Diving into the depths of identity construction and motivation of a foreign language learner

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Abstract

Moving away from the bilingual assumptions that have traditionally informed the study of language learners' identity construction, this paper draws on cutting-edge SLA and sociolinguistic theories to explore the close relationship between identity and motivation in foreign language learning contexts. To this end, this paper presents some preliminary observations of a case study in progress involving a language learner who struggles to display his professional identity with the linguistic resources available to him. This, coupled with the social prestige acquired for learning a foreign language, acts as a motivating force for improving his language skills. Finally, adopting an emic perspective, the paper outlines some of the linguistic and socio-pragmatic areas the participant reports as problematic when displaying his professional self.

Keywords: identity; motivation; professional self.

Resumen

Alejándose de las conceptualizaciones bilingüistas que tradicionalmente han informado al estudio de la construcción de la identidad de los estudiantes de idioma, este artículo utiliza teorías de SLA y sociolingüísticas de vanguardia para explorar la estrecha relación entre la identidad y la motivación en estudiantes de lenguas extranjera. Con este fin, este presenta algunas observaciones preliminares de un caso de estudio en progreso, el cual involucra a un estudiante de idiomas que lucha por construir su identidad profesional con limitados recursos lingüísticos. Esto, junto con el prestigio social adquirido por el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera, actúan como fuerzas motivadoras para el mejoramiento de sus habilidades lingüísticas. La adopción de una perspectiva 'emic', el artículo explora algunas de las áreas lingüísticas y socio-pragmáticas que el participante reporta como problemáticas al construir su identidad profesional.

Palabras clave: identidad; motivación; ser profesional.

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TRADITIONALLY, THE THEORETICAL debate surrounding learner motivation has pivoted, almost exclusively, around the intrinsic-extrinsic and instrumental-integrative binaries (Dörnyei, 1994; 1998). Recent developments in social psychology and sociolinguistics, among others, have prompted second language acquisition (SLA) scholars to reconsider existing conceptualizations of motivation to take into account the often neglected social dimensions which influence a learner's motivation to learn a language (Dörnyei, 1994; Norton & Toohey, 2001; see Laoire, 2010). Within this discussion, SLA scholars have 'placed crucial questions of self and identity at the very core' (Laoire, 2010, p. 91; also see Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; McNamara 1997). This identity is constructed, negotiated and reworked in meaningful interactions with relevant others (Blommaert, 2005). In this vein, learning a new language is seen not only 'as a gradual and neutral process of internalizing the rules, structures, and vocabulary of a standard language' (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 312) but also as the appropriation of the learner's own voice in that language. As Norton (1997, p. 410) explains,

> Every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are, in other words, engaged in identity construction and negotiation.

This perspective emphasises the need to consider the identity of the language learner as a motivational factor influencing the learning process (Dörnyei, 1998).

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a case study (in progress) of a language learner who uses English as a tool to display his professional self and his scholarly achievements in academic contexts. As will be argued, the data reflects this learner's perceptions of how he negotiates his professional identity when using English as a foreign language.

In what follows, vital theoretical considerations underlying the notions of identity and motivation underpinning this study are outlined.

Motivation

Motivation has been widely accepted by the SLA community as 'one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second/foreign language (L2) learning' (Dörnyei, 1998, p. 117; 1994). To date, many have attempted to provide comprehensive definitions and theories of motivation (see Dörnyei, 1994 and 1998 for a comprehensive overview of concepts, classifications and theories of motivation). Gardner's conceptualisation of motivation remains central, however; in his view, L2 motivation involves 'the

