

Acculturation, Interpersonal Networks, and the Learner's Sense of Self: The Effects of Social Relationships on Second Language Learning

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Introduction

In reaction to what they considered the prevailing bias of second language acquisition (SLA) research towards cognitive-oriented theories, Firth and Wagner (1997) called for a greater recognition of the social context and interactive nature of language use. Without negating the importance of cognitive dimensions of learning, the authors noted that “language is acquired and learned through social interaction ... and should be studied in interactive encounters” (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 287). The article set off a firestorm of controversy. Some critics argued that language acquisition is “fundamentally a psycholinguistic process” (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 239), and that language acquisition and language use are two entirely separate entities (Gass 1998). Firth and Wagner acknowledged this criticism, but still maintained that language acquisition “is built on language use” (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p. 806) and that it is a process that takes place “in the micromoments of social interaction” (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p. 807). This perspective was echoed by Wenger (1998), who stated that “learners are social beings ... this fact is a central aspect of learning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). For Wenger, learning is a fundamentally social activity that occurs in *communities of practice*, where learners form identities as they negotiate meaning through interactive practice with others.

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Recognizing that there is still debate over the role of social context in SLA research (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2007), the intention of this paper is not to restate the controversy. The purpose instead is to explore the ways in which the social relationships experienced by learners — with society in general, with their network of family, friends, and acquaintances, and with themselves — may contribute to individual differences in what, and how, second language learners learn. The perspective taken in this paper is informed less by Firth & Wagner (1997) and more by Spolsky (1988), who acknowledged that while social factors have an indirect rather than a direct influence on language learning, their effects are “strong and traceable” (Spolsky, 1988, p. 382). According to Spolsky, social context can be expressed in *macro* policies (such as the determination of the official language of a country, or the provision of language education to immigrants) and in *micro* policies (such as a family’s decisions about what language(s) to speak in the home). The social context is seen as affecting a learner’s attitudes toward the target language and motivation to learn, which combines with other characteristics of the learner (e.g., age, aptitude, learning styles and strategies, and personality factors such as anxiety). This complex combination contributes to determining whether the learner makes use of the formal or informal opportunities for learning provided by the social context.

Taking the perspective that a learner’s social environment can affect his learning in underappreciated but powerful ways, this paper will attempt to create a broad picture of how the learner is situated in the world as a social being, and how this may advance or impede his progress in acquiring a second language. The discussion will also include examples of how a learner’s choice of which language to use can be affected by his social relationships. With a few exceptions, the focus will be on adult immigrant learners who are acquiring a second language in a host country. The paper will analyze three levels of relationships experienced by this learner

population, each level providing another “layer” of information that helps explain individual differences in second language learning outcomes. The paper begins at a macro level by addressing the learner’s relationship with society at large, which may be reflected in the learner’s willingness to acculturate to the host society. The discussion then turns to the micro-level effects that an interpersonal social network brings to bear on an individual’s ability to learn. Finally, the discussion moves to an internal level, focusing on the relationship the learner has with himself, as expressed in the idea of self-identity. The paper concludes with a summary of implications for the classroom that are suggested by the research.

Relationships at the Macro Level: The Learner and Society

An immigrant who moves to a new country is immediately immersed in an unfamiliar culture, which may be radically different from his own. As the individual resides in the new country over time, he may experience various relationships with the host culture, ranging from complete rejection of the host culture to complete acceptance and internalization of host culture norms. This process of adapting to the host culture over time is frequently called acculturation. Before discussing how this process affects language learning specifically, it may be helpful to describe some of the forms acculturation can take and the variables that can affect the strategy an immigrant chooses to adopt. A useful starting point is provided by Berry (1997), who identified four possible acculturation strategies which provide a framework for understanding the various ways an individual can adapt.

According to Berry, individuals who shed their original cultural identity in favor of adopting the target culture are using an *assimilation* strategy. Those who retain their original culture and reject the target culture are adopting a *separation* strategy. When the individual maintains his original culture while participating in the target culture as well, he is using an

integration strategy. Finally, when there is no interest in either maintaining the original culture or participating in the target culture, the individual is experiencing *marginalization*. Variables which could affect the level to which an individual acculturates to the host society exist at both the group level and the individual level. Group-level variables include social forces present in the society of origin and the society of settlement (such as the political context and attitudes towards particular ethnic groups); individual-level variables include the length of time the individual resides in the host culture, the social support resources available to the individual, and the acculturation strategy the individual chooses to adopt. These group- and individual-level variables may interact in multiple ways to determine how an individual chooses to integrate into the host society. Although Berry did not specifically discuss the way these variables affected language learning, his themes will be repeated many times over in the second language learning (2LL) literature.

