

Whose voice is telling the story?
An Iranian immigrant woman's language learning experiences

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Abstract

It is evident that social and linguistic aspects of language learning affect each other (Pennycook 1994b; Canagarajah, 1999a; Norton, 2000; Block, 2003b; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Informed by a poststructuralist notion of identity and in response to the recent call for socially-oriented SLA research, the study reported in this article opened up a space in which a broad view of the language learning context was integrated with an in-depth understanding of an immigrant woman's changing identities. The study examined the language learning experiences and negotiation of identities of an Iranian immigrant woman. Adopting a poststructuralist research framework facilitated a multi-layered understanding of the participant's language learning experiences within her social context. In accordance with previous research, identity was considered to be a dynamic process of becoming, context dependent and constructed through discursive practices of individuals within their social setting (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1990; Hall & du Gay 1996; Weedon, 1996; Woodward, 1997; Dolby 2000; Farrell 2000). The participant's life history thus appeared not as a single coherent account, but as a series of multiple, inconsistent and contradictory narratives. In response to her psychological needs and her constantly changing environment, she enacted complex, multi-faceted and changing identities.

Aims and context of the study

There has been considerable debate in recent years regarding the role of the broader social context in second language acquisition. These debates are centred on issues such as globalisation and language policy, global homogeneity and the construction of a more socially sensitive approach towards second language acquisition (SLA) research:

Such research would involve exploring the extent to which macro social constructs such as gender, as well as the trilogy of political, cultural and economic capital, play themselves out at the micro level of the foreign language classroom and the effect they have on language

development, not only in terms of formal aspects but also in terms of issues such as identity and face. (Block, 2003b: 138)

The present debates have impacted on the way we see individual learners in this particular context. The works of Pennycook (1994a), Rampton (1995), Canagarajah (1999b), Norton (2000) and Block (2003a) are good examples of the *social turn* (Block, 2003b) in second language acquisition research.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how an Iranian female immigrant experienced learning English within her social contexts, resulting in a detailed description and interpretation of the ways she viewed herself as a language learner within the existing power relations in society. To achieve this, a qualitative case study approach based on the participant's life history narratives was conducted. The main purpose of narrative inquiry is to understand how participants make meaning of their life trajectories. Such narratives are helpful devices in studying lived experiences (Punch, 1998). They provide us with the chance to scrutinise how individuals narrate their understanding of the social contexts they inhabit (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). As identity is constructed through narration, individuals take advantage of the opportunity to reflect upon and build up their identities and understand broad social frameworks (Jansen & Wildemeersch, 1996).

The study provided the chance to create a deeper understanding of the constructed identities of an Iranian immigrant woman, the ways her identity options related to her language learning experiences and her aspirations to invest in her language learning.

Basic assumptions of poststructuralism

The theoretical framework of poststructuralism was the guiding perspective for this study. The main assumptions of the present research were grounded in a non-essentialist notion of identity. Within recent decades there has been a growing interest in non-essentialist and poststructuralist approaches to identity in applied linguistics (e.g., Miller & Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2001; Kanno, 2003; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Nunan, 2005; Block, 2006).

Non-essentialists explore identity with regard to dynamic change, hybridity, fragmentation and multiplicity (Hall & du Gay, 1996; Hall, 1997; Woodward, 1997; Dolby, 2000; Farrell, 2000), holding that identity is deeply rooted in social interaction and is fluid from context to context (Said, 1978; Lipiansky, 1991; Morrison, 1993; Adams & Marshall, 1996; Hall, 2000). Expressed plainly, 'identity is defined as something that we constantly renegotiate during the course of our lives' (Lave & Wenger, 1998: 153). A non-essentialist standpoint towards the negotiation of identities rejects the fixity of identity options operating within an individual, and identity is viewed as being in flux.

Poststructuralist theories of subjectivity thus ‘capture the active process of taking up certain subject positions in an ongoing process of becoming – rather than merely being – in the world’ (Jackson, 2004: 674).