combination of efforts plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes toward learning the language' (1985, p. 10). Recently, motivational researchers have critiqued traditional views of motivation which described it as a fixed characteristic of the language learner, while they emphasise the role of motivation as a dynamic process, the drive that initiates and maintains the learning process (Dörnyei, 1998; see the socially constructed process of motivation in the Vygotskian sociocultural theory in Ushioda, 2006). Moreover, a learner's motivation or drive to learn the language is determined by, as SLA research supports, a learner's assessment of the profitability of learning the language. In other words, learners evaluate the contributions the language, a linguistic system immersed in social meaningfulness, will make to their cultural capital (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, cited in Norton & Toohey, 2002; also discussed in Park, 2007). And learners invest, for instance, time and energy, in the learning process according to these evaluations. It follows then that if learning any given second language increases a learner's cultural capital, a wide range of symbolic and material resources, including the learner's sense of themselves, will also increase as the language becomes a site for identity construction (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton & Toohey, 2001, 2002; Ushioda, 2006). Motivation can then be seen as a factor that will influence a learner's drive to learn the language in order to develop the competencies needed to display a desired identity.

Identity

SLA researchers interested in exploring the relationship between motivation and identity have drawn on the cognate disciplines of social psychology, anthropology, and sociolinguistics, in order 'to develop a textured understanding of the relationship between the language learner and the sociocultural world' (Norton & Toohey, 2002, p. 115). Advancements in these fields have contributed to the shifting conceptualization of identity from a static mental process, represented in the essentialist views of identity, to a dynamic and dialogically created aspect of the self (Caldas, 2007; Park, 2007). This view rests on the social constructionist principle that a person's identity is a relational phenomenon; identity is socially and jointly constructed by social actors in interaction (Agnihotri, 2007; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006; Park, 2007). This shift has placed the social actor at the centre by emphasising their agency in managing the linguistic tools available to them in order to enact and construct their identity in social contexts (Norton Peirce, 1995). The self-regulated process means social actors accomplish the preferred orientation of the self through the display of certain stances or positionings (see Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006; see 'positionality principle' in Bucholtz & Hall, 2010). Identity then is something people do, not something people are (Widdicombe, 1998).

One way in which advocates of this dynamic view of identity define it is as 'an organized representation of our theories, attitudes, [values, experiences] and beliefs about ourselves' (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 108). In this light, a person's identity is the reflection of their self-conceptualisations and the way they position themselves and others through talk in interaction (Buchlotz & Hall, 2010). For the purposes of this study, this is the working definition that guides the data analysis.

The relationship between a language learner's identity construction and their motivation status has traditionally relied on and built upon the contextual assumptions inherent to bilingual environments (see Block, 2007; De Costa, 2007; Miller, 2007; Morgan & Clarke, 2011; Noels & Giles, 2009; Norton, 2000; Park, 2007; Siegal, 1996; Spotti, 2007) This is possibly due to Gardner's claims that the integrative motivation for learning a language was a better predictor of L2 variables (for example, proficiency). This perspective highlights the learner's loss of their own cultural identity when they join a new language community (Gardner, 1991) and assume the learner needs to create a new L2 identity that is functional in the new L2 community (see Dörnyei, 1998; Ushioda, 2006). In this regard, this paper proposes to investigate the role of motivation and identity in the often neglected context of foreign language learning.

The Case Study

Building on the limitation discussed above, most literature in the field of learner identity and motivation is characterised exclusively by etic considerations, that is to say, the researcher's interpretation of the sociolinguistic event (see Norton, 1997 as an exception to this limitation; also see Markee & Kasper, 2004). Not surprisingly, this has resulted in a poor representation of the learner's voice. By taking up Norton's (1997) suggestion to include the emic voice of the learner, this paper hopes to contribute to the recently growing field of learners' self-perceptions of their identity construction (cf. Haugh, 2008).

Following a situated approach to the study of motivation, this paper reports on a case study in progress of a language learner who uses English as a professional tool to display his professional self and his professional achievements in academic contexts. This paper focuses on the first two of three stages of the data collection process involved in this study. The data presented in this paper is self-reported, and includes a Bilingual Self-Perception Survey (see Caldas, 2007), learner diaries and semi-formal interviews (cf. Matsumoto, 1996). The analysis focuses on the perceptions of a foreign language learner who reflects on his identity as enacted through the use of a foreign language and how this impacts on his motivation to learn the foreign language.

