Background

Recognizing that individuals not only learn differently but also have contrasting abilities in a second language (L2), second language acquisition (SLA) research has theorized the cognitive, conative, and affective dimensions of learner differences. The constructs of aptitude, learner strategies, motivation, autonomy, anxiety, and self-efficacy, to name a few, foreground different aspects of the diverse thoughts, motives, and behaviors of L2 speakers, and the way these impact learning outcomes. Focusing on the sociocultural dimension of learner differences, this chapter discusses identity as a construct that highlights the individual learner in relation to a particular social context. It recognizes that while language learners are described in SLA research in a variety of ways—bilinguals, multilinguals, immigrants, and heritage language learners—these labels chosen by researchers and institutions do not necessarily convey the complexity of learners’ personal histories and lived experiences. As learners navigate the social world in embodied ways, differences in terms of their L1, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religious affiliation can shape the extent to which they invest in the language practices of various communities.

In earlier social psychological research, these identity categories served as independent variables where L2 speakers were classified according to their membership in different social groups, and certain correlations or causal relations were investigated between these groups and certain qualities, behaviors, or attitudes. Questions regarding identity were tied to notions of culture or community and shared history, language, or geographical region. Learning another language meant being able to identify with the target L2 community and taking on aspects of their behavior (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Drawing on Tajfel’s (1982) conception of social identity that highlighted how people categorized the social world and perceived themselves as members of groups, Giles and Johnson (1987) theorized how ethnolinguistic identity and solidarity shaped predispositions towards speech accommodation and language maintenance. During this period, language learners were usually interpreted as having fixed personalities, learning styles, and motivations; notions that aligned with product-oriented methodological trends. While previous SLA research tended to define learners in binary terms (such as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited), more recently, identity has been understood as fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing, shaped by various historical and material circumstances. There has been great interest in the relationship between the learner and specific contexts, and learning experiences mediated through institutions like families, schools, and workplaces. What constitutes “culture” has become more difficult to apprehend and some identity scholars have drawn attention to
how the attribution of qualities to specific groups of learners can essentialize and reify identities in ways that do not account for changing circumstances. Researchers such as Norton (2000), Toohey (2000), Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), Block (2007), and Kramsch (2009) provided evidence that language learners are not unidimensional but have identities that are multiple, changing, and often sites of struggle. These contingent positions are shaped not only by learners’ material conditions and lived experiences but also by their imagined futures (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton & Pavlenko, 2019).

Changing conceptions of the individual, language, and learning have secured a place for identity on the SLA agenda. Different terms have been associated with this concept and while they may refer to the same object of study, they represent different theoretical perspectives and foreground specific ideas. The self, for instance, is regarded as a psychological entity, and self-concept refers to the cognitive and affective dimensions that shape what we believe about ourselves (Mercer, 2011). Dörnyei (2009) theorized the notion of the ideal self and the ought-to self to refer to the attributes a learner would like to possess and believes one should possess. From a sociocultural perspective, learners are also understood as agents who are shaped, but not completely determined, by context and are individuals with the capacity for self-determination. Derived from poststructuralist notions of the individual, subjectivity focuses on how our sense of self is constructed through discourse, and subject position draws attention to the way we position ourselves and are positioned in this discourse (Kramsch, 2009; Weedon, 1987). While both subjectivity and subject position highlight this discursivity, identity foregrounds how these selves are constructed in practice. Learners produce, enact, or perform identities (Blommaert, 2005; Butler, 1990; Hall & Bucholtz, 1995; Wodak, 1997) as they relate or interact with others in the social world (Norton Peirce, 1995).

During the sociocultural turn of SLA research, many scholars (Ricento, 2005; Zuengler & Miller, 2006; Block, 2007; Swain & Deters, 2007; Menard-Warwick, 2009) looked to Norton’s theorization of identity (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000, 2013) to integrate poststructuralist notions of identity and language learning. When her seminal article, “Social identity, investment, and language learning” (Norton Peirce, 1995) was published, SLA research was just beginning to emerge from its predominantly cognitive orientation to examine how social factors facilitated or inhibited language learning (Firth & Wagner, 1997). These changes were raising new questions of identity, and Norton saw the need to develop social theories that were complementary to cognitive theories and that captured the complexity of language learning as both a social and cognitive process. Her study of five immigrant women in Canada drew attention to the way globalization was changing the world, and how large-scale migrations were transforming post-industrialist societies into more multicultural and multilingual spaces (Norton, 2000). As migrants transitioned into their country of settlement, being able to acquire the country’s official language was key to social integration and meaningful employment. Native speakers of the host community, however, often served as gatekeepers to participation in different contexts by controlling access to linguistic resources and determining rules of use. For immigrants to claim their rightful place in a new country and to imagine better futures, they had to negotiate relations at work, school, and other community settings, and to assert their own identities.

