

Language and Cultural Identity: From Theory to ELT Practice

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ABSTRACT

There is a distinct tendency to use the identity perspective while addressing the questions of culture and language teaching in the English language classroom. Commonly, language is considered to be the most noticeable marker of identity and the most powerful force of its development. Thus the presentation explores a complex but vital link between language and cultural identity. It is stressed that key issues of identity theory can be successfully drawn upon for our understanding of language learning, and particularly the fact that identity is a product of interactions. There is, therefore, the need to raise teachers' and students' awareness of cultural discourses which contribute more successfully to identity maintenance or, conversely, to identity change. To provide cultural transmission through education, the emphasis should be on such type of curricula that incorporate not only target language/culture issues along with reference to student's native language and culture but work towards understanding how they are interrelated and what kind of learner's identity they result in. Using classroom examples, the presenter demonstrates how identity building strategies based on reflectivity, dialogue, accommodation, rejection, etc. can equip learners for monitoring translation of their cultural selves in a variety of (inter)cultural contexts.

Keywords: Theory of identity, ELT and learner's identity, identity building

I. Introduction

The complex issues of language and cultural identity come to the fore whenever we start speaking a language. Since nature and the essential content of communication are rapidly changing in today's world, multicultural identities emerging through the globalized contexts of intercultural interactions are likely to add to the complexity of these issues. With this in mind, I will look at the current conceptions of identity in search of the insights of what builds identity and transforms it, what cultural and language structures contribute to its maintenance.

There has been a detailed and stimulating discussion of the questions of identity and intercultural communication in special literature. Drawing on the major conceptions of language and identity theory, I will argue that key theoretical ideas might be useful for reappraising current language teaching perspectives and goals in non-English speaking communities. It will be shown that foreign language teaching has a particular role to play in exploring and extending the concept of language and cultural identity and the aim of teaching a language overlaps with the objective of developing learner's language and cultural identity. In other words, we might welcome a teaching approach emphasizing raising awareness of learner's self-concept as a foreign language user.

II. Language and cultural identity: theory and implications for teaching

Theorizing language and cultural identity

For many years, identity or self-understanding has been a focus of attention in quite a few scholarly fields including cultural studies, communication, social theory, psycholinguistics and others (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2003). Using current theoretical perspectives, the paper will discuss in some detail and will attempt to map contemporary thought on language and cultural identity. The following issues of the concept of identity and its link to language and culture will be covered:

- Multiple identities and identity categories: personal, relational and communal (Samovar *et al.*, 2007);
- The complex nature of identity: the “I” vs. “me” (Mead, 1967); the “I”- vs. “we”-identity (individual and group identity);
- Language and cultural identity. Interactive nature of identity and the role of the Other (Kidd, 2002);
- Identity construction and maintenance. The factors significant for identity development;
- Texts and discourses of identity as resources to reflect on one’s identity.

In a nutshell, it is saying that the development of the identity theory offered a lot of understanding of human behavior and particularly communicative behavior. As Samovar *et al.* (2007) rightly pointed out, “identity is an abstract and multifaceted concept that plays a significant role in all communication interactions” (Samovar *et al.*, 2007: 39). The authors go on to say that “Identities do not exist until they are enacted through language” (*ibid.*). Thus language is a means of manifesting identities and—to put it in a simplistic way, we are what we say. Furthermore, Fasold (2007: F51) stressed that people use language “to communicate to other people not only their thoughts, but also their self-concepts and their perceptions of the relationship between them, their audience and the situation”. Language identity, therefore, presupposes a certain degree of understanding why we choose a particular language (or one of its registers) to communicate with a target audience in a certain setting. And since in a communicative event there is always the Other, this language identity serves as a lens to perceive and evaluate the Other(s) (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2003).

Secondly, language contributes to the identity construction (Edwards, 1985; Hall, 2005). By acquiring particular linguistic resources, we position ourselves and are positioned as social agents of speech groups. For example, speech communities are currently more constructed by the mass media language or the language of advertising and the Internet than that of fiction. Obviously, the impact of the Internet language is more extensive on younger generations of language users. Although there are multiple identities, some of them are more relevant than others (Edwards, 1985; Kidd, 2002). Language and cultural identity provide the foundation for all other types of identity (professional, religious, etc). It can be seen straightaway that questions of culture and identity are also particularly topical when communication between cultures takes place (Kramsch, 2003). True, the expression of identity and the linguistic actions we take are determined by the culture we belong to. Thus language, culture and identity are interrelated and closely linked to each other and we cannot ignore the overwhelming influence of them on our communication styles.