Work on the effect of acculturation on immigrant language learning has generally focused on the effects of interrelationships between cultural groups rather than between individual learners. The archetypal theory of this genre is the Acculturation Model developed by Schumann (1986), which explained the second language learning of immigrant groups who were learning a second language (L2) without instruction while residing in the target culture. Schumann's model distinguished between two types of acculturation. In Type 1, the learner becomes socially integrated, developing social contacts with L2 speakers who provide him with input while continuing to retain the lifestyle and values of his native culture; this is similar to Berry's integration strategy. In Type 2 acculturation, the learner develops social contacts in the target culture and also moves toward adopting the lifestyle and values of the target language group; this corresponds to Berry's assimilation strategy. By encompassing both definitions of

acculturation, the model implies that a learner could succeed in acquiring the target language regardless of whether he chose to adopt the norms of the target culture or not. An important difference between Schumann and Berry is that both of Schumann's categories assume that there is social contact between the learner and members of the target culture, whereas Berry's taxonomy allows for the possibility of limited or zero contact between groups.

Schumann's (1986) model identified numerous ways in which social relationships between groups could affect second language learning. The possible effect of power relationships between cultural groups is reflected in the degree to which the target language (TL) group is socially dominant over the 2LL group; if the TL group is more dominant, presumably the 2LL group would have more reason to learn. Other variables in the model focus on the amount of contact, or "social distance," between the groups. The degree to which the 2LL and TL groups are enclosed—that is, the degree to which they share social and occupational facilities such as churches, schools, and professions—could affect willingness to learn the TL; if there was less interaction between groups, there would be less reason to learn. If the 2LL group is more cohesive and/or large, the members would tend to maintain contact among themselves rather than initiating contacts with the TL group. Similarities between the 2LL and TL cultures could facilitate social contact between the groups, as could the existence of positive attitudes from one group toward the other. In addition to the amount of contact maintained with the TL group, the 2LL group's intended length of stay in the target culture was theorized to be predictive of learning success — the longer the intended length of stay, the higher the motivation to learn the target language would be.

Brown (1980) drew on Schumann's (1976) idea of *social distance* to hypothesize the optimal time for learning a second language when residing in a new country. He identified four

stages involved in acculturation: (1) excitement upon exposure to the new environment; (2) culture shock as the individual realizes the distance between his own identity and the host culture; (3) gradual recovery as the individual begins to accept or at least empathize with differences in the second culture; and (4) assimilation or adaptation as the individual adjusts completely to the host environment. Brown hypothesized that mastery of a second language would optimally happen during the third stage (recovery), when the social pressure (resulting from “social distance”) felt by an individual is neither too strong (as would be the case during the period of culture shock) or too weak (as would be the case during complete recovery). If the individual did not master the language prior to proceeding to the fourth stage, he might never master it, because social pressure would be too weak; conversely, if he mastered it prior to that stage, he might not psychologically acculturate completely because his linguistic and social development were out of line. Because successful transition to the third stage is necessary before completely mastering the language, Brown suggested that language learning would be optimized if teachers allow students adequate time to pass through the second stage, giving students the opportunity to express frustration and anger with the host culture rather than expecting them to adapt to their new environment quickly.

Research by Tinker Sachs and Li (2007) validates the idea of social distance. The authors attempted to determine why so few non-Chinese residents of Hong Kong were successful in learning Cantonese, noting that one of the most obvious indicators of an individual’s attempts to integrate into the host culture is attempting to learn the language. The authors found that over 80 percent of the 40 non-native speakers surveyed had attempted to learn Cantonese, but that only 35 percent reported having the opportunity to use it, despite the fact that they were surrounded by native speakers. Even when non-natives attempted to speak Cantonese with Hongkongers, the

native speakers would switch to English. It appeared that while some Hongkongers appreciated the foreigners' attempts to speak Cantonese, others felt they were being negatively perceived as "not smart enough" to speak English. Additionally, there seemed to be little expectation (and even some resistance to the idea) that immigrants would integrate into the Hongkong society; speaking English was seen as a way to keep the foreigners at a distance from the native culture. This lack of willingness on the part of native speakers to engage with learners in the local language made it difficult for learners to practice the language and it inhibited their ability to integrate into the host society. It appears that even where there is motivation on the part of the learner to acquire the language and assimilate into the host culture, the social attitudes of the local population can make it very difficult to do so. This finding is congruent with Schumann's (1986) theory that the attitudes of the majority and minority groups towards one another can affect willingness to assimilate.