Drawing on Weedon (1987), Norton pointed out that learning a language is a powerful political act, in which language constructs both social organization and a sense of self. The individual is conceived of as a “subject”, in that the individual can be subject to a set of relationships in one social site, or the subject of a set of relationships in another social site. In the former, the individual would be in a relatively powerless subject position; in the latter, the individual would have greater power relative to other individuals. To capture the plurality and fluidity that characterized this poststructuralist perspective, Norton (2013) defined identity as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 45). While identity can be framed as experiential, discursive, and developmental, Norton’s conception of identity is primarily constituted in
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relational terms; the individual never stands apart from the social world but is always an integral and constitutive part of it. As learners navigate diverse spaces, their sense of self and relation to the world continually shift, and they have to negotiate their identities as they position themselves and are positioned by others in terms of their identity, e.g., as Black, female, Filipino, middle class, etc. To participate agentively in these spaces, they need to draw on their material, cultural, and social resources, which are valued by others in different ways. In this perpetual state of flux, identity is dynamic, multiple, and oftentimes contradictory (Norton, 2013).

Identity research informed by critical theories recognizes that learner identities are not only multiple and dynamic but also positioned unequally. Through this critical lens, learner differences are viewed as learner inequalities, and the processes and outcomes of L2 learning are circumscribed by power. Identities are constructed and performed in frequently inequitable relations of power, affecting learners’ access to opportunities to participate in spaces of language acquisition. Identity theorists who take on a critical perspective are concerned with the ways in which power is distributed in both formal and informal sites of language learning, and how it affects learners’ opportunities to negotiate relationships with target language speakers. Identity, practices, and resources are mutually constitutive, and while some inscriptions of identity (e.g., race, gender, and ethnicity) may limit and constrain opportunities for learners to listen, speak, read, or write (particularly under conditions of marginalization), other identity positions may offer enhanced sets of possibilities for social interaction and human agency, i.e., the possibility to take action in social settings. Operating within the tensions of structure and agency, language learners who struggle to speak from one identity position may be able to reframe their relationship with others and claim more powerful, alternative identities.

Research

Evidence

As investigations of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class in SLA have evolved into major strands of research, poststructuralist approaches, influenced by the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1992, 1997) and post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994), are careful not to essentialize these identity categories. Hall focused on identity as in-process and stressed the importance of representation following from the discursive construction of identity. In his notion of new ethnicities, he provided an alternative theorizing of race that recognized experiences of race without homogenizing them, and he emphasized a multifaceted rootedness that was not limited to ethnic minorities and could be applied to other forms of difference. As Pennycook (2007, p. 39) notes: “Taken-for-granted categories such as man, woman, class, race, ethnicity, nation, identity, awareness, emancipation, language or power must be understood as contingent, shifting and produced in the particular, rather than having some prior ontological status”.

Navigating various spaces as embodied identities, L2 speakers are positioned before they even speak, shaping the extent to which they are granted or refused not only the right to speak but also the right of entry. Different ideologies or frames of reference shape the way they are perceived by others, and for Bourdieu (1987), these frames are constructed by symbolic or world-making power, “the power to impose and to inculcate principles of construction of reality” (p. 13). Constructed and imposed by structures of power, ideologies are dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Ideology is a site of struggle, of competing dominant, residual, and marginal ideas, produced and reproduced in interaction. Its mechanisms are what enable the privileging and marginalization of people by virtue of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class.
Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity have long been researched as inscriptions of identity, and several scholars have been interested in the relationship between race and language learning (Ibrahim, 1999; Lin et al., 2004; Curtis & Romney, 2006; Flores & Rosa, 2015; McKinney, 2007; Kubota & Lin, 2009). Ibrahim (1999) conducted research with a group of French-speaking continental African students in a Franco-Ontarian high school in Canada to examine the impact on language learning of “becoming Black”. Recognizing linguistic styles associated with “being Black” in North America, he argued that the African students’ use of Black American Stylized English was a way for these students to construct identities familiar to their peers, and to connect to North American imagined constructions of “Blackness”. Research in South African multilingual contexts has provided a different set of insights into issues of race with respect to language learning, and the learning of English in particular (e.g. Makalela, 2015; McKinney, 2007, 2017).

