

Identity and Communities of Practice in Foreign Language Learning Contexts

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, some second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have begun to conduct research from a perspective on learner development that foregrounds the effects of situational or environmental variables on the learning process. These researchers, according to Swain and Deters (2007), privilege a “participation” metaphor over the more traditional focus on “acquisition.” Important researchers in this tradition (e.g., Lantolf, 1994; Pierce, 1995; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Norton & Toohey, 2001) have drawn upon poststructuralist social theory, as well as Vygotsky's (1978) earlier notions of learning situated in a *zone of proximal development*, to emphasize the influence of the learner's environment in shaping learning behaviors, and consequently language learning outcomes.

Firth and Wagner (1997) were early proponents of a research agenda for SLA that adequately values such sociocultural factors. They argued that the then prevalent conceptualizations within SLA research were “individualistic and mechanistic,” and thus failed “to account in a satisfactory way for interactional and sociolinguistic dimensions of language” (p. 285). Their criticisms were controversial and divisive, but over the following decade and a half, research on language acquisition from a sociocultural perspective has

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gradually gained prominence in the field. As late as 2007, however, it has been noted that the vast majority of the research that was born out of what has been termed “the social turn” has focused on learners in *second* language rather than *foreign* language learning contexts (Block, 2007).

In English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, the connection between learner identity, community access, and language development was recognized by Pierce (1995). In an important departure from mainstream trends in SLA research at the time, he drew upon poststructuralist conceptions of identity to highlight the complex and conflicted nature of second language (L2) learning among immigrant women in Canada. Pierce saw the social construction of learner identity as intimately related to language learning outcomes, and thus called for SLA theory to “to develop a conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day interactions” (p. 13). Pierce’s ethnographic case studies revealed social identity to be “a site of struggle” which conditions learners’ interactions with the world and language learning progress (p. 13).

Taking this perspective that language learning success is deeply connected to learner identity and location within a broader community context, the purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which sociocultural issues of identity and access to communities of practice affect learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. Particular emphasis will be given to research conducted in countries (such as Japan and China) within which Kachru (1992) has termed the “expanding circle” of English language learning.

Though necessarily informed by ESL research, and peripherally by studies of bilingualism, the primary focus of this paper will be on learner self-identity, membership, and communities of practice in EFL contexts. The paper begins by looking at important

conceptualizations of student and teacher identity construction in various foreign language learning contexts. Next, the discussion focuses specifically on one conception of the role of self-identity in EFL motivation. Finally, my paper examines the concept of *communities of practice* and two ways that it has been applied to the study of foreign language learning. In conclusion, I offer some pedagogical implications related to the concepts introduced in my paper.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

CONTEXTS

When learners and teachers come to the foreign language classroom, they face a number of difficulties in addition to those of form and meaning commonly addressed in language textbooks. This is because studying a foreign language is, by definition, an exploration of otherness. As such, progress must be defined not only by a mastery of forms, but also by a shift in the learner's native sense of self and identity within which he or she has been socialized. Communicative competence, which includes pragmatic as well as linguistic proficiency, is developed by comprehending and interacting with cultural norms that, like the L2 itself, are initially quite foreign. The study and practice of such norms requires motivation and effort, and the way these become manifest is often a function of the learner's identity in terms of present and future conception of self.

The research tradition revolving around identity in SLA, which Pierce (1995) helped to pioneer, can be seen as a bridge between psychology studies that look at the effects of globalization on identity, and studies of language use and motivation in various settings. Although scholars continue to answer the call for more research on issues of bilingual and bicultural identity in terms of immigrant socialization, the broad effects of globalization on

identity formation among foreign language learners have only recently come into focus in mainstream psychology. As Arnett (2002) noted: “The concept of bicultural identities has so far been discussed only in relation to the identities developed by immigrants and members of ethnic minority groups, but it can also be applied to globalization” (p.777). As in psychology identity studies, SLA research on the subject has only picked up within the past decade or so, with more researchers recently starting to explore identity issues in foreign language learning contexts.