In a model describing variables that affect a learner's willingness to communicate in an L2, Macintyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) discussed the effect that power relationships and social distance could play in language choice among L2 speakers. In addition to acknowledging the effect that a learner's motivation and self-confidence (or anxiety) could have on his willingness to communicate, the authors also hypothesized that attitudes (positive or negative) of one ethnic group towards another could play a significant role since intergroup attitudes could presumably lead to more or fewer interactions between language groups. A desire to affiliate with the TL group could have a positive effect, as this could lead to increased contact with L2 speakers; conversely, prejudices and discrimination could negatively impact attempts to communicate in the target language. The authors noted that learners could experience conflict between the desire to assimilate with the host culture and the fear of losing "membership" with

one's own culture; willingness to use the L2 would depend on which force became more dominant in the individual. A strong L1 enclave could ameliorate the desire to assimilate and discourage use of the L2.

The effect of enclaves was also discussed by Lazear (1999), who framed the idea of how social distance affects the decision to learn the language of the host culture as a question of economics: speaking the majority language is necessary in order to have a larger pool of people to trade with. Through analysis of U.S. Census data, Lazear found evidence that immigrants who clustered, or settled in areas with higher concentrations of immigrants from their native country, were less fluent in English than those who resided in areas where there was a lower density of immigrants speaking the same native language. The author posed two possible reasons for this: either immigrants in areas where the majority language is predominant have fewer opportunities to trade with those who speak their same native language, giving them a greater economic incentive to become more fluent; or immigrants who lack fluency in English to begin with choose to settle in areas where it is possible to "get by" speaking their native language instead. The author's analysis of the interaction of length of stay in the U.S., concentration of immigrants speaking the same native language, and L2 fluency showed that the second explanation is the more likely one. This implies that low proficient L2 learners deliberately choose to immigrate to areas with high concentrations of people who speak their same native language, which in turn increases social distance from the TL group and makes it less likely that the learners will become proficient in English.

The ideas proposed by Schumann (1986) have not always held up well in empirical studies, however. For example, Scully (2002) used the variables proposed in the Acculturation Model to study seven Filipino women who immigrated to Japan to marry Japanese farmers. Each

subject was scored for competency in accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and pragmatics. Acculturation was measured using interviews, field observations, and a questionnaire to determine the subjects' perceptions of family and community relationships and the amount of language contact they had with native speakers. The degree of acculturation seemed to track linearly with the measured competence of the subjects — subjects with low acculturation scores had low oral competency scores, and subjects with high acculturation scores had high oral competency scores. However, the author noted that each subject displayed individual acculturation factors (e.g., motivation) that were out of line with the total acculturation score. For example, one subject who obtained high overall competency and acculturation scores during the interviews also gave a strong impression of being dissatisfied with the Japanese environment during field observations. All subjects were considered to have minimal social distance with the Japanese because they married into Japanese families, but the expected positive effect on L2 learning seemed to be ameliorated by other social factors, such as the family dynamics specific to each subject (such as whether the mother-in-law was supportive of the subject or not). Scully concluded that the Acculturation Model was not valid because the individual acculturation variables seemed to have varying degrees of usefulness in predicting L2 learning success.

The problem with applying the Acculturation Model, or in talking about macro-level group-to-group relationships in general, may be that these analyses take into account only one dimension of the many levels of relationships experienced by learners. A more complete picture may be achieved by including the micro-level effects of an individual's personal social network, to which we now turn.

Relationships at the Micro Level: The Learner and His Personal Social Network

Although it acknowledges that the degree of social distance between cultural groups can affect language learning, the Acculturation Model does not provide a means of actually

measuring social distance. In addition, because the model deals with cultural groups rather than individual learners, it is not useful for accounting for individual differences in learning outcomes.

The Social Network Theory model developed by Milroy (1980) provides a solution to both problems. First, the model provides a means of measuring social distance by analyzing an individual's network of relationships or contacts, as its termed in the study. Contacts are divided into first-order zones (those people with whom the individual is directly linked) and second-order zones (people who are linked to the individual via contacts in the first-order zone—e.g., “friends of friends”). Networks are classified as either *exchange* networks, where communicative transactions result in an exchange of goods and services and there is an implied mutual obligation between the individuals, or as *interactive* networks, where communication is more likely to be unidirectional and there is no implied obligation between individuals (such as speaking with a pharmacist when picking up a prescription or listening to a sermon at church). Further, the density of an individual's network is measured by determining how many individuals within the first-order zone know one another. Segments of networks which have relatively high density are identified as clusters; all the members of a particular cluster know one another. Examples of clusters include family members, co-workers, and neighbors. Because clusters are particularly dense, they have a strong effect in enforcing group norms, including language.