Conducting research on the language practices of Black South African students attending high schools that had previously enrolled White students, McKinney (2007) demonstrated how these Black youth had nuanced understandings of themselves and others in relation to different “brands” of English as well as to the use of local African languages. Although South Africa has 11 official languages, English is the language of power. One learner referred to the prestige variety of English as “Louis Vuitton English”, representing English as a commodity (McKinney, 2007, p. 14). Despite the criticism endured by Black students who are acquiring a prestige variety of English (perceived as “becoming White”), Black students resisted this derogatory positioning and showed their awareness of the different kinds of cultural capital carried by varieties of English and local languages. They showed that they were mindfully acquiring English for their own uses rather than identifying with White first language speakers of English in their language acquisition processes.

The 2006 special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* (edited by Kubota & Lin) offered several articles investigating the relationship between race and language learning, and all authors made the case that TESOL practitioners need to critically examine how our ideas about race and racial identities influence what we teach, how we teach, and how we see our students. Motha (2006) supported Kubota and Lin’s assertion that race is central in language teaching and examined how four American teachers attempted to create anti-racist pedagogies, showing what complexities such a commitment involved. For example, a Korean American teacher, who was the only teacher of color among the research subjects, discussed how she believed her legitimacy as a professional was judged inadequate by colleagues, and how this positioning contributed to her feelings of inequality within her professional context. Shuck (2006) examined how public discourse in the US links language with race as a way of positioning groups. In interviews with White undergraduates who speak English as a first language at a southwestern US university, Shuck found that non-native speakers with non-European origins were seen by the students as incomprehensible, intellectually inadequate and responsible for their “non-integration” in American society. In particular, she found the onus was always on the non-native speaker, not the White student, to create comprehensibility.

In a study of African American study-abroad college participants who learned Portuguese in Brazil, Anya (2011, 2017) found that these Black students were drawn by the desire to connect with and learn more about Afro-descendant speakers of their target language, while Feinauer and Whiting (2012), who studied Latinx communities in the US, endorsed ethnic identity development processes for preadolescent language minority youth. Studies of how ethnolinguistic differences shape interactions between those who are positioned as insiders or outsiders of a community continue to attract L2 identity research (e.g., Moussu & Llurda, 2008; Gatbonton et al., 2011).

Gender and Sexual Orientation

With regard to intersections of gender and language learning, the works of scholars such as Cameron (2006), Sunderland (2004), and Takahashi (2013) are particularly insightful. Their con-
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cception of gender, which extends beyond female–male divides, is understood to be a system of social relationships and discursive practices that may lead to systemic inequality among particular groups of learners, including women, minorities, the elderly, and the disabled. A number of these issues are taken up in Norton and Pavlenko (2004), who discuss how some female learners invest in learning English because they perceive it as linked to feminist discourse and as a language that provides opportunities to liberate themselves from a patriarchal order. Menard-Warwick (2009) explored the extent to which gender impacts the language learning of adult women by examining how the gendered life histories of immigrant women in California shaped their participation not only in the English classroom but also in the education of their children. Particularly significant in the study was the larger sociocultural context of Latin American immigration to the USA, and the challenges of poverty, unstable migrant status, childcare, and schooling. The study highlights the fact that profound inequalities exist both within and among groups of women, notwithstanding commonalities of experience.