Most foreign language learning studies of identity have adopted Pierce’s (1995) poststructuralist conception, viewing identity as a site of conflict and struggle, negotiation, compromise, and potential transformation. Lantolf and Genung (2002), for example, presented the perspective of a beginning foreign language learner who confronts negative affective reactions to her teacher’s culturally informed pedagogy. Their study presented a learner narrative: the case of an individual learning Chinese as a foreign language from within the context of an American university Ph.D. program. The student was extremely frustrated by what she perceives as her teacher’s rigid and old-fashioned pedagogy. The student felt the teacher’s pedagogical choices were undermining her initial motivations for studying the language. The authors pointed to the way in which this causes a shift in learning motives in the student—as she eschewed her identity as an intrinsically motivated language learner for that of a student focused only on the extrinsic reward of a good grade. As the student drew upon competitiveness learned in her capacity as a member of the military, Lantolf and Genung (2002) showed how a student’s identity and sense of self as it has been formed in other contexts can have a very powerful effect on how and why language is learned, and on success in the foreign language classroom. Though just one example, this

study showed that demotivation is not necessarily the only reaction in cases of student-teacher pedagogical preference misalignment.

Identity Slippage

A more idealistic account of identity issues in foreign language learning was presented in a study by Armour (2000). Armour's study offered the concept of *identity slippage* through close readings of student-teacher actions and interactions in the context of an Australian university's Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) program. Armour (2000) utilized Rogoff and Chavajay's (1995) concepts of *apprenticeship*, *guided participation*, and *participatory appropriation*, and applied these to two semiotic analyses of evidence from an adult foreign language learning setting. The first deconstructed a model dialogue used in JFL lectures and tutorials. The dialogue—of a student visiting his/her Japanese language teacher—presented a variety of “pivots” which served as signposts for the kind of guided participation which brings learners into identification with the target language and culture, thus allowing for identity slippage through impersonation. As Armour (2000) explained:

Impersonation appears to be transitional and learners transcend it the more bi-languaging they do, changing the process into identification. Identification with others including their ideologies, values, beliefs and so on can create a situation in which the self displays multiple and overlapping identities (p. 259).

Such “impersonation” was also apparent in Armour's second example of identity slippage. He presented the case of Lola Lovett, a non-native JFL teacher with more than 30 years' experience of participatory appropriation—in both Japan and Australia. After formative undergraduate experiences studying Japanese in Australia and Japan, Lovett, who

lived in Sydney, had continued “a long apprenticeship” through sustained interaction with members of the Japanese diaspora (Armour, 2000, p. 264). In her capacity as a JFL teacher, Lovett embodied an alter-ego named Akiko in front of her students in order to allow them to practice speaking with an imagined native speaker. The transformation was unequivocal: “Lola believed that she was that person she had created and portrayed *Akiko* as an authentic Japanese by responding as a Japanese would in a contact situation” (Armour, 2000, p. 265). Armour’s (2000) characterization of identity slippage is similar to Pennycook’s (2003) idea of language’s function in identity performance and construction: “It is not that people use language varieties because of who they are, but rather that we perform who we are by (among other things) using varieties of language” (p.141).

Productive Bilingualism

Lola’s identity slippage clearly indicates that foreign identity adoption and maintenance can serve as a valuable tool for language practice and development over time. But in many foreign language learning environments, such extreme impersonation is quite uncommon. LoCastro (2001), for example, has shown that even learners who exhibit positivity towards their L2 may have great difficulty parting with their established identity. LoCastro’s study examined the attitudes of 4th year English majors at a Japanese university, and found that despite significant affinity for English, pragmatic awareness, and awareness of the value of high-level English proficiency, some learners displayed “resistance to convergence towards NS behaviors and L2 communicative expectations” (LoCastro, 2001, p.83).

To address this, another way of conceptualizing identity formation in foreign contexts extended from research on bilingualism. In the Chinese university EFL context, Gao (2002)

introduced the valuable concept of “productive bilingualism.” This idea expanded upon Lambert’s (1974) distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism, to capture the way in which “command of the target language and that of the native language positively reinforce each other” (Gao, p.135). This model is suitable for the EFL context, in that L2 progress and target language culture identification do not depend upon loss of first language (L1) proficiency and cultural identification. Instead, “deeper understanding and appreciation of the target culture goes hand in hand with deeper understanding and appreciation of the native culture” (Gao, p.135).

Gao’s (2002) research has been followed by additional studies that have considered self-identity construction in Chinese EFL contexts. Yihong et al. (2007), for example, surveyed 2,278 university students from across China to investigate motivation types and changes in self-identity construction as a result of English learning. In this case, “motivation types” referred to the top 30 reasons which students surveyed in a preliminary study gave for choosing to study English. In the main study, Likert scale responses to these 30 statements were correlated with statements about self-identity change derived from Lambert’s (1978) concepts of additive and subtractive bilingualism and Gao’s (2001) notions of productive bilingualism. Yihong et al. (2007) discovered complex interrelationships between learners’ varying motives for language learning and their shifting self-identities vis-à-vis the target language.

