose language is learned, or a group of native speakers. Thus target language community is a group of people whose language is being learned by language learners as their second language. Both the proposed social identity and power relations are located within this target language community. This is where the learning process takes place, and the domain where the learners have to fit in.

We are now ready to address the central questions of this paper: How can the three socio-cultural terms relate to SLA? And what is the contribution of the three components to SLA?

The Second Language Learning Process Seen from a Sociocultural Perspective

Many socioculturalists believe that learning is first social, then individual; first inter-mental, then intra-mental. Learners are seen as active constructors of their own learning environment, which they shape through their choice of goals and operations (Mitchell & Myles, 2004: 221).

In relation to second language learning, the discussion will deal with the statement that learning is the result of interaction between speakers in the community. Krashen's (1985) *Input Hypothesis* conceptualizes the importance of input and interaction:

Humans acquire language in only one way – by understanding messages, or by receiving 'comprehensible input'... We move from i , our current level, to $i + 1$, the next level along the natural order, by understanding input containing $i + 1$ (Krashen, 1985: 2).

Input is the language data (text or utterances) to which the learners are exposed. It is an important component in language learning. Krashen points out that comprehensible input is the necessary and sufficient element for SLA to take place. *Intake* is the part of input, which has actually been processed by

the learner and turned into a systematic representation of the knowledge of some kind, or an *interlanguage*.

According to Long's *Interaction Hypothesis*, in the process of learning, there exist collaborative efforts such as repetition, confirmation checks, comprehension checks or clarification requests. These efforts are very useful for language learners to build communication with native speakers. As they struggle to maximize comprehension, and negotiate their way through trouble spots, the native speaker – non-native speaker partnerships are incidentally fine-tuning the second language input so as to make it more relevant to the current state of learner development (in: Mitchell & Myles, 2004: 167). This process is called a *negotiation of meaning*. In this process, especially in its initial step, the learners try to speak the second language and express it as naturally as can be. In conversational situations, sometimes the learners *code switch*, or use their native language and second language interchangeably or even gesture to cover their incompetence in the target language.

Interaction allows the learners to gain comprehensible input in real life experience because in real life interaction the learners not only practice what they have learned, but also learn to use conversational tactics. When learners practice the language learned in a real life interaction is called *output*. However, the output depends on stimuli, the more the stimuli, the more frequent the learners practice the second language. Stimuli can be from the interaction between speakers in the environment, the best one being the target language community, where the learners are forced to practice the target language all the time.

Output also relies on the learners' attitude toward the target language. If they have a positive attitude toward the target language, they are motivated to learn it. On the other hand, a negative attitude will discourage learners' attempt to learn a language. Therefore motivation plays an important role in language learning. Gardner and Lambert (1972) introduced the notions of *instrumental* and *integrative* motivation. Instrumental motivation refers to the desire that language learners have to learn a second language for utilitarian purposes, such as employment, whereas integrative motivation references the desire to learn a language to integrate successfully in the target language community (in: Norton-Peirce, 1995). Norton, on the other hand, rejects this conception and offers her own conception of motivation. Based on her opinion, such conceptions do not capture the complex relationship between relations of power, identity, and language learning that she has investigated. In her view, the conception of investment rather than motivation more accurately signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of the women studied to the target language and to their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. It is a property of the language learner, a fixed personality trait (Norton-Peirce, 1995: 9).

Figure 1 below describes the necessary elements for second language learning.