The work of scholars such as Gray (2016), Moore (2016), and Nelson (2009) explores the extent to which sexual orientation might be an important identity category in the language classroom. In a study of an English class organized by an LGBT organization in Japan, Moore (2014) noted how the inclusiveness of this class empowered LGBT learners to speak honestly about their identities, enabling more opportunities to speak and practice the L2 and to question normative practices in commercial language schools. Of central interest is the way in which a teacher can create a supportive environment for learners who might be gay, lesbian, or transgender. Nelson contrasts a pedagogy of inquiry, which asks how linguistic and cultural practices naturalize certain sexual identities, most notably heterosexuality, with a pedagogy of inclusion, which aims to introduce images as well as experiences of gays and lesbians into curriculum materials. Nelson’s approach can fruitfully be applied to other issues of marginalization, helping learners to question normative practices in the target culture into which they have entered. The perceived existence of two clear, fixed, and opposing genders is shaped by binary, heteronormative ideologies of gender. Identity research in these areas seeks to develop a much richer and more nuanced understanding of how complex gender identities are indexed and performed in real-world contexts.

Social Class

Block (2012) argues that while class has not been on the SLA agenda to a significant degree, it is a useful identity inscription that enables an understanding of why learners orient to and engage with L2 learning processes. While social class has always been recognized as an economic position, it has also increasingly been regarded as a cultural process, marked by consumption patterns, identity formations, and bodily attributes like accent, behavior, and dress (Kelly, 2012). It reflects relationships between structure and agency, and economic and cultural inputs—relationships best integrated by Bourdieu’s conceptualization of social class (Crompton, 2008). In a study of Spanish L1 speakers in London, Block (2012) demonstrated how one migrant’s class position, indexed by his educational attainment, consumption patterns, and symbolic behavior, shaped feelings of ambivalence in different spaces of L2 acquisition and limited his opportunities of interlanguage development. Drawing on data from a case study of immigrant Filipino youth in Canada, Darvin (2017) illustrated how differences in social class positions can shape the linguistic confidence of these youth and their capacity to claim the identity of a legitimate speaker of an L2. While the two youth shared the same gender and ethnicity, differences in their economic, cultural, and social capital shaped their dispositions towards English and their sense of agency as they interacted with native and non-native speakers.

For Bourdieu (1991), these dispositions that shape an individual’s behavior are explained through the concept of habitus. Interpreted by Holland and Lave (2001) as “history in person”, habitus, is “a system of durable, transposable dispositions … principles which generate and organize practices
and representations” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). As a set of dispositions, habitus expresses both the internalized parameters of what is deemed reasonable or possible and a tendency to generate perception and practices that correspond to these structures (Swartz, 1997). In this sense, individuals draw on their habitus as they negotiate or perform their identities in different social interactions. What they judge as reasonable for people of their class comes from habitus, which is acquired by structures of social advantage and disadvantage and is constituted by combinations of different forms of capital. Identity scholars such as Block (2012, 2014), Darvin (2017, 2018), De Costa (2010, 2016), and Norton (2013) have drawn on Bourdieu’s (1987) theoretical toolkit of habitus, capital, and field, which examine class as relational and emergent. The dispositions, values, and lived experiences of L2 speakers shape how they position themselves in different fields and recognize, consciously or unconsciously, the markers of class that others bear.

Kanno and Vandrick (2014) edited a special issue of the Journal of Language, Identity & Education on social class where contributors demonstrated how this construct can be productive for understanding individual learner differences. Gao (2014) discussed the shifting model of class stratification in China and how this model shapes the understandings of language learners. Shin (2014) examined how middle-class Korean families invest in study-abroad programs for their children to learn English. Lopez-Gopar and Sughrue (2014) drew links between social class and coloniality and the impact of class differences in terms of access to English education. Darvin and Norton (2014a) illustrated how migrant Filipino students in Canada continually negotiated class positions in transnational spaces and how the affordances and constraints of social class can shape contrasting learning outcomes. Collectively, these articles asserted that just as race, ethnicity, and gender have been generative in understanding learner differences, social class is a powerful means to understand how differences in disposition and access to resources provide opportunities for L2 acquisition.