The number and types of relationships that exist between the individual and each member of his first-order zone can also be measured. If the individual relates to one member in a single capacity (e.g., as a co-worker), the relationship is categorized as uniplex. If the individual has multiple relationships with a member of his network (e.g., as family member, neighbor, and co-worker), the relationship is categorized as multiplex. Networks with high multiplexity are often

high in density as well, which tends to further reinforce the norms of the group. The conclusion Milroy (1980) drew is that “a dense, multiplex personal network structure predicts relative closeness to vernacular norms” (p. 160). Milroy also acknowledged that the composition of personal networks varies from individual to individual due to level of education, occupation, and age. This explains why networks can be very different for individual members of the same larger social group; the variance in network structure also leads to variance in the amount of pressure an individual feels to conform to the linguistic norms of the network group.

Lie (2002) used Social Network Theory to analyze the English speaking ability of ten women who immigrated to England from Sylhet, a district in northeast Bangladesh. The author found that the ratio of English-speaking contacts to total contacts within the individual’s social network was moderately correlated with English speaking ability ($r = .645, p < .05$) — i.e., the subjects with the greatest number of English-speaking ties in their network also had the highest English speaking ability. Despite the influence of the English-speaking contacts, none of the subjects had a high level of English proficiency. Lie believed that this was because the Sylheti community as a whole had made limited effort to integrate into the native culture. Because the community networks were strong, they were serving to enforce the continued use of Sylheti rather than encouraging members to learn English. Echoing themes raised by Schumann (1986) and Lazear (1999), Lie noted several social factors that may have contributed to the community’s lack of integration, including the racial harassment and crime experienced by Bangladeshis in England and the tendency for Bangladeshis to live in the same part of town rather than dispersing. The author concluded that the “relationship between language ability and social networks is by no means a relationship in isolation” (Lie, 2002, p. 396).

Lybeck (2002) applied both Social Network Theory and the Acculturation Model to a population of nine American women who immigrated to Norway as a result of job transfers (either theirs or their husbands'). Lybeck used interviews to measure the subjects' proficiency in Norwegian pronunciation and to obtain information about the subjects' participation in and attitudes toward the target culture. The author identified the contacts and clusters within the exchange network for each subject; the subjects were then identified as having close, moderate, or distant relationships with Norwegian speakers. Lybeck demonstrated that each group exhibited predictable perceptions of the target culture — for example, those whose social network included close relationships with Norwegian speakers had a more positive view of the Norwegian culture. The author also found a strong relationship between these measures of assimilation and success in learning Norwegian, at least for the groups that had made an effort to establish close or moderately close relationships with native speakers. Lybeck noted that “acculturation is a two-way street” (p. 175), meaning that the attitudes and behavior of the target group can be just as influential as the attitudes and behavior of the learner group. This is important in explaining the difficulty many of the subjects had in establishing relationships with Norwegians, despite their stated willingness to try. As in the study of Hongkongers by Tinker Sachs and Li (2007), the Norwegians studied by Lybeck tended to be closed and suspicious of “outsiders,” which made it difficult for immigrants to befriend native speakers, which consequently inhibited L2 learning.

Rather than focusing on language learning, Tong (1997) used the both the Acculturation Model and Social Network Theory to analyze language choice among 190 recent Chinese immigrants in New York City. Information was collected about the individual's choices of whether to use Chinese or English in a variety of situations, including home, school, and work.

The subjects clearly preferred to speak Chinese most of the time, which was reinforced by the strength of their social networks within the large Chinese immigrant population in New York City. However, they attempted to use English more as they began to explore and adapt to American culture. The subjects seemed to be developing what Tong (1997) called a “cross-group identity” (p. 53), using English or Chinese interchangeably depending on the situation. The author observed that this is consistent with Schumann’s model, which says the learner group need not adopt the lifestyle and values of the target language group to acculturate (Schumann, 1986). The author also noted that while the strong Chinese social networks enforce the continued use of Chinese, as would be predicted by Social Network Theory, they may also provide the recent immigrants a sense of security that gives them confidence to explore the unfamiliar American society. In this way, the strength of the Chinese social networks may actually indirectly *encourage* the new immigrants to learn to speak English.

Akresh (2007) also analyzed the frequency with which immigrants used English in the contexts of home, work, with a spouse, and with friends, comparing it to the immigrants’ age at arrival and the cumulative number of years spent in the U.S. The author found that an older age at arrival was associated with a lower probability of using English in all four contexts, but that the probability of English use increased the more time the immigrant spent in the U.S. In particular, the likelihood of speaking English with friends increased substantially the longer the immigrant stayed in the U.S. (e.g., for those age 20-39 at arrival, the probability increased from approximately .25 at arrival to approximately .85 after a 20-years stay). This could be an indication that the immigrants are increasing their networks of English-speaking friends over time. The data also showed that women’s use of English was far more sensitive to time spent in the U.S. than was men’s, suggesting that social networks change more substantially over time for

women than for men. All these findings indicated that even among first-generation immigrants, there was a significant increase in linguistic integration with the immigrants' social contacts.