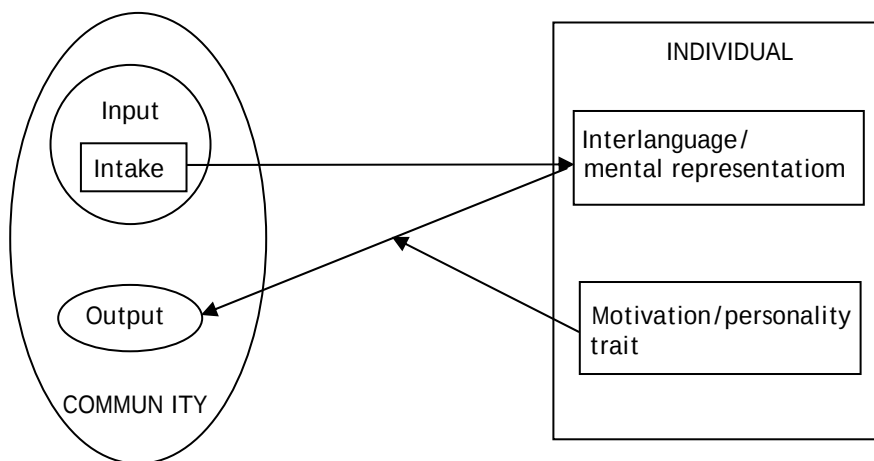


Figure 1: Elements of SLA

Empirical Studies of Second Language Learning as Situated Social Practice

1. Immigrant women in Canada

Norton-Peirce studied immigrant women in Canada in 1991 (Norton-Peirce, 1995). Her study involved five women from different countries; Mai from Vietnam, Eva and Katarina from Poland, Martina from Czechoslovakia, and Felicia from Peru. Her 12 months-longitudinal study (January to December 1991) focused on the natural language learning experiences of the women in their homes, workplaces, and communities. During the course of the study, they met on a regular basis to share the entries the participants had made in their diaries and to discuss their insights and concerns. She administered personal and group interviews and undertook home visits before as well as after the study.

All participants were at the lowest level of English proficiency but were highly motivated to learn it. They experienced being underestimated or inferior at the workplace. For example Martina, who worked in a restaurant where at first she could not approach her colleagues and bosses or engage them in conversation:

I feel uncomfortable using English in the group of people whose English language is their mother tongue because they speak fluently without any problems and I feel inferior (Peirce, 1995:13).

Such feelings encouraged the participants to attain better English. They all took ESL courses; they all wished to have more social contact with Anglophone Canadians; and they all wanted to get a better job. Eva, for example, paid attention to what utterances her co-workers used in

conversation with others and especially with customers. She tried to imitate them and developed her own opportunity to practice the utterances to customers. As time went by, they were better at English, started to get involved in conversational situations and became more confident and open to social life.

As an immigrant, a mother, a language learner, a worker, a wife, Martina faced a more complicated situation, and never felt comfortable speaking. She frequently referred to herself as stupid and inferior because she could not speak English fluently. Martina was challenged by her bad experience with younger co-workers in the restaurant where she worked.

In restaurant was working a lot of children, but the children always thought that I am – I don't know – maybe some broom or something. They always said "Go and clean the living room." And I was washing the dishes and they didn't do nothing. They talked to each other and they thought that I had to do everything. And said "No." The girls is only 12 years old. She is younger than my son. I said "No, you are doing nothing. You can go and clean the tables or something" (Norton-Peirce, 1995: 15).

However, she refused to give up, since as a mother and primary caregiver she had to deal with the public world. She herself consciously widened her opportunity to be engaged with Canadians. She gained her right to speak and to become part of the community.

2. South-Asian Immigrants in Britain

A study done by Jupp et al. (1982) showed that South Asian immigrants in Britain, with unskilled manual work experience and poor communication skills were less well served by the employment services than native people. In British society, immigrants formed the lowest layer in society. Once an immigrant worker entered the society, the negative cycle of social class and ethnicity began to operate. Natives are biased by their negative assumption that all immigrants have a low English proficiency.

The situation was even worse if immigrants failed to build good relationships with the local workers; failed to acquire English and/or failed to integrate with the local community. A South Asian worker illustrated the working conditions she experienced in the workplace:

We never mixed up English ladies and Asian ladies. We didn't bother to each other ... we are going in the factory, we are working, we're getting our money and come back. Our supervisor, she don't want to talk to us. She prefer English lady to us- we thought she don't like us... we are not like friends with her. We respect her like in our country we respect our boss and we have to listen them... if they talk to us we are happy, if they don't bother we don't bother... if we want anything from G [the supervisor] we didn't say, because we are frightened that if we say she will refuse... we thought G, she upset very quick – we feel it – we never look on her face (Jupp et al., 1982: 241).

There were two kinds of differences arising in the gap between the supervisor and the subordinates. The first is the different position between the boss and the workers. The second is the different ethnic background of the local boss and the immigrant workers. Because of these two differences, both the workers and the supervisor were reluctant to create a good environment for communication. The conclusion to this problem is easy to predict: there would not be upward movement from workers to a higher position either in society or in the workplace.

Jupp and colleagues initiated a training process in order to break the negative cycle within which the South Asian workers were caught. This required creating a social context in which both sides could interpret and evaluate an interaction not just on the basis of their own language and social conventions, which may be markedly different. It aimed to help the trainees to understand the hidden process whereby language differences feed into negative categorizations of groups.

In order to reproduce this hidden process, the trainees had real interactive material and became both informants and interpreters. Trainees examined interethnic communication for differences in goal and style and for evidence of how these differences can lead to awkward moments, misinterpretation and real communication breakdown. Through undertaking this analysis, people can be helped to recognize the fact that the personal perceptions present in interactions are the result of an interplay of received cultural knowledge, of observation, and of inference from the linguistic data in actual interaction (Jupp, 1982: 247-248).