**Indexicality, Positioning, and Intersectionality**

Key to researching identity are the concepts of indexicality (Blommaert, 2005; Silverstein, 2003), positionality (Davies & Harré, 1990), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). As language is used to perform personal identities or characteristics, individuals can adopt linguistic styles or expressions that may *index* geographical origin, gender, age, or class and demonstrate membership in specific social groupings or identity categories. When these individuals speak with an interlocutor, they bring to the particular situation their “history as a subjective being” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48), as agents who are able to position themselves (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Whether speakers bring their identities to a conversation, or if these identities are constructed in vivo during a conversation, is a question that identity scholars continue to debate. What one says in interaction, however, also positions others, making them subjects of this discursive process. This *positionality* draws attention to how language as a social practice is subject to conditions of power and how identity is a site of struggle as people seek to claim a legitimate position within these conditions. *Intersectionality*, on the other hand, recognizes that while people can be positioned because of an inscription of their identity (e.g., being “Black”, “a woman”, or “gay”), these dimensions actually interrelate or intersect. The lived experiences of a working-class Black lesbian will be markedly different from those of a middle-class White heterosexual man, and identity researchers need to recognize that there are variations and inequalities within these dimensions (Block & Corona, 2014). The situation of struggling immigrant students cannot be attributed solely to inscriptions of race or ethnicity but must be examined with respect to other categories such as class and gender. Kamada’s (2010) study of the identities of half Japanese adolescent girls demonstrated the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender and illustrated how these young women navigated marginalizing discourses. In a study that examines the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, Appleby (2012) provides insight into teacher identity by discussing the challenges of White Australian men teaching in Japanese
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language schools in negotiating a particularly complex contact zone, and the way these challenges limited their professional and pedagogical aspirations.

Data Elicitation

In SLA research that examines identity as a construct of individual differences, the key methodological question to be answered is: what kind of research enables scholars to investigate the relationship between language learners as social beings and the frequently inequitable worlds in which learning takes place (Norton & McKinney, 2011)? Since a sociocultural perspective of identity and language learning characterizes learner identity as multiple and changing, quantitative approaches that rely on static and measurable variables will generally not be appropriate. While there are quantitative methods or designs that complement complex and dynamic perspectives of SLA, a focus on issues of power necessitates that qualitative research designs are framed by critical research (Norton, 2020). For these reasons, methods that scholars use in identity approaches to language learning tend to be qualitative rather than quantitative, and often draw on critical ethnography, feminist poststructuralist theory, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. This variety of perspectives has paved the way for a diversity of research approaches that range from the ethnomethodological (Benwell & Stokoe, 2016; Harklau, 2005) to the critical (Norton & De Costa, 2018). Researchers of identity adopt, modify, and design methodologies that fit their specific purposes, and this section discusses some of the most commonly used methodologies in researching identities.

Case Study

As a research approach, case studies have generally provided a contextualized profile of a person (e.g., a language learner or teacher) or a group (e.g., a class or a community of practice). Case studies analyze linguistic, cultural, and social phenomena to understand individuals’ experiences and development within specific contexts (Duff, 2007). Longitudinal case-based approaches to analyzing L2 development, for instance, reveal how data based on larger numbers of learners can obscure individual variation over time and variation of developmental patterns and processes across individuals (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2006). There are some case studies, as part of mixed-methods research designs, that analyze both quantitatively measured linguistic dimensions of learning/use and qualitatively described sociocultural dimensions (e.g., Duff et al., 2013; Kinginger, 2008). A great number of recently published case studies in language though have foregrounded personal and sociocultural aspects of lived experiences without detailed linguistic descriptions. This emerging body of research examines the shifting identities of language learners of different life stages, using diverse repertoires, while constrained by norms, ideologies, and policies (Duff, 2014). While a case study design offers an in-depth understanding of the context and processes of the phenomenon under study, it has often been caught in a methodological crossfire because of a number of issues. These include questions of what one can generalize on the basis of an individual case and how such a case contains a bias toward verification or a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived ideas (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Narrative Inquiry

In research that examines how learner identities shape the learning process, there has been a strong methodological focus on narratives, whether collected through fieldwork (Barkhuizen, 2016; Block, 2006; Miller, 2003) or from existing autobiographical and biographical accounts (Kramsch, 2009; Pavlenko, 2001). This methodological focus has many potential synergies with a critical research paradigm in that it foregrounds an individual’s sense-making of their experience as well as the complexity of individual/social relationships. Canagarajah (1996) asserts that narratives are able to represent knowledge “from the bottom up” (p. 327) and have the powerful potential to represent
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in a comprehensive and more open-ended way the identities of research participants. Pavlenko (2002) makes a strong case for the particular contribution that narrative can make:

L2 learning stories … are unique and rich sources of information about the relationship between language and identity in second language learning and socialization. It is possible that only personal narratives provide a glimpse into areas so private, personal and intimate that they are rarely – if ever – breached in the study of SLA, and at the same time are at the heart and soul of the second language socialization process.