The idea of social networks affecting language use and learning is also reflected in research by Buttaro (2004), who conducted ethnographic studies of eight Hispanic female immigrants in New York City to determine how linguistic, cultural, and educational factors combined to affect their English language learning. For all the participants, the opportunity to practice English informally (e.g., with shopkeepers or their children's school teachers) was crucial to helping them improve their English proficiency; interacting with Americans in their social networks also improved their understanding of the target culture and language. Beyond providing an opportunity to practice, family and friends played a significant role in convincing the participants to attend English classes; in fact, a supportive family environment was the most significant factor determining the student's ability to progress in English. Similarly, the six Dominican English language learners in New York City interviewed by Reynoso (2008) indicated that family situations were either a major obstacle to or a primary motivation for their educational success in English. Some participants had children and were motivated to learn to improve their children's lives; other participants experienced difficult relationships with their relatives which made it hard to focus on their studies (e.g., one student lived with a brother who physically abused her).

The idea that social networks provide an opportunity to practice is further illustrated in a study by Cooke (2006), who analyzed 76 adult immigrants in the United Kingdom to attempt to discover their language educational goals and the social factors that constrained their learning process. Despite their strong motivation to learn English in order to obtain a better job, many of the learners had limited opportunities to practice English with their co-workers because they

worked in jobs that were typically performed by immigrants who did not speak English. These learners expressed frustration with their inability to develop social networks with native English speakers beyond the brief transactional encounters they had with bureaucrats or shopkeepers. In this study, the English classes attended by the learners became important social networks that provided the opportunity to meet other English speakers (even if those speakers were fellow learners) and practice English. Equally important, attendance at the classes improved the learners' sense of independence and helped them to begin to identify themselves more positively as students rather than as immigrants. The effects on learning from shifts in self-identity will be explored in greater detail in the following section.

Relationships at the Internal Level: The Learner's Sense of Self-Identity

The final level of relationships to be explored in this paper is the relationship of the learner with himself — i.e., how the learner perceives himself changing in relation to others in his social sphere as he acquires a new language. As described by Armour (2000), practicing a second language is like playing a new role, tantamount to “impersonating” another. Armour calls the process of becoming an authentic speaker in a new language *identity slippage*, identifying the learner as part of a “kind of diaspora” who is required to make meaning “using someone else’s tools” (p. 263).

The author most closely associated with the subject of language learner identity is Norton Pierce (see Norton, 2000; Norton Pierce, 1995), who found that identity could be expressed in multiple ways and change over time and location in relation to the social context. Expanding on Gardner's (1985) theory of motivation, Norton Pierce introduced the concept of “investment” to explain why the language behavior of L2 learners did not always appear to be synchronous with their motivation to learn: e.g., whether a learner chooses to remain silent or speak is dependent

on how the learner identifies himself during a particular social interchange. Connecting with Bourdieu (1991), who stated that that “linguistic exchanges . . . are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized” (p. 37), Norton Pierce’s (1995) research found that power relationships between learner and target language speakers play a large part in determining whether learners have opportunities to use the target language. Even when the learner is highly motivated to learn, such power relationships could have the effect of “blocking” their ability to practice and therefore inhibit their proficiency. One example given by the author is Martina, a Czech immigrant to Canada who was highly motivated to improve her English in order to gain better employment. Despite her motivation to advance at work, Martina was reluctant to speak English with co-workers because she felt the identity imposed on her at work was that of “stupid immigrant.” However, Martina also strongly identified herself as the primary caregiver in her family. When her English-speaking landlord accused her of breaking her lease, Martina broke out of her silence and engaged in a lengthy argument with the landlord in English because her strong identity as “caregiver” took over. As Norton Pierce (1995) explained, Martina’s investment in protecting her family caused her to overcome her fear of speaking with someone who had more power. Eventually, Martina’s identity as a mother transferred to the workplace, where she was finally able to overcome feelings of being marginalized by her much younger co-workers by conceptualizing them as children; at that point she began to speak with co-workers and customers more frequently.

In analyzing linguistic interactions between her subjects and their social networks, Norton Pierce (1995) also drew on Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of *legitimate language*. This is spoken by an individual who is legitimately recognized as able to produce a particular type of

discourse (e.g., a priest can say a mass), in a legitimate situation in front of legitimate receivers (e.g., mass could be read in a church), using legitimate linguistic forms. Norton Pierce applies this idea to interactions experienced by her subjects, showing how individuals determine whether to speak in a particular situation based on how “legitimate” they perceive their contribution to be. The perceived legitimacy is in turn based on a learner’s feelings about his own identity and is affected by the power dynamics that exist between the individuals sharing the conversational exchange.