The Participant: Rodrigo

Rodrigo is a 32 year-old PhD student in science at a renowned university in Concepción, Chile. He was born in Chile and his mother tongue is Spanish. He started learning English at the age of twenty-six (26) as he was preparing to apply for a PhD programme in his country. He enrolled in the PhD programme in 2009 and is expected to complete his studies in 2013. For Rodrigo, English is a vital professional tool as he became involved in academic activities in a wide international community of peers with whom he interacted when attending conferences and online seminars of universities around the world. English for him is an intellectual resource used to communicate his professional self and his academic achievements (see Ushioda, 2006). Rodrigo's orientation to learning English then is instrumental, as opposed to integrative (see a rich discussion of the two in Dörnyei, 1994 and Gardner, 1985). By learning the language he hopes to open his work to international audiences with the aim of facilitating his professional advancement and mobility in an international community of peers (see Dörnyei, 1994; Noels, 2001).

Having friends in common, Rodrigo and the researcher met a few times at social gatherings. Almost three years ago, Rodrigo informally approached the researcher to express his concern about not feeling "quite" himself when speaking English, in the hope of insights that would improve this aspect of communication.

Data Collection

This section focuses on the methods of data collection, namely, TOEFL test, Bilingual Self-Perception Survey, learner diaries and semi-structured interviews.

Proficiency Level

Rodrigo completed a computer-based TOEFL (CBT) test, which was graded by an external examiner, with the aim of determining his current proficiency level. He scored 213 (highest total score= 300 points) in the overall test and 4 (scaled score of 0 to 6) in the writing section.

Bilingual Self-Perception Survey

This survey was taken from Caldas (2007), who studied the self-perceptions of his bilingual children, and adapted to meet the context of this study (see Appendix A). It includes 6 open-ended and 2 rating questions whose responses provide valuable evidence of the participant's self-perceptions of his identity. The survey was considered relevant for this study because, in spite of the fact that the participant does not live in a bilingual environment, it focuses on eliciting speakers' perceptions of their identity when using a language that is not their L1. This survey then elicited Rodrigo's reflections

on how he speaks and uses English and how he feels when he speaks English with his colleagues, for example. In a case study such as this one, this survey serves as a basis for understanding why the participant has certain perceptions of his self in relation to his use of a foreign language. The responses are also expected to reflect those comments made by the participant in his journal entries and they were used as a starting point in the drafting of the interview questions (see point 4).

The participant was given the choice to complete the survey in English or Spanish, and, having chosen Spanish, he completed the survey on his own in his own time. The survey was administered at the beginning of the study and will be administered again at the end of the study to see if there were any changes in the participant's self-perceptions of his identity.

Learner Diary

In SLA research, journals have proved particularly useful as a self-reporting device to capture the various dimensions of English language usage and identity (see Caldas, 2007). Considering the purpose of this study, a learner's diary provides rich results as it can yield insights into Rodrigo's perceptions which are 'inaccessible from the researcher's perspective alone' (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 178; also see McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 121-136). In these journal entries Rodrigo was asked to reflect upon his linguistic competence, and his feelings and reactions while engaged in academic activities in which he participates in English. Rodrigo was encouraged to decide whether he wanted to write these entries in English and/or Spanish (cf. Hosenfeld, 2003) and, as in the case of the Bilingual Self-Perception Survey above, he, not surprisingly, chose Spanish as the preferred language to communicate issues of language and identity. So far, Rodrigo has written five entries of his reflections about giving talks at two conferences and participating in online seminars and focused group discussions of universities around the world.