(p. 167)

One specific approach to narrative inquiry is highlighting the “identity work” research participants engage in “as they construct selves within specific institutional, organizational, discursive and local cultural contexts” (Chase, 2005, p. 658). In a study that examined researcher identity, Norton and Early (2011) draw on Bamberg’s (2006) conception of big stories that focus on life histories and small stories that are centered on small talk and regular conversation. They reflect that while small stories in interaction may not create a coherent sense of self, they can highlight the diverse identities that one performs in everyday interactive practices. One of the challenges of narrative researchers is to understand what is “story worthy” in the participant’s social setting and to orient to the particularity of his or her story and voice (Chase, 2005). To analyze narratives, Block (2010) proposed three distinct ways that focused on different things: what is said (thematic), how narratives are produced (structural), and who the utterance is directed to and the purpose of such utterance (dialogic/performative). This third approach draws attention to the need to examine the positions adopted by the interlocutor and the significance of rigorous narrative analysis.

Pavlenko (2007) identifies a number of issues of narrative research that are linked to content and thematic analysis. The lack of both a theoretical premise and a set of established procedures, she argues, obscures how conceptual categories are identified and linked to specific instances. The focus on what recurs in the text can also lead to the oversight of important events that need not have happened repeatedly and of the gaps and absences in a text that are themselves meaningful. The most problematic issue, however, Pavlenko points out, is the lack of attention to how narratives are constructed through carefully chosen language. In this case, storytellers use words that position them in specific ways and reflect their own interpretive stances. Although narrative inquiry can be broad and its parameters can be difficult to define (Barkhuizen, 2013), Norton and Early (2011) in an exploration of researcher identity demonstrate how narrative inquiry can provide insight into the negotiation of identities, especially since narratives are themselves co-constructed and shaped by social, cultural, and historical conventions. De Fina and Baynham (2012) assert that narratives create a space for immigrant voices, further exemplified in the case involving Spanish-speaking Latina immigrants interviewed in a study by King and De Fina (2010). During interviews, the immigrant participants positioned themselves vis-à-vis language policies in the US, demonstrating the challenges of negotiating their identities within a broader anti-immigrant socio-political context.

**Conversational Analysis**

Benwell and Stokoe (2016) assert that while conversational analysts do not usually begin with identity as a theoretical tool, they recognize that social life is grounded in interaction and constituted by talk. Identities are made relevant by conversational participants and are constructed in sequence. If ethnomethodologists and conversational analysts were to adopt a theory on identity, therefore, it would be an “indexical, context bound theory, in which identity is understood as an oriented-to, recipient-designed accomplishment of interaction” (p. 68). Research thus has to begin with an analysis of identity categories that is not based on what analysts take to be relevant but
on what people do and say as they deploy categories. Talmy (2011) asserts that this positionality is significant even during research interviews when specific identities are performed during this particular speech event. Conversational analysis (CA) collects naturally occurring data where participants proceed with their daily routines. This means, however, that there is low standardization and comparability on the level of the interaction (Kasper & Wagner, 2014).

In a study of how the identity of an “ESL student” is constructed in routine classroom interactions between students and the teacher, Talmy (2008) demonstrated how CA can be productive in critical research on second language education. By grounding theories of language socialization and cultural production in the participants’ discursive practices, he asserts that CA can provide an analytic frame that shows how power is achieved in interaction before any a priori conclusion. By examining language at work, the researcher of identity can investigate how biases and assumptions of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are “instantiated, resisted, accommodated, reproduced, and/or transformed” (p. 206) in daily routines and activities. For Kasper and Wagner (2014), one of the greatest advantages of CA is that it offers researchers a coherent, integrated theory and methodology of interactions to investigate language-related real-life problems. Longitudinal CA research, for instance, helps examine the language learning of individuals over time and traces changes in their use of lexical and grammatical forms. Social problem-oriented CA examines how power imbalances are constructed through interactional practices in various settings like courtrooms or hospitals, positioning speakers by virtue of their situated identities. Kasper and Wagner point out that while CA in its earlier stages was limited by an entrenched monolingualism, more recent research has rectified this through studies that focus on the practices of multilingual interaction (He, 2013; Higgins, 2009; Nevile & Wagner, 2011; Li, 2011).