A more recent study by Yihong et al. (2010) explored the connection between EFL learners’ adoption of Western names (a common practice for English learners in China) and identity construction. Citing existing research that showed Chinese university English majors displaying positive attitudes towards their English names, Yihong et al. (2010) sought to explore the connections between Chinese EFL students’ names, and their adopted name

identities. In a 4-year longitudinal study, the authors analyzed the language learning journals of 16 (12 female, 4 male) university English majors with whom they subsequently conducted interviews. Some learners had recently adopted Western names for the first time, whereas others had names from primary or secondary school. Many students had chosen their names themselves, selecting role models from popular media, literature, or their immediate surroundings. In one case, a student adopted her former teacher's English name; the authors interpreted this as "an externalization of her ideal self, and an internalization of the teacher's influence" (Yihong et al., 2010, p.8). This also demonstrated a sense of agency and ownership of English and English identity to a degree we might not ordinarily expect of EFL learners.

Consistent with previous research, Yihong et al. (2010) showed that the adoption of foreign names had a positive influence on learners' L2 identity formation, concluding "It is evident English names congeal the learners' imagined identities into a "thing" with fixed forms. As a performative act, naming turns the imagined identity into a real self-identity" (p.13). When foreign name adoption is paired with the identity work required in this case study, it would seem that the effects are empowering to students.

Teacher Identities

The fact that one of the research subjects in Yihong et al. (2010) took her influential former teacher's foreign name for her own is not surprising, but it raises one additional point which is very important to issues of identity and self in the foreign language classroom: teacher identity. In most foreign language learning environments, it is teachers who have the most control over what gets practiced, and how such practice is realized. Further, teachers act

as role models and guides for their students, helping to bridge the foreign with the familiar in their lessons.

Given this fact, EFL teacher sociocultural identity is an important issue that deserves greater attention in the literature. Tsui (2007) pointed out that "... although research on teacher cognition, teacher knowledge, teacher learning, and teacher development has burgeoned in the last two decades, only a very small number of studies have focused on teacher identity" (p.657).

Duff and Uchida (1997) offered one very useful cross-sectional look at EFL teacher identity construction and transformation in a Japanese EFL context. The authors conducted ethnographic research on four EFL professionals working at a language school for adults in Minato City, Japan. Two of the participants were American (a male and a female), and two were Japanese (both female). Over a six-month period, data were collected via questionnaires, teacher reflective journals, reflective participant observation, interviews, and materials analyses. What emerged from this scrutiny were four complex portraits of teachers negotiating various aspects of their sociocultural identities over time. Duff and Uchida described teachers who all struggled to define their roles with students and within the culture of their classrooms, as that culture gradually evolved. Amidst this process, all four teachers were seen to be pursuing interpersonal and intercultural connections with students while maintaining the degree of control over the classroom environment sought by their biographically informed professional identities.

In contrast to Duff and Uchida's (1997) research, Tsui's (2007) study offers one in-depth case study examining the process and product of a Chinese EFL teacher's identity formulation. Tsui's research highlighted not only the broad influences of national culture, which contributes to teacher development, but also those aspects of identity formation that

arise from historical and institutional circumstance. The study profiled a teacher named Minfang, who had transitioned from his role as “humble student” to that of a teacher at his university (p. 669). As a student, Minfang first had trouble adapting to the local (Cantonese) language and culture of his university. Eventually, he established himself within a peer-group of other English majors and became comfortable with university life. But in regard to the university’s English curriculum, he was uncomfortable with the fact that he and his classmates were among the first cohorts to be taught using communicative language teaching (CLT) in addition to more traditional methods (a mixture of Chinese-style rote learning and the grammar-translation method) (p. 662). Minfang despised CLT, viewing it as “soft and unrealistic,” and feeling that his Chinese teachers were ill-equipped to model the kind of pragma-linguistic competence necessary for interaction with native English speakers (p. 664).