Finally and most importantly, language identity is developed as a result of identification with the concept of (a native) language by using it, by speaking it and by sharing with other members of the speech community both verbal and non-verbal codes of communication in a

variety of discourses. Associating themselves with a language, its speakers demonstrate loyalty and emotional attachment to it through special discursive rhetoric. In our use of language we represent a particular identity at the same time that we construct it (Hall, 2005:35). However, the effort we put into shaping our language and cultural identity might need to be more concentrated and require an action (Altieri, 1994), especially in an educational context.

Language and cultural identity: implications for EL teaching

The English language teaching in a global context has to address the language and cultural diversity of various groups of learners of language. It is, therefore, self-evident that questions of language and cultural identity can hardly be avoided in classroom proceedings. True, there is a growing tendency to use the identity perspective while addressing the questions of culture and language learning and teaching. However, despite the fact that over the past years identity has become a buzz word in the EFL classroom and the need to understand identity in language teaching context has been stressed in a number of works (see, for example, Brock & Tulasiewicz, 1985; Norton, 1997; Duff, P. & Uchida, 1997; Barker & Galasiuski, 2001; Hall, 2005; Jenkins, 2007), we still need more and better understanding of how identity influences foreign language learning.

Bonny Norton (1997) was the one to suggest that identity perspective on language learning would help to set new directions for research in applied linguistics. Since then, more researchers and educators have recognized the legitimacy of identity in ELT, especially in view of the globalization of English language teaching (Jenkins, 2007). Yet, I would argue that identity issues in general often pass unrecognized in the common EFL classrooms and we still have a very rudimentary knowledge of the language identity of a language learner in particular.

To begin with, it is important to define a language identity of an EFL learner which, in my view, comprises two essential aspects. First of all, it is based on learners' reflective views of the language they study. It also includes their self-conception as users of this particular language. Being an outcome of an interpretative process, language identity of an EFL learner results in a certain cultural and linguistic concept of the language with which learners begin to identify themselves. Acquired language identity includes an awareness of language as a communicative and linguistic resource for individual language use. It means that the speakers should be conscious and selective of their communicative behaviour and the language repertoires accumulated through their previous linguistic experience.

Looking at language use as acts of identity leads us to viewing a foreign language classroom as a setting where identities are expressed and confirmed or, conversely, challenged and shifted. Language instruction, in this way, might be effective to emphasize students' self-awareness, i.e. how learners see themselves and other people and assist in developing students' language and cultural identities which guide their language processing and production (Rassokha, 2005).

It should be noted from the very beginning that language identity formation can be looked upon as developing through a number of stages. I think it is possible to apply Phinney's three-

stage model as well as make **REFERENCES** to Martin and Nakayama's four-stage model of ethnic identity development (Pinney, 1993; Martin and Nakayama, 2005, cited in Samovar, 2007: 120). Adapting these authors' terminology, I would call the first (initial) stage of language identity development *unexamined language identity*. It is the stage on which language learners are unaware of cultural underpinnings of their uses of language (both L1 and L2). There is no reflection or exploration why they say this or that and, consequently, there is no verbal expression of language identity in students' classroom interactions.

To move to the next stage of *identity search*, students have to learn to use identity building strategies. As "identities are formed in selective repudiation or assimilation of identifications" (Brock & Tulasiewicz, 1985), it is natural that they should use strategies of identity search based on reflectivity, dialogue, accommodation, rejection, etc. Following up the ideas of Martin and Nakayama (2005), it is obvious that this stage should also feature separateness and resistance. Rejection is possible because the attitudes of learners can differ from those expressed in the language and culture they learn.

The third stage, *language identity achievement*, is reached when learners have clear and *working* understanding of their language identity. They have the skills to display it in a confident way, the skills to monitor it, and, what is more important, learners gain confidence in their use of a foreign language as they more and more identify themselves with that language in a variety of contexts. The students of language start playing a significant role in shaping their individual language use. Their language and cultural identity becomes associated with particular sets of linguistic actions, beliefs, attitudes and norms (Hall, 2005:33). Since the act of identification involves either convergence or divergence, the whole process of identity formation results in a system of various attitudes and reflections of their own language and culture and of those of the Other.