Interviews

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted, one at the beginning of the study and two after each talk at the conferences. Before interviewing the participant, the researcher read the journal entries and used the answers in the Bilingual Self-Perception Survey to draft questions for the interview, using only those concepts that emerged from Rodrigo's reflections in order to avoid restricting his responses or introducing new topics and ideas (see 'prompted interview' in Henderson & Tallman 2006). Employing an introspective method of data collection (see Gass & Mackey, 2000), these entries were also used as prompts to have Rodrigo further reflect on and provide clarifying comments of issues concerned with the relationship between his identity and his motivation for learning the

language. In this regard, Henderson and Tallman (2006) contend that the fresher the event, the more likely participants are to recall their thoughts more accurately. Thus, in order to maximize Rodrigo's recall of his experiences, these interviews were carried out no longer than a week after the academic activity had taken place (see Lazzaro-Salazar, 2009).

Preliminary Findings

This descriptive self-perception study is guided by an inductive approach to the data analysis as, at this point, the discussion of the data revolves around emergent themes from the Bilingual Self-Perception Survey and entries of the learner's diary (Bowen, 2006). In other words, the topics, and their groupings into different categories, arise from the data collected. The researcher's work, then, has been to identify recurrent themes to group for discussion. Subsequent stages of data analysis will also include the data from the interviews.

A close look at the Bilingual Self-Perception Survey and some of his diary entries shows that Rodrigo recognizes the value capital that learning and speaking a foreign language has for him. As Rodrigo puts it:

> Actually, I feel pretty well for speaking two languages fluently. From my point of view most English speakers are monolingual, so being a very fluent speaker of English too makes me feel respected and somehow unique (in a good way). This represents for me an advantage when socializing with English speakers. Where I'm from, being bilingual or speaking other languages is a sign of high social status and opens a number of opportunities that are not available for monolingual people. I also feel fortunate because of being bilingual has opened an entire world of new cultures for me that otherwise would have been impossible to know.

He reflects on the meaningfulness of learning a foreign language as it 'opens a number of opportunities' that increase his chances of upward social mobility, such as that of possibly obtaining better jobs (see Pavlenko, 2002). In this regard, he also highlights the social prestige gained when speaking other languages as 'a sign of high social status' (see Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). In addition, learning English empowers him as he gains knowledge related to 'new cultures', which helps him to understand the social worlds in which he participates. In this way, Rodrigo acknowledges the advantages that speaking English gives him in his two social worlds, the English speaking community and the community with which he interacts daily at work and at home.

When asked how he felt when speaking English with his colleagues in conferences,

for example (see second question of the Bilingual Self-Perception Survey), he said:

> From my point of view, the first conferences were a complete disaster! People were not used to talking to a foreigner with poor listening abilities and I was so nervous that I could not understand anything they said.
> At the beginning I felt uncomfortable. I was anxious about making myself clear and not committing too many pronunciation and grammar mistakes.

He later continued to reflect on this issue in his diary, where he explains that with time and exposure to these events, he feels he has improved both his receptive and productive skills, particularly listening and speaking.

> Later I started feeling better as I can notice my English has improved a lot.

Rodrigo also reports being highly aware of the lack of linguistic repertoire and socio-pragmatic resources (see Holmes, 2005) that he needs to display his chosen professional identity in professional contexts.

> English speakers use a lot of slang and idiomatic expressions related to their local cultures. I'm most of the time unaware of this expressions and that provokes lack of understanding. Speaking as them would make me feel much more part of that community of professionals.

As he has reported in his diary entries, Rodrigo is concerned that he does not know the right 'expressions' to use colloquial English during informal encounters such as the conference dinner. He reported feeling he spoke bookish English and that he unintentionally sounded too formal when, in fact, he wanted to sound more friendly and relaxed. Moreover, Rodrigo has reported he thinks that what is perceived as the speed of his speech delivery is too slow and, thus, he bores people when telling stories. In this regard, he explained that he feels he needs to provide a more detailed, and thus longer, context of the stories he tells in English compared to Spanish. This lies in his concern that his audience may not understand what he means if he does not provide background context. Rodrigo thinks his stories, then, become too long and he senses a feeling of boredom in his audience, which he attributes to his inability to speak in English as fast as he does in Spanish.