McKay and Wong (1996) used Norton Pierce’s (1995) concept of social identity as a framework for studying the language learning progress of four junior-high Chinese immigrant students in California. The authors found that variances in how the students progressed in English seemed to depend on how they perceived their identities at particular points in time and how they saw speaking English as helping or inhibiting that identity. One immigrant student, Michael, quickly developed an identity as an athlete, which made him more ‘acceptable’ to his white classmates. As a result, he began to spend increasing amounts of time with English-speaking students, and his speaking and listening abilities (which were the language skills most valuable to him as an athlete) progressed rapidly, far outstripping his reading and writing proficiency. Another student, Jeremy, adopted the identity of model student in response to pressure from his parents, and focused his energy on improving his writing, which was the skill most valued in academic work. The authors conclude that a learner’s willingness to invest in the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking will shift as multiple identities emerge. In addition, they found that although the students were willing to learn to fit in as Americans and learn English, they continued to retain their Chinese language, which they used frequently with other Chinese students in the school. In fact, the Chinese dialects spoken among the Chinese

immigrants were used as markers that identified the speakers with specific regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Thus while the immigrant students were establishing a new identity within the American culture, they were also using their L1 to position themselves within the complex maze of cliques that were formed among the cohort of Chinese speakers. It appeared that they were identifying themselves culturally as both Chinese and American, a finding that is congruent with Berry's (1997) integration strategy or Schumann's (1986) type 1 acculturation.

The experience of the learners in Reynoso's (2008) study illustrates the interplay of identity, social networks, and acculturation. Like the subjects studied by Norton Pierce (1995), several of the participants in Reynoso's study reported that the humiliating treatment they endured from coworkers and employers motivated them to improve their English. The experience of discrimination appeared to force these learners to re-assert their identities. As one participant stated, "I felt like a slave. However, one day I asked myself what I was doing here. I had completed high school in my country with honors. This experience motivated me the most to learn English and attend college" (Reynoso, 2008, p. 405). In addition, the participants reported that it was important to retain their identity with their native culture while they were beginning the process of establishing a new identity in the target culture. As in the study by McKay and Wong (1996), most participants ended up developing a new, bicultural identity, which encompassed a new social network of American friends and participation in American cultural activities as well as continued close ties to family and return trips to the Dominican Republic. As one participant stated, "I am part of two cultures: American and Hispanic."

Menard-Warwick (2005) explored how the English learning experience of two Central American immigrants was shaped by their personal histories. The author demonstrated how the personal investment made in education by the subjects' parents influenced the subjects' tenacity

in learning English. In turn, the learners' own investment in learning English affected their decisions about which language to teach their children and when. The motivation of both women to learn English was significantly affected by their identities as young mothers; they wanted to improve their English so they could help teach their children and instill in them a love of learning, just as their own mothers had done for them. However, both women experienced social constraints which limited the amount of investment they could make in learning. For example, both were only able to find low-wage, unstable jobs with irregular schedules in places where the other workers all spoke Spanish. There was no opportunity to practice English and it was difficult to make time to attend class. In this study, although the learners' self-identity drove them to invest in learning, their lack of English-speaking contacts in their social network made it difficult to practice.

In another illustration of Norton Pierce's (1995) notion of investment, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) studied four Cambodian adult ESL learners to explore how their desire and ability to attend class changed as their roles and identities changed over time. The author found that the learners' identities as spouses, mothers, and workers had complex effects on their progress in learning. For example, one learner no longer needed to work after she got married; when she no longer valued English as a way to improve her job, her attendance at class waned. When another learner's husband saw that her social contacts were expanding as a result of attending ESL classes, he pressured her to stop going to school and start working in a sewing shop ten hours a day, six days a week. Other learners needed to be able to help their children with their homework. Because learning English was associated with child-rearing in these families, it was seen as the domain of the female and it was supported by the husbands. In a similar analysis of shifting gender identities within two Laotian families residing in Philadelphia (Gordon, 2004), the

workplaces in which the men were employed were populated mostly with other Laotians and Spanish-speakers. Workers were grouped according to their native language, so workers needed only to speak their L1. In contrast, because the women bore the responsibility of dealing with external social institutions (e.g., their children's schools, the legal system, and the landlord), they had many more opportunities to practice English. In these families, learning English ultimately became the domain of the female, which in turn shifted the power relationship between husband and wife. The author concluded that as identities shift, language learning can be affected, which in turn may cause identities to shift again.