CLT was highly valued by his institution, and when he became a teacher himself, Minfang was coerced into token compliance with the institution’s curricular values. Although Minfang was able to gradually acquire professional stature, Tsui’s case study (2007) illustrates how culturally informed methods of coercion diminished a teacher’s ability to resist institutional pressure for a dominant methodology, even within his own classroom. Bax (2003) has made the argument that context and learner needs should be the most important factors driving pedagogical decisions, and yet in the case of Minfang, we see institutional values (for a certain methodology) driving such decisions. Tsui illustrated how this situation forced Minfang to give up his “eclectic” approach, perhaps to the detriment of his students (p. 671).

It is ironic and unfortunate that Minfang, once demotivated by CLT himself, was later required to carry the banner of that methodology. With this in mind, we now turn to the important issue of learner motivation in foreign language contexts.

MOTIVATION AND THE L2 SELF

In studies related to student identity in EFL contexts, emphasis has often been placed upon the function of internal factors that motivate learners. Such studies draw upon notions of the “self” from mainstream psychology, adapting these to second and foreign language study contexts. Many of the recent studies which have looked at identity and self in EFL stem from challenges to Gardner’s (1985) socioeducational model of motivation which posited *integrativeness* as one of the most important factors motivating the L2 learner (e.g. Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994, 2005, 2009; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Gardner (2001) defined integrativeness as “a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community,” and also included in this concept of motivation the learner’s “openness to, and respect for other cultural groups and ways of life” (p. 5).

The most prominent challenge to this view of L2 learning motivational self orientation came from Dörnyei (2005):

Although Gardner’s conceptualization of the concept makes sense in the multicultural context of Montreal, where it originated from, extending the relevance of integrativeness to learning environments that are significantly different from this context (because, e.g., there is no real contact with L2 speakers available for the learners) has not always been straightforward (p.94).

Gardner’s model was developed in the unique bilingual environment of Montreal, Canada, and Dörnyei (2005) essentially argued that it was not a very useful fit for EFL contexts. The alternative he proposed synthesized motivation paradigms proposed by Noels (2003) and Ushioda (2001), and was called *The L2 Motivational Self System*. Dörnyei’s system

contained three main conceptual components: 1) *Ideal L2 Self*; 2) *Ought-to L2 Self*; and 3) *L2 Learning Experience* (Dörnyei, 2005, p.106). Dörnyei's (2005) *Ideal L2 Self* concept also incorporated the Markus and Nurius (1986) conception of "possible selves," and thus concomitant research has displayed a tendency to use this terminology as well to describe L2 learner identity conceptualizations.

The first two of Dörnyei's three components have received the most attention, and the system as a whole has gained prominence because it offers a motivational construct for EFL contexts independent of a desire to integrate into a target language community. Results of a large, long-term study by Csizer and Dörnyei (2005) that looked at Hungarian learners of English have been successfully repeated in multiple contexts, including a Japanese EFL setting by Ryan (2009), who notes that "...the strength of some of the similarities suggests that some of the key Hungarian findings are not peculiar to the local Hungarian context but are indicative of common patterns to be observed in learning environments where contact with the L2 target community is not immediately available" (p.129). This, along with other similar results from other countries, offers significant validity to Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System model.

Unfortunately, the category in Dörnyei's L2 Self System called *L2 Learning Experience* has received less attention than the other two in the literature, where focus has continued to center upon learner identity and self in L2 learning, and motivation vis-à-vis attitudes toward, and sense of affinity with target language people and their cultures. In Ryan's (2009) repeat study, for example, the author found that "In the Japanese study the correlation between milieu and effort is much lower than that found in Hungary, which suggests that there are important differences in the role the learner's immediate social relationships play in the language learning process" (p.130). Ryan's (2009) study failed,

however, to explore these social relationships in context, though noting it as an important area in need of further investigation.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: REAL AND IMAGINED

While the studies outlined above go a long way towards addressing issues of learner identity in foreign language learning contexts, few studies have explicitly focused on how the specifics of those pedagogical contexts affect learner identity, motivation, and learning progress. That is, concepts of identity and the L2 self have received considerable attention in the literature; but questions of how real-world foreign language learning communities actually contribute to changes in learners' identities have remained largely unexplored. Several authors (e.g. Block, 2007; Gao, 2007; Lamb, 2009; Gu, 2010) have called for more qualitative research into this dimension. As mentioned above, Dörnyei's (2005) expansive L2 Motivational Self System includes a component which is meant to evaluate "the L2 learning experience," by analyzing situational/contextual factors, but it has remained largely unmapped in favor of analyses of learner attitudes and conceptions of self.