Knowing he needs to improve some aspects of language in order to legitimately claim his identity in this context, Rodrigo has actively reflected on other aspects of identity he finds himself unable to draw on. The most salient aspect he has identified is

his limited ability to make the kinds of jokes he would make in his mother tongue. When responding to question 5 of the survey, that is to say, what aspects of his personality he thinks he cannot competently display when speaking in English, Rodrigo explained:

> So far, my sense of humour! I'm very fond of puns in Spanish, and I feel frustrated when I try to recreate the same type of humour in English. Also, I cannot be as informal as I am in some social situations, especially when socializing with colleagues in more informal situations or even in more formal situations like conferences. I would like to sound more relaxed and more fluent, so feel more like myself when speaking Spanish.

Humour, as Rodrigo reflects, is a vital aspect of his professional identity. He reports employing it as an ice-breaker strategy in, for instance, conference talks with the goal of establishing good rapport and a relaxed atmosphere with his audience (see humour as a tool to establish relational identity display and development in Habib, 2008). In this regard, Rodrigo reports not feeling 'quite himself' when using English as a vehicle for communication for he is unable to use humour to build rapport with his interlocutors (see Nguyen, 2007). Indeed, social constructionist views of identity consider humour to be 'a very efficient means of the expression of identity' since, in addition to communicating transactional meaning, it is frequently also used to communicate relational meaning such as in-group belonging and solidarity (Archakis & Tsakona, 2005, p. 42).

As a common theme running throughout his comments, Rodrigo stresses his frustration for not being able to overcome the problems posed by these linguistic and socio-pragmatic aspects of his identity. Due to this, he feels he cannot manage his agency in the identity construction process in order to express his professional self competently.

Discussion

As the preliminary findings show, Rodrigo is well aware of the fact that, by learning a foreign language, he gains prestige in his two broad interactional worlds, the English speaking community and the community with which he interacts daily at work and at home. He is also aware of the ways he employs, or would like to employ, the language to construct and negotiate his professional identity. He reflects upon the lack of linguistic knowledge and the socio-pragmatic competence needed to display his professional self fully when faced with an English-speaking community of professionals. An exploration of those aspects of the language Rodrigo felt he lacked in order to display his identity satisfactorily led him to consider colloquial English, speed of speech delivery, and humour as the major factors contributing to his struggle in the articulation of his professional identity in the foreign language.

Rodrigo feels that his current linguistic and socio-pragmatic competence positions him professionally as 'a different person'. In spite of being proficient in English when it comes to discussing his academic work, Rodrigo strives to find his own legitimate voice that expresses all aspects of his professional identity adequately. Academic encounters, such as conferences, then become sites of conflict where Rodrigo's professional subjectivities cannot be expressed satisfactorily with the repertoire of linguistic resources available to him. He feels then that his agency in the identity formation process is seriously impaired and that this will constrain his access as a core member of an international community of professionals (see Wenger, 1998), which may, in turn, have an impact on, for instance, future job prospects (see Sakui & Gaies, 2003 for a discussion on issues of professional identities).

As he resists the subject position he finds himself in when speaking English in professional contexts, Rodrigo works hard to overcome this issue and to ultimately acquire the linguistic and socio-pragmatic competence needed to gain autonomy as a competent language user (Ushioda, 2006). In this light, the ideal professional image Rodrigo wants to project, together with the social prestige gained for speaking a foreign language, provide the motivational basis for improving his language skills and thus his proficiency in the language in order to develop the competencies needed to display the desired identity.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the study of the relationship between a language learner's identity construction and their motivation status has relied upon the contextual assumptions surrounding bilingual contexts. From this perspective, the language learner is believed to develop the need to create a new L2 identity that allows them to integrate in a new L2 community. However, as Noels (2001) argues, an integrative orientation to learning a language is not relevant to many language students1. This may be the case for foreign language learners who may be instrumentally, and not integratively, motivated to learn a language (see Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009). In this regard, this paper has proposed to move away from the limitations imposed by bilingual contextual assumptions and to consider the role of identity construction in learners' motivation in the often-neglected context of foreign language learning.