The idea of identity shift is again documented in a study of the English language learning experience of older Russian immigrants to the U.S. by Hubenthal (2004), who noted that many of these immigrants had previous identities as well-educated professionals. On arrival in the U.S., however, many did not find employment (either because of lack of English skills or because of their age, or both), and ended up spending most of their time with other Russian speakers. The older immigrants also tended to live in enclaves where they could get by without speaking English, as described by Lazear (1999). Despite their separateness, the learners studied by Hubenthal were happy to be living in the U.S. and wanted to be a part of American society, considering citizenship the ultimate expression of integration. As well-educated professionals, they wanted to have enough proficiency in English to allow them to express their identities as “informed members of society and adept conversationalists, retaining their importance as grandparents, and being autonomous” (Hubenthal, 2004, p, 118). Despite this motivation, their behavior did not follow; they preferred to study in intensive classes on their own instead of making attempts at conversation with native English speakers. Many of the learners studied stated that they were embarrassed to talk to English speakers because their own English was so

low and that they felt ashamed as a result. The result was a vicious cycle: their social networks were limited to Russian speakers, which helped them maintain their Russian identity; however, they had little opportunity to practice English in informal conversations with English speakers, which would have helped them learn to express their complex identities in English.

A different type of identity shift is documented by Warhol (2004), who studied a population of elderly Liberian women immigrants to the U.S. to understand how these learners defined academic success. The author found that the standardized assessment tools required by the ESL program these women attended provided a poor measure of their achievement. Many of these women had never enrolled in school before because it was not common for Liberian girls to attend school; some were illiterate in their L1 because they spoke languages that had no written form. When tested, the students appeared to have made little progress in learning; however, because of their newly constructed identities as learners in the U.S., the students stated that they felt they were making progress simply because they were finally attending class. Those who were illiterate in their L1 found learning the ABCs challenging, but they were committed to investing time into the process because they felt that completing a task was another indication of success. In fact, when the students completed a project in class, it was celebrated with applause or a prayer of thanks—even if the task was as small as finally producing the written letter “c” correctly. In contrast to the Russian immigrants studied by Hubenthal (2004), who were motivated to learn English because they felt they were unable to express their complex social identities, the Liberian women were celebrating the opportunity to learn English in order to structure a better identity than they had experienced in their home country.

To test attitudes toward the idea of identity shift among L2 learners who had not yet immigrated, LoCastro (2001) studied Japanese university students who were learning English to

determine whether they evidenced readiness to adopt target language pragmatic norms, even if adopting those norms meant shifting their identity. The author used questionnaires, group discussions, and student writing assignments to collect data on the learners' attitudes and language awareness. The data indicated that the students had a positive attitude towards learning English and felt that gaining proficiency had value for careers, academic work, and traveling and living in English-speaking countries. However, they expressed resistance to the idea of changing their identity in order to become more proficient in English. As one student stated, "Somehow we may have to change our way of thinking when we speak foreign language and it's necessary. But it doesn't mean that we throw our own identities out, instead, we should keep 'ourselves'" (LoCastro, 2001, p. 80). As theorized by Milroy (1980), it is possible that this resistance is the result of the pressure of the strong L1 social networks that would be inherently present when learning an L2 while living in one's native country.

The Language Learner as Social Being: Implications for the Classroom

The need to translate the idea of the language student as social being to the classroom setting is illustrated by Cooke (2006), who analyzed the specific language learning goals of four students who were enrolled in English classes in Britain. Despite the fact that the curriculum required teachers to create an individual learning plan for each student, the teachers seemed unaware of the real educational and occupational goals of the students and how dramatically these goals varied from the "job-related education" that was reflected in the curriculum. As discussed earlier, many of these students had limited opportunity to practice English outside the classroom due to the limited nature of their social networks. Despite high motivation, investment, and access to ESL classes, the students were stymied in their learning because the curriculum did not address the real social situations they faced.

Durán (1996) also highlighted the importance of understanding the cultural-linguistic needs of ESL students. While the families in Durán's study recognized the need to learn English in order to be qualified for employment, they also needed to learn how to find places where jobs were posted, what kinds of skills and experience were expected of workers, and how to find transportation to a new job. As their children entered the school system, some family identities were upended; the parents perceived the discipline in school to be too lax, but if they tried to enforce discipline at home, the children threatened to report them. As their identities shifted in a new culture, these immigrants needed the language and pragmatic skills that would help them deal with unfamiliar and complex social situations. This need was echoed by Buttaro (2004), who called for a "broader definition of literacy" that takes into account the need of students to use language to establish identities in a new social and cultural community, stating that the best way to help immigrant learners is "to explore how language, culture, and society are intertwined" (Buttaro, 2004, p. 37).