One promising framework to be used for addressing this gap is *communities of practice theory*. In this section I will discuss some core concepts in this research tradition, briefly outline the early application of a communities of practice paradigm to research in an ESL context, and explore how communities of practice ideas have been used to inform some research in foreign language learning settings.

Real World Communities of Practice

Concepts from communities of practice theory first began appearing in the academic lexicon of various fields, including SLA, in the 1990s, after the publication of Jean Lave and

Etienne Wenger's book, *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991). Lave and Wenger used case studies and observations about learning as it took place in both formal and informal contexts of apprenticeship. They examined the processes by which knowledge is formed, maintained, and transmitted in communities, and out of this focus came the concept of “communities of practice.” Lave and Wenger's ideas about communities of practice have undergone considerable evolution over time, but a few key features remain as defining characteristics of the two main semantic components that constitute the larger concept. These are: 1) mutual engagement; 2) a joint enterprise; and 3) a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). These three components described a group of individuals who work (or study) together on a common activity in an established way, which has evolved (and continues to evolve) throughout the group's history.

As Swain and Deters (2007) have pointed out, viewing language learning from the perspective of communities of practice privileges a focus on *participation* to SLA's once dominant focus on *acquisition*. Perhaps the concept from this paradigm that has had the most impact upon SLA is that of *legitimate peripheral participation*. This idea is useful to SLA researchers because it refers to the process whereby newcomers integrate into a community of practitioners, adopting group language, practices and identities by virtue of their formal or (more commonly) informal membership.

One of the first SLA researchers to employ a communities of practice perspective was Toohey (1996), whose research examined the integration (and non-integration) of ESL learners into the everyday classroom life of a Canadian kindergarten. Whereas previous research had focused more on how ESL learner traits affected the success of their integration into school environments, Toohey's work uniquely focused upon the integration process itself, highlighting participation rather than personality. As she explained: “the second

language learner is seen not as internalizing the second language, but rather as a newcomer beginning to participate in the practices of a particular community” (p.5). Through participant-observer research and interviews, she was able to explore this process, and observe learners “integrating” into not only the school’s broad culture, but also into many communities of practice that formed organically among students in the classroom. She saw student socialization to be a dynamic process that did not always have monolingual native speakers at the center. Like Pierce (1995), Toohey concluded that “[i]dentity and access to participation and resources in these various communities are historical, dynamic and problematic for the children” (p.32) But she also argued that this issue of access does not always depend on language: “The extent to which any participant can speak any particular language is involved in their identities, practices and access to resources but, in at least some communities, it doesn't seem the most important factor” (p.32).

Toohey’s (1996) conclusions were not revolutionary, but the idea of using a communities of practice framework to look at language acquisition was new and innovative. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* turned out to be useful for explaining the process by which ESL students constructed and maintained identities through membership in various communities of practice. Such identities served to empower or disempower language use, depending on the nature of the community and practice. That is, in one setting, a learner might be shy and reticent, whereas in another—one where she felt a greater sense of membership or competence—she could be gregariously verbal, and even bossy.

More research on socialization in ESL contexts with reference to communities of practice themes followed (see e.g., Leki, 2001, Norton & Toohey, 2001; Morita, 2004), but as with identity research, far fewer researchers have used these concepts for analyzing foreign

language learning settings. Ohta (1994, 1999) is one researcher who has employed communities of practice perspectives to look at how JFL learners can become socialized into linguistic and pragma-linguistic patterns of usage through classroom routines. Ohta (1994) analyzed JFL teachers' affective particle use and explored the influence this had upon learners. And though this study did not explicitly reference communities of practice theory, it did presciently conceive of foreign language classroom learning in terms of socialization rather than just acquisition. In this sense, socialization into the language practices and corresponding micro-culture of a foreign language learning classroom can be seen as a process akin to the communities of practice concept of legitimate periphery participation, in that "learning takes place not so much through the reification of a curriculum as through modified forms of participation that are structured to open the practice to nonmembers" (Wenger, 1998, p. 100).