Social Identity, Power Relations, and Target Language Community

In this section, I will discuss the two studies presented above, from a socio-cultural perspective. I am intrigued by the similarities between them. Most obviously, both tell us about the experience of immigrants struggling for their right to get equal treatment from others, both in the working place and in social life.

The unequal treatment they experienced came especially from the work place. In the beginning, Eva, Martina, and South Asian immigrants were feeling inferior because of two reasons: first, they were treated differently, in a negative sense, because they were immigrants, or 'guest' workers; second, they were unable to negotiate their social identity because they could not build good communication with the local workers or bosses who seemed to create the gap intentionally.

Eva and other immigrants in Canada and Britain were conscious of the problem they encountered. People looked at them differently because they were indeed different from the locals; they had a different ethnic background, different physical appearance, and a different language. These created their social identity as ethnic-minority-group workers who were isolated and had less power in the community. None of the differences can be modified to enable them to integrate with the Anglophone Canadians, except for the language.

Thus, the struggle is firstly undertaken through the language. Subjects of the studies were highly motivated to learn English. Eva and other immigrants in Canada joined an ESL course and practiced their English actively. The South Asian immigrants in Britain were trained not only in English, but also in communication skills in order to interact with the locals and break the negative cycle they were embedded in. More complex training was given to Asian immigrants since they were facing a more complex situation.

It highly motivated learners have a willingness to get out off the situation they are trapped in, which includes the feeling of being isolated, of inferiority and low self-confidence, and this encourages them to acquire better English. Yet, classroom learning is not enough to accommodate their need for English, because it takes place indoors and in closed interaction. However, as soon as they interact with other people in the community, not only is learning taking place, but also socialization. Language socialization takes over the role when they are outside and practice the target language in real social interactions within the community (Gumperz, 1982). Through language they can integrate with the Anglophone Canadian community, and build good communication with them. This enables the immigrants to share the accepted conventions and through shared communicative conventions, they begin to treat each other as part of their own social group. When the immigrants become part of the group, they are able to improve their identity.

The community where immigrants live indirectly supports the process of learning, because as speakers of the target language, the community members have really become a medium and a place in which to have a real learning process, as suggested by the socioculturalists.

Communication functions as a tool for renegotiating the immigrants' position in society and providing an access to power relations within the target language community. Gaining power in the society means receiving an equitable division of resources in the society, having the right to speak and the right not to be discriminated against in any kind of situation. Their identity is no longer as immigrants belonging to a different group of the community, but as part of the community itself.

The re-creation of identity is built on the basis of English as the language used by the dominant majority within the community. Domination, oppression, and hegemony support them in initiating the creation of an identity, and eliminate the gap between the two groups. Language may be a bridge to link the gap and through language the immigrants' own power can emerge.

The two studies above prove that language, the individual, and society are inseparable components for creating a social identity. It is through language that an individual can build her/his identity in society.

The Contribution of Social Identity, Power Relations, and Target Language Community to SLA

In this section, I focus my discussion on the three components; social identity, power relations and target language community and their

contribution to SLA. Norton (1997) believes that there is a strong relationship between the three components above and SLA, this cannot be separated from her assumptions that identity relates to desire – the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and desire for security and safety.

Obviously, the desire of the learners in Norton-Peirce's Study to acquire English as a second language in this context is definitely high, because there is encouragement from society. The willingness to recreate an identity and to build up equal power with other people cannot be separated from the unequal distribution of resources in the society. People who have access to a wide range of resources in a society will have access to power and privilege, which will in turn influence how they understand their relationship to the world and their possibilities for the future (West, 1992). Possibilities for the future including the possibility of having the right to speak, the right to get a better job, and the right to a better position in society.

The empirical study done by Norton-Peirce clearly shows how the women immigrants, Eva, Martina, Mai, Katarina and Felicia take the necessary action to improve their social identity and social relations with the local community as they believe it will be an investment in the attainment of a better life in the future. The first action taken is learning English, the second is interacting actively with the Anglophone Canadians, and the third is maintaining good communication with them. By doing these actions they can finally engage with the local people and gradually share equal material resources and power in the society.

Another study done by Jupp (1982) complements Norton's because it focuses on the communicative power between South Asian immigrants and British people. To gain communicative power, learners need to understand the hidden process occurring in the interethnic communication. Understanding the hidden process includes the understanding of the social context in which the conversation takes place in order to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation. This is very important since effective communication relies on a two-way interaction, where speaker and listener understand each other.

There are similarities between the two studies concerning the social context. Both Norton-Peirce and Jupp's studies take place in a society where the immigrants are a minority and discriminated against due to their inability to speak English fluently. This forms a strong motivation to acquire better English as the only means of communication in the community. However, the motivation indicated by the data is a much more complex matter than the concept of motivation as currently taken up in SLA theories. The motivation proposed is mediated by an understanding of learners' investments in the target language – investments that are closely connected to the ongoing production of a language learner's social identity (Norton-Peirce, 1997).