Practical Applications

The position that identities are indexed in the languages that learners use, and in the ways they use them, has significant practical implications for practitioners and policy makers. Creese and Blackledge (2015) assert that to “incorporate the complex, mobile language repertoires and identities” (p. 33) of learners, language classrooms in multilingual settings need to incorporate translanguaging strategies (Canagarajah, 2011; Garcia & Li, 2014) that enable learners to draw on their diverse linguistic resources. Recognizing the complex identities of heritage language learners also challenges the privileging of monolingual standard varieties in learning contexts, including their being stigmatized for nonstandard or “deficient” varieties and practices (Leeman, 2015). By understanding individual differences in terms of learners’ identities and personal histories, teachers can design learning activities that recognize the rich diversity of learners and affirm the knowledge, languages, and cultural resources that they bring to class. Learners may be excellent musicians, artists, or athletes and if the teacher constructs classroom activities in which these talents are made more visible, not only would there be greater opportunity for social interaction and language use, but such activities could affirm the identities of these learners as knowledgeable and competent individuals. Language teacher identity (Barkhuizen, 2017; Cheung et al., 2015; Varghese et al., 2016) also has great implications on pedagogy. Teachers themselves are engaged in identity work when interacting with language learners, and they need to reflect on their own teaching practices and ask to what extent they are able to provide conditions in which learners are able to assert their own identities (Ponte & Higgins, 2015). How can language learning offer greater opportunities for learners to expand their social networks and access diverse opportunities? While structures of power and oppressive discourses can continue to limit the possibilities of learners outside the classroom, teachers need to think about how those marginalized by virtue of gender, race, ethnicity, social class, or sexual orientation can reframe their relationship with others, appropriate more powerful identities, and claim the right to speak.
One pedagogical tool to address this objective is the construction of identity texts, which are creative works or performances that promote enhanced investment on the part of learners (Cummins & Early, 2010). In recent years, digital storybooks have become popular identity text projects that encourage learners to claim authorial agency (Stranger-Johannessen & Norton, 2019). By borrowing and repurposing texts, images, and music, learners are able to become co-authors and agents of language and literacy acquisition. In a study of the creative process of ninth-grade students, Rowsell (2012) demonstrated how the production of their own digital stories about “an odyssey of self” helped them reposition their identities. By making different multimodal choices to represent their lived histories, learners are granted individual creative expression. Because digital stories have very few structuring conditions and constraints, learners can improvise their ideas, values, and histories without critical challenge and, thus, they are able to reimagine their own self-identifications. For Darvin and Norton (2014b), digital storytelling is a powerful way to affirm the transnational identities of migrant learners who speak different languages and negotiate different cultures. Through a workshop where high school students produced their own stories of migration, learners were able to use their own voices and mother tongues and draw from the modalities of images and music to share their lived experiences. Kendrick et al. (2012) conducted a project where rural Kenyan students were provided with digital cameras, laptops with connectivity, and voice recorders to be journalists. As students conducted interviews with government officials, their digital tools became signifiers of membership in a journalistic context. Through role-playing, students were able to ask about controversial issues like dissent and police corruption, and negotiate the performance of new, more empowered identities.

McKinney and Norton (2008) have argued that responding to diversity in the language classroom requires an imaginative assessment of what is possible as well as a critical assessment of what is desirable. Clearly, the assessment of what is “possible” requires ongoing interaction between teachers, administrators, and policy makers, with reference to larger material conditions that can serve to constrain or enable the range of identity positions available to students (see Darvin, 2017; Stranger-Johannessen & Norton, 2019). If we agree that diverse identity positions offer learners a range of positions from which to speak, listen, read, or write, the challenge for language educators is to explore which identity positions enable agentive engagement and interaction. Conversely, if there are identity positions that silence students, then teachers need to investigate and address these marginalizing practices. Through teacher training and reflexive practice, teachers can develop a critical disposition necessary for a pedagogy that affirms and empowers the complex, multiple identities of learners (Darvin, 2015). It is through a critical pedagogy that examines and addresses inequalities that language learners can invest in the language and literacy practices of their classrooms and claim their right to speak and to be heard.