Ohta (1999) took up similar themes, this time analyzing the way in which L2 learners can internalize realistic L2 interactional routines beyond the scope of the Initiation-Response-Follow-up (IRF) routines that prevail in traditional teacher-fronted classroom discourse. Ohta's (1999) study undertook a corpus analysis of 14 first-year university Japanese language classes, in order to examine which types of interactional routines were in fact practiced. The research was innovative in that it examined this data from a pragmatic perspective as well. For example, Ohta's (1999) analysis highlighted the ways in which classrooms either encouraged or discouraged opportunities to practice common Japanese pragmatic interaction routines such as alignment, and the way in which legitimate peripheral participation played a key role in this, concluding:

Clearly, the interactional routines of the classroom have a profound impact upon the acquisition of the adult learner. Peripheral participation has a

powerful socializing function; during the peripheral participation process, the learner gradually becomes more active, developing the ability to use routines for herself. (p.1509).

The legitimate peripheral participation referred to here is really students' participation in teacher-fronted assessments. And though Ohta's (1999) study illustrates the limitations of such activities, her conversation analysis (CA) transcriptions reveal students repurposing the teacher assessments to rich and creative ends in the learner-learner talk opportunities that were provided.

Also focusing on a JFL context, Haneda (1997) employed a 'communities of practice' perspective to look at learner interaction and development in a fourth year university reading and writing course. To do this, the author collected data over the course of two 13-week terms in the form of student reflection reports, audio recordings of student-teacher conferences, and field notes (Haneda, 1997, p. 4). In the course, students were asked to complete a portfolio project in which they were given freedom and responsibility of identifying their own weaknesses and designing a learning plan that would address these while yielding tangible evidence of their progress. Students each had their own projects, but it was hoped that the classroom would serve as a venue for members to share expertise in a variety of ways. As Haneda (1997) explained:

It was also hoped that this learning project would help the students to feel that there was a classroom-based community wherein they could share what they had accomplished on their own, have opportunities to interact with other members, and seek or give assistance when it was required. (p. 4)

Haneda's (1997) results described a classroom that was in fact transformed into a community of practice in which "each participant alternated between the roles of 'legitimate peripheral

participant' and expert, depending on the specific goals at each moment" (p. 7). As in a similar study by Donato and MacCormick (1994) set in a French foreign language classroom, Haneda's (1997) study showed that when students are given space and opportunities for collaboration, more advanced learners share their language and language learning expertise with less advanced peers. This allows for the Vygotskian dynamic of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) to exist in which more adept peers (or the teacher) can offer learning assistance ideally suited for the learner's development.

Imagined Communities

The idea of "imagined communities," originated with Benedict Anderson (1991) in the field of international relations (to describe nations), but it has proved useful for describing the foreign language learner's relationship to a target language community. Adopting the term for use in SLA though, Norton (2001) wrote: "A learner's imagined community invite[s] an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context" (p. 166). Norton's use of the word 'investment'² calls to mind Pierce's (1995) usage that drew upon Bordieu's (1985) conceptualizations of "social capital," but here allows for a broader interpretation.

Many SLA researchers have generally followed Norton's (2001) use of the concept of imagined communities, and have also incorporated ideas put forth by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) about *communities of practice*. Norton (2006) described this concept of imagined communities in a way that is also suitable for EFL contexts:

For many language learners, the community is one of the imagination—a

² Pierce (1995) writes: "the conception of investment rather than motivation accurately signals the socially and historically constructed relationship . . . to the target language and . . . the [the learner's] sometime ambivalent desire to learn and practice it." (p.17)

desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future...In essence, an imagined community assumes an imagined identity. (Norton, 2006, p. 4)

Ryan (2006), for example, introduced similar themes when describing the motivations of Japanese learners of English when he writes about the learner's "global imagined identity." Also, further developing Norton's (2001) notion of imagined communities, Yashima (2002, 2004, 2009) has proposed the concept of *international posture* as an additional motivational component of Japanese English learners' possible selves, contributing to what McIntyre and Charos (1996) have characterized as L2 learners' *willingness to communicate* (WTC).

Yashima (2002) argued that:

When English is regarded as a knowledge-based subject, the needs for achievement, mental training, and satisfaction in learning motivate learners just as they do in other subjects . . . it is also necessary that one consider attitudes to prospective communication partners when communication becomes an important objective in learning English. (p. 63)

Yashima's (2002) study in fact operationalized international posture, showing it as a significant motivational component in students' development of language learner identities that reach beyond the classroom. In a later case study, Yashima (2009) showed an example of how international posture could be encouraged in the classroom. The study outlined a model United Nations project in a Japanese high school, and examined motivational factors which contributed to students' WTC and "illustrated an approach to education in EFL contexts in which students expand their self by creating new images of themselves linked to global concerns, and in the process find meaning in learning English while learning to use the language" (p.159).