There is an assortment of ways to assist learners with moving from one stage to another in an educational context. However, unfortunately, EL textbooks practically do not contain materials focusing on the development of learners self-concepts as speakers of language. The EFL textbooks are still heavily NS English-based (Jenkins, 2007:245). Regarding this, Matsuda (2002) puts it best: "the representation of English in EFL textbooks may be an important source of influence in the construction of students' attitudes and perceptions towards the target language" (Matsuda, 2002: 196, cited in Jenkins, 2007:245). There is, then, a problem of creating materials that could speak directly to learner's sense of identity, particularly their language and cultural identity. Importantly, these materials and activities are not meant to be a single lesson, but to be used as and when the teacher and students feel like they need them.

Just to set the scene with one example, I would like to introduce the concept of *identity texts*, specific texts which most efficiently translate the speaker's language and cultural identity. Activities developed on these texts are particularly useful for practicing identity building strategies based on reflectivity, which can equip learners with skills for monitoring manifestations of their cultural selves in a variety of (inter)cultural contexts. Here's an excerpt from a story *Personal and Singular* written by an English-speaking Korean writer Ha-yun Jung (2004).

In Korean, the first-person singular is an elusive voice. The simple English sentence "I want

an apple” sounds awkward when translated, word for word, into Korean. A Korean person is much more likely to say something that could be translated as “It would be nice to have an apple.” Omitting “I” is never a grammatical defect; on the contrary, the sentence sounds more polished without it. Rarely will you hear a Korean speak—or write—consecutive sentences that start with I-this, I-that. “I” seems content to crawl behind the curtain at the first given moment. And when it comes to possessive forms, “our” is often used in the place of “my.” “My country,” “my people,” “my neighborhood” are all very unusual expressions in Korean, even when one is speaking as an individual. This is all the more evident when referring to family members; even when the speaker is an only child, one will say “our” mother or father, never “my.” I (there’s that “I”!) am a single parent, but when I speak Korean I say “our son.” And in English I am prone to saying things like “So then we had to go fill out a prescription for our kid” to a casual acquaintance I might see while in line at Starbucks. Then I quickly realize, from the slightly confused look on the person’s face, that to the American ear what I said sounds like a slip.

Texts like this negotiating the language identity of a speaker of two languages can be used for classroom discussion of the following key issues:

- Accommodating and separating attitudes accompanying language use;
- The verbal means to express identity (I-we, my-our; I want - it would be nice; Korean-American);
- Implicit and explicit messages of language identity manifestation; and
- Cultural identity.

These issues are meant to stimulate the students’ minds and have them become more aware of the interaction between their mother tongue and their L2, as well as their home culture and target culture. Texts of identity may be used for bringing into the classroom both an international culture and a home culture to generate far more discussion on comparing language and cultural identity of representatives of different cultures. For example, I use the above text with my Russian students whose English features the same usage of pronouns: our country, our university, etc., the linguistic pattern typical of Russian users of English in general.

It is obvious that certain materials and activities can serve as a catalyst to bring out learners’ language and cultural identity. As soon as students gain understandings of the key strategies of identity building and expression, they need to be encouraged to further them, particularly in intercultural situations. The teacher’s role, then, is to offer the learners as much practice as possible in a variety of formats: reflection journals, their peers’ language use observations, interviewing NNSs, projects (Rassokha, 2008), etc. which can help result in an increased language and cultural identity of the students.

III. Conclusion

I would like to conclude this paper by pointing out that the conceptions of ELT are changing and developing due to the processes of globalization of the English language education. It is important that we are able to look at these processes offering different theoretical perspectives and their practical applications. Identity has to be recognized as a new quest in

language teaching and learning which is likely to give more insights into what language learning is like. There has been a lot of mention about the ownership of English. In this light, the language classroom can be seen as an ideal arena for personalizing English and making it less “foreign”, and for creating a setting in which language and cultural identity of the students are developed. In this respect, issues of identity should require our attention and management in the EFL classroom. But there are further important advantages: from the global perspective it is important to raise awareness of our students’ identity so they could identify themselves with a certain type of culture and certain linguistic repertoire, find their own place in the spectrum of cultures, offer something to people from other cultures while manifesting their selves, because we are interesting to each other by our otherness.

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