Future Directions

As technology continues to provide new spaces of language acquisition, how learners draw on their linguistic and semiotic repertoires to curate digitally mediated identities will continue to be an important area of research (Darvin, 2018; Henry, 2019; Lam & Smirnov, 2017; Thorne et al., 2015). Learners navigate these spaces in usually disembodied ways, and how social categories of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation are performed and recognized online will be of increasing interest to identity researchers examining issues of positionality. Through the digital, not only do speech and writing converge, collapsing the boundaries of language and literacy, but online and offline spaces impinge on each other in mutually constitutive ways. The connection between bodies and devices has become more seamless, shaping not only behavior but also modes of thinking (Pennycook, 2017; Toohey, 2019). Consequently, online communicative practices are produced through the convergence of material conditions, dispositions, desires, and cultures, presenting complex and exciting possibilities for identity studies.
Although social interactions continue to migrate to online spaces, the access and use of digital technologies, however, remain unequal. New and often invisible relations of power between human and non-human actors, sociotechnical structures, and algorithmic processes shape the ways learners negotiate their identities online. The dynamics of this interaction as it impacts opportunities for SLA present a range of research tasks for those interested in issues of identity. Following the “trans-” turn of language learning and teaching research where translanguaging, transculturality, and transnationalism have been foregrounded, there has been increasing interest in research populations like study-abroad learners, heritage language learners, and lingua franca speakers (De Costa & Norton, 2017). To understand how new forms of inequality impact the social and educational trajectories of learners, the construct of scales (De Costa & Canagarajah, 2016; Maloney & De Costa, 2017) has become increasingly productive. Through a scalar approach that treats scales as a shifting category of practice, longitudinal identity research can interpret how identities emerge from the translingual practices of people and institutions (Canagarajah & De Costa, 2016).

The integration of technology in almost every aspect of everyday life, where learners move fluidly across online and offline spaces, means that researchers are confronted with a more complex array of potential sites and sources of data. Tying together disparate insights from diverse digital practices to understand identity production becomes more complex. Challenging the notion of conventionally bounded field sites, Hine (2015) highlights the need for an “ethnography of an embedded, embodied, everyday Internet” (p. 56) that enables researchers to move between face-to-face and mediated forms of interaction. Leander (2008) defines connective ethnography as a methodological approach “that considers connections and relations as normative social practices and Internet social spaces as connected to other social spaces” (p. 37). Recognizing the connectedness of these spaces, Büscher and Urry (2009) have devised mobile methods that allow researchers to examine these online and offline practices through the frame of movement. In this case, data collection takes into account the bodily travel of people and virtual travel across networks of mediated communications, as people are connected in face-to-face interactions and via mediated communications.

One fundamental challenge in conducting identity research is that one’s findings will always be partial, no matter how meticulously the research is executed and articulated across spatio-temporal scales (Block, 2010). Researchers need to continually grapple with how many interviews, stories, and artifacts can sufficiently represent an individual’s identity. At the same time, identity is not only linguistically mediated, but also semiotically mediated. This point is underscored in Blommaert’s (2005) definition of identity as “particular forms of semiotic potential, organised in a repertoire” (p. 207), and also discussed further in the context of online–offline spaces (Blommaert, 2019). Because of the complexity of one’s repertoire, any analysis that focuses only on the linguistic will be limited and will miss other semiotic resources that comprise communication: gaze, posture, gestures, dress, etc. (Block, 2010). Self-identifications shift as people represent themselves differently across time and space and project a self of their choosing (Davies & Merchant, 2009; Stornaiuolo et al., 2013; Weber & Mitchell, 2008). As people participate in online spaces, the integration of visual, aural, spatial, and gestural affordances in the analysis of identities becomes increasingly significant.

By responding to the call of The Douglas Fir Group (2016) for more transdisciplinary SLA research, identity scholars can also work with scholars who research cognitive, conative, and affective learner differences (Clément & Norton, 2021). Exploring how constructs like aptitude, motivation, and self-efficacy can be operationalized alongside identity can help the development of a unified theoretical framework that demonstrates the interconnectedness and interdependence of cognitive, psychological, emotional, and sociocultural processes. As learners negotiate identities inscribed by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class, understanding the complexity of their personal histories and lived experiences remains a critical component of addressing learner differences. The extent to which learners are able to exercise their agency and assert their identities in a continually changing world will continue to generate exciting SLA research in the 21st century.
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