Block (2002) introduced the similar idea of “cosmopolitan identities” to describe the transformed bicultural selves of adult learners. Block’s (2002) case studies looked at two adult learners from Japan and Taiwan who developed “cosmopolitan identities” as a result of formative cross-cultural experiences. This is similar to Yashima’s (2002, 2004, 2009) conceptualizations of international posture, except that it represents a real, rather than aspirational identity. In Dörnyei’s (2005) terminology, a cosmopolitan identity would represent the actual L2 self, whereas international posture describes the learner’s “ideal self” as being an association with international engagement by way of the learner’s imagination. Yashima’s (2009) study considers the development of international posture without travel abroad, through classroom activities, and through the media. In this sense, identity formation is an imaginative act.

Here, I have shown how research into both real and imagined communities of practice sheds light on otherwise obscured dynamics of foreign language learning contexts. Finally, I will now turn to some implications brought by this perspective for international educators.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As studies by Lantolf and Genung (2002) and Tsui (2007) illustrated, teachers must closely attend to context, developing pedagogy that aligns with student needs and motives.

Encouraging foreign language communities of practice can have the significant benefit of creating opportunities for what Murphey (1997) has described as *near peer role modeling*—a situation whereby more experienced or proficient peers influence the behavior of the learners they come into contact with. In classroom settings, Ohta (1999) described the importance of creating such opportunities for “access,” making it clear that teacher-fronted activities must be significantly supplemented by learner-centered ones such as group and pair work.

Inviting students individually to do the type of “identity work” described in Gu (2010) can offer them the important opportunity to reflect on their L2 selves, thus allowing for agency. Teachers, too can benefit from explorations of their identities as “native” speakers, bilinguals, or even target language and culture impersonators: as Armour (2000) demonstrated, the ability to slip between one’s various identities and selves can help create the “pivots” necessary for native-like performance.

Beyond the classroom, recognition of the importance of communities of practice should encourage teachers and curriculum designers to think about ways of creating environments which allow for participatory learning communities that are closed enough to possess strong group identity, but open enough to encourage legitimate peripheral participation for newcomers.

Finally, in addition to the real world peer-to-peer interactions that teachers should encourage in their classrooms, there is also an important place for classroom activities that promote international awareness. As Yashima (2004) has shown, positive attitudes towards the international community improve student motivation by helping them to develop the imagined possible selves shown to be instrumental in Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self System.

CONCLUSION

Though more commonly applied to ESL contexts where pragma-linguistic socialization may already be taking place outside of the classroom on a daily basis, identity research and communities of practice concepts have enormous potential to enliven discussions of pedagogy in EFL contexts as well. Conceiving of EFL contexts in terms of learner identity formation and maintenance, membership, and participation in a set of

linguistic and cultural practices brings the learning environment into sharp focus. It prods teachers to consider not only the language we teach, but also the practices we invite learners to participate in, and how these practices might contribute to their identity as legitimate members of one of the world's many English-speaking communities.

Authors such as Rampton (1990), Cook (1999), and Han (2004), have all argued against the native speaker standard in SLA, in favor of a view of L2 users that takes into account their unique capabilities and self-defined identities. Focusing on identity in foreign language communities of practice has the benefit of promoting learner ownership of English, and encouraging confidence in what Cook (1991, 1999) would call "multicompetence."

This review of literature on learner identity and communities of practice in foreign language learning contexts has revealed a number of important issues. First, it has shown that foreign language learners struggle with identity issues in ways that are unique and different from the issues faced by ESL learners. Second, it has illustrated the value of "identity work" in which learners deeply consider their present and potential L2 selves. Finally, it has explored the value of real and imagined communities of practice perspectives on foreign language contexts.

There is still a great need for context-specific research that explores foreign language learning identity issues and communities of practice. Future research might examine interventions designed to promote learner self-awareness and group cohesion focused around foreign language use and learning activities in various contexts. Such studies must deeply explore the personal, interpersonal, and situational elements of foreign language contexts in order for the learning dynamics created by these environments to be better understood. And though every context is different, a diverse accumulation of research focused on EFL identity formation and foreign language communities of practice might eventually offer some

common clues to help international educators cultivate language learning environments that can motivate and empower students towards greater success.

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