L2 learners' perceptions of their selves affect the degree to which learners engage in, for example, the L2 community which influences the language learning process and the development of learners' sociolinguistic competence (Norton & Toohey, 2002). By adopting a pragmatic approach to the study of learner motivation, this study hopes to have raised language teachers' and researchers' awareness to the idea that foreign language learners also have learning needs that are identity-related in nature and which

need to be addressed so that we empower learners with the appropriate linguistic tools to negotiate their identities competently. Future research in this area should undertake the task of collecting larger samples of learners' perceptions of their identities in order to draw generalizable conclusions that can inform L2 teachers of an important aspect of the reality surrounding the learning process of their L2 students.

Note
1. See a rich discussion on the influence of the powerful forces of globalisation in the now fading explanatory power of integrative motivation in current contexts of language learning in Ushioda, 2006.

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Appendix 1.

Bilingual Self-perception Survey (English version)

Please be as honest and objective as possible. Please remember there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Having the university environment that surrounds you in mind, respond to questions 1-8.

1) How do you feel being a very proficient foreign language speaker compared to native speakers of English?

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2) How do you feel when speaking English when around your English speaking colleagues at conferences, for instance?

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3) In general, do you feel fortunate to speak two languages? Why?

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4) Do you feel you're bilingual? Why yes? /Why not?

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———————————————————————————————————

5) If any, what aspects of your personality do you think you cannot competently display when speaking in English?

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6) If you spoke English exactly as your English speaking friends/colleagues, how would that change your feelings when with them?

_____

_____

_____

7) On a scale of 1-5, '1' equals a strong English accent, and '5' equals no English accent. To what degree do you think you have a detectable accent when you speak English?

1   2   3   4   5

8) On a scale of 1-5, '1' equals a strong Spanish accent, and '5' equals no Spanish accent. To what degree do you think you have a detectable accent when you speak English?

1   2   3   4   5

(Adapted from Caldas, 2007)

Encuesta de Percepción del Hablante Bilingüe (Spanish version)

Por favor, sea tan honesto y objetivo como sea posible. Recuerde que no hay respuestas correctas o incorrectas a las preguntas en esta encuesta. Teniendo en cuenta el entorno de la universidad a la que asiste, conteste las siguientes preguntas.

1) ¿Cómo te sientes al ser un hablante de lengua extranjera muy competente comparado con hablantes nativos de inglés?

_____

_____

_____

2) ¿Cómo te sientes al hablar en inglés cuando te encuentras con tus colegas, quienes solamente hablan inglés, en congresos, por ejemplo?

_____

_____

_____

3) En general, ¿te sientes afortunado de hablar dos idiomas? ¿Por qué?

_____

_____

_____

4) ¿Sientes que eres bilingüe? ¿Por qué sí?/ ¿Por qué no?

_____

_____

_____

5) ¿De haber alguno, qué aspectos de su personalidad piensa que no puede reflejar competentemente cuando habla inglés?

_____

_____

_____

6) Si hablaras inglés exactamente como tus colegas/amigos, ¿de qué manera eso cambiaría tus sentimientos al estar con ellos?

_____

_____

7) En la escala del 1 al 5, donde '1' significa fuerte acento inglés, y '5' significa nada de acento inglés. ¿En qué medida piensas que tienes acento al hablar en inglés?

<div align="right">1   2   3   4   5</div>

8) En la escala del 1 al 5, donde '1' significa fuerte acento español, y '5' significa nada de acento español. ¿En qué medida piensas que tienes acento al hablar en inglés?

<div align="right">1   2   3   4   5</div>

<div align="right">(Adaptado de Caldas, 2007)</div>