Buttaro (2004) concluded that understanding the English language needs of learners requires more than merely assessing students' abilities in reading and writing; it also requires understanding the social and cultural factors that are at play in the students' lives, and developing curricula that address these realities. Buttaro noted that the curricula of ESL classes often reflect idealized American middle-class values and economic situations rather than the economic and social realities of the students (e.g., unsafe working conditions, inadequate access to health care, communication difficulties). Similarly, Gordon (2004) described the disconnect between the ESL textbooks she studied and the realities of students' lives; the textbooks concentrated on vocabulary for the workplace (where the students did not need to use English), but did not address English as used in the legal system, which was a pressing concern for the families in her

study. Menard-Warwick (2005) agreed, stating that educators need to understand the societal and personal forces that create dilemmas for students and address them directly by making them topics for discussion in class, allowing the students to use the target language to derive a collective solution based on the resources that each student brings to the class. Skilton-Sylvester (2002) encouraged teachers to learn as much as they can about their students' identities outside the classroom, and draw on those identities in classroom activities to encourage the students to continue their investment in learning.

Cooke (2006) reminded teachers that the classroom not only provides an important forum for learners to practice English, but also serves as a means of meeting other people and widening the students' social networks. Macintyre et al. (1998) stated that "the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness to actually communicate in them" (Macintyre et al., 1998, p. 547). Since a learner's willingness to attempt to practice may be inhibited by power relationships, Norton Pierce (1995) noted that language teachers should help learners learn to claim the "right to speak" outside the classroom, and encourage learners to reflect on situations where they feel marginalized so that they can learn to transform them through their language.

Finally, the importance of acknowledging the complexity of learner identities in the classroom was discussed by Nero (2005), who noted that educational institutions tend to assign learners "fixed ethnolinguistic identities" (p. 195), all too often simply identifying learners monolithically as "non-native speakers" rather than as complex individuals with multiple and shifting identities. Although immigrant learners may be experiencing rapid shifts in identity, it is important not to force learners to acculturate too quickly, giving them the opportunity to express

frustration with the new culture they are experiencing (Brown, 1980). LoCastro (2001) concluded that in light of the increasingly widespread use of English as a lingua franca, it is important to take into account an individual's desire to maintain identification with his own culture while becoming proficient in English: "[t]o do otherwise smacks of neo-colonial and hegemonic pretensions" (p. 83).

Conclusion

From the prior review, it appears that an immigrant learner's relationships with the host society, his social network, and his own identity act in complex ways to affect his second language learning. These relationships may be described as "layers" because they are overlapping and interdependent — a change in one can easily create changes in the others as well. For example, an individual's identity as a parent may motivate her to attend class to improve her English skills so she can communicate with her child's teachers; as the learner enters into conversations and relationships with the child's teachers, she broadens her English-speaking social network ties, which provides her with the ability to practice outside the classroom. The confidence the learner gains from these interactions could in turn have the effect of creating a positive attitude toward the host society and give the learner a greater desire to adopt the norms of the host culture.

If this is true, then the effectiveness of a teacher of English lies not only in assessing what students need to learn linguistically, but also in understanding how their progress may be enhanced or impeded by the multiple social relationships that students experience outside of the classroom. This requires thinking beyond placement tests and developing a methodology for collecting information about the students' willingness to acculturate, the type and extent of their social networks, and the reasons (e.g., personal identities) which are driving them to "invest" in

studying English. The questionnaires used by LoCastro (2001) and Buttaro (2004) provide a range of ideas for constructing a “social assessment” survey. In addition, teachers could obtain writing samples to both assess language and social experiences by providing an essay prompt along the lines of those used by LoCastro, such as “Describe your life as an immigrant woman in New York City. You may want to include the types of experiences you had (either positive or negative)” (p. 38).

In addition to collecting information, the teacher must be sensitive to the fact that the learner’s social relationships will change over time, which may change the individual’s willingness to invest in learning. As illustrated by Skilton-Sylvester (2002), students may drop out of classes suddenly for reasons unknown to the teacher; rather than assuming a lack of motivation, the teacher may want to follow up with the student to try to understand the change in situation and encourage the student to persevere, if that is practically possible for the student.

Finally, as Gordon (2004), Durán (1996), and Buttaro (2004) suggest, the language teacher can draw on the students’ social experiences outside the classroom as a resource for discussion within the classroom. Giving students the opportunity to voice their experiences gives them the opportunity to support one another; it also provides the teacher with additional information about the learning needs of her students, and may spark ideas for modifications to what is taught in the classroom. For example, a thematic unit on “finding a job” may require less focus on how to read classified ads and more on how to find transportation to work.

In the end, as Spolsky (1988) stated, some variables in language learning can be controlled and some cannot, but all of them must be taken into account by the language teacher. Successful second language teaching requires not only the ability to impart grammatical knowledge, but also a sensitivity to the social realities faced by students residing in an unfamiliar

culture. The teacher then becomes not only an instructor but also an important source of social support for the student, which may in turn be reflected in the student's willingness and ability to invest and progress in language learning.

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