A language works as a marker of a person's social identity when it comes into being. Day-to-day interaction between immigrants and the people in the target language community may lead to understanding between them. When the language is no longer a problem, communication will be effective and people can talk their way through to opportunities and to more social power. This may create access to power and enable immigrants to negotiate their status and rights in the society. Rights mean the right to speak, to get a

better job and to be treated equally. The following scheme (figure 2) will describe this process:

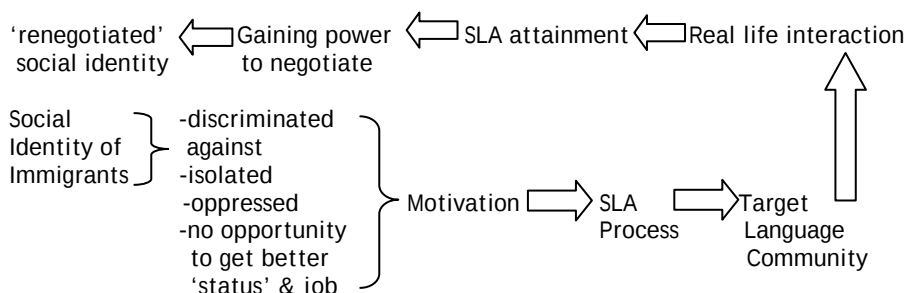


Figure 2. the process of negotiating social identity

The scheme above clearly describes the process of negotiating social identity through second language acquisition. Immigrants get through the process until they are finally able to negotiate their social identity. The process starts from the unfairness they experience as new comers to the community. Being unable to speak English brings them to the lowest class of society. The feelings of being inferior and oppressed, of being isolated and discriminated against increase their motivation to learn English so as to obtain a better status in the community. If they do not struggle to learn the language, they will not be able to struggle for their life.

In this context, language learning is inspired by the environment as the result of interaction between the speakers. The interaction plays important role in this learning stage. The input is gained from both classroom and interaction in the target language community, and is then turned into intake. At this point, linguistic data is processed in working memory and in the interlanguage system. As the input is very rich and more than sufficient, learners are able to intake the comprehensible input and process it into the complete linguistic forms and develop it into a more practical system. Conversational interaction has the reputation of being the basis for the development of syntax rather than being only a forum for practice of grammatical structures in the classroom (Gass, 2001). It provides a bridge between the rigid pattern syntax and practical use of the language.

The result of language learning can be seen in the output through practice of the language learned in a real life situation or in *communicative contexts* (Batstone, 2002). Communicative contexts require that learners use the L2 as a tool of sorts for exchanging information and participating in important social and interpersonal functions. This context encourages the learners to keep practicing the target language. Frequent and routine use of the target language increases learners' fluency. Learners start to use simple forms of language and sometimes come to a negotiation point, when they are unable to express an utterance in target language and make use of repetition and gestures. This is another advantage of learning a second language in its target community. When learners are at the point of negotiation of meaning, the native speakers will help them to find the right utterance and receive the

feedback from them. Hence learners can reflect critically on their engagement with target language speakers. They can investigate under which conditions a certain utterance is used. This point will lead them to awareness and better understanding of the language rules. Learners become aware of explicit knowledge existing in the target language. This ability will enable them to speak effectively and develop their opportunity to strengthen their position in society.

It is English, the target language, which changes immigrants' lives. Wider opportunities and a better future are open to them as they attain the language properly. This proves how language has the power to negotiate social identity in the community and to accommodate greater access to resources as well as to social and economic power.

Concluding Remarks

Although there is pessimism among SLA theorists on giving a theoretical and empirical account of the influence of social context toward the SLA process, this paper tries to show the opposite and tries to present the link in order to create a bridge between the two. The language learning process should be seen in a broader context than the individual internal process, it is more social and interactive. I believe so since the learning itself is a social context; the learners get input as well as intake from the teachers and learning materials, the interlanguage system then allows them to practice what they have learned in a real life interaction or output.

There is a broader connection between second language learning and social orientation. Learning context plays very important role in second language acquisition in which learners and their learning are structurally constructed. From the discussion above we can see how the environment of learners highly motivates them to acquire English otherwise they will fail in reestablishing their existence and identity in the society. Reestablishing their identity becomes so important for them because, first, they are immigrants or new comers which mean the last layer of the social class. Second, they are powerless in gaining material resources including a better job, education, and social network. Third, if they cannot speak English, they will be unable to create their own opportunities to make their lives better both individually and socially. It is through language they gain life, and through learning they gain the opportunity to live that life.

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