Through a poststructuralist lens, SLA research and scholarship have undergone a theoretical shift to include concepts such as identity, the language learner, culture and community. Poststructuralism proved effective as a framework for this study because it takes into consideration the public and personal intersections of gender, class, race, ethnicity, language, power and knowledge within individuals’ lives (Butler, 1990; Weedon, 1996). This framework makes it possible to consider the role of unequal power relations, politics, ideologies and positioning in SLA contexts. Insights gained from poststructuralist theory facilitated a multi-layered understanding of the participant’s shifting identities within the contexts of immigration and language learning. The framework provided fertile ground for investigating her fragmented identities within different social environments.

The following summarises the main assumptions informing the poststructuralist perspective adopted in the study:

- 1 Identity is context-dependent and is constructed through discursive practices of individuals within their social settings (Derrida, 1967).
- 2 Through narrating their life histories, individuals construct their multiple identities (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).
- 3 Poststructuralism is an appropriate lens through which to investigate power relations and negotiation of identities in an immigrant woman’s life history narratives (Hall & du Gay, 1996; Hall, 1997; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).
- 4 Individuals constantly take up different subject positions; identity is a dynamic process of becoming (Hall, 1997; Woodward, 1997; Dolby, 2000; Farrell, 2000).

Research design

A case study design based on the life history narratives of an Iranian immigrant woman was used in order to investigate the processes of identity negotiation and the complexities of her English language learning experiences. In terms of the study under focus, a ‘case study is defined by interest in an individual case ... by whatever methods we choose to study *the case*’ (Stake, 2005: 443). In conducting the case study, the researcher was interested in interpreting the underlying meanings of the data (Merriam, 1998). In order to retain the privacy of the participant, her real name has been substituted with a pseudonym, ‘Marjan’.

The main way of collecting data was through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. I consider the interview as ‘a very good way of accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations, and construction of reality’ (Punch, 1998: 174). A life history interview in particular is designed to collect information regarding an individual’s subjective understanding of different stages of his or her entire life:

A person’s life history, the one he or she chooses to tell others, is what is most real, most important to him or her and is what gives us ... the clearest sense of the person’s subjective understanding of his or her lived experience, his or her life as a whole. (Clandinin, 2007: 233)

The different identity voices within the participant’s narratives are highlighted in the following sections of the paper. Summaries are presented with an emphasis on participant’s language learning and the different identity voices which emerged across her narratives:

Further avenues for the analysis of narratives are opened up by thinking about whose voices are telling the stories – in any story telling context, the voices are differentiated and stratified – and by the social and cultural context in which the stories are told. (Punch, 2005: 218)

Apart from an in-depth investigation of the participant’s life history, the analysis shed light on her ideological and philosophical backgrounds, major milestones in her life, her language learning experiences, strategies she utilised to negotiate her identity and the way her social and psychological environment left an impact on her language learning journey.

Multiple identity voices

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ is valuable for interpreting the language learning experiences of immigrant women within multicultural settings. According to Bourdieu, habitus does not just form individuals’ perceptions of the world, it determines individuals’ actions including their speaking and gesturing within their social environments (Bourdieu, 1984). That is to say, immigrant women’s relationships with the English-speaking community, their ways of communication, and their mental perceptions and attitudes are all influenced by the nature of their habitus.

The different identity voices that could be heard beneath the surface of the participant’s narratives were identified. Through her search to develop an acceptable social and personal identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Hall & du Gay 1996; Cote & Levine, 2002), she tried hard to attain a meaningful place in English-speaking society.

Marjan the political activist: Rebellious voice

Marjan described the socio-political context which shaped her identity narrative and set her own analysis of her life trajectory. Her identity story was clearly influenced by the socio-political situation of Iran in 1979. The Iranian Revolution and Iran-Iraq war exerted a crucial influence on her identity narrative.

Marjan positioned her life story within a certain moral framework. Theorists argue that individuals connect through their imaginations to certain groups of people because they wish to become a member of the group (e.g., Norton & Kanno, 2003). Marjan revealed that, as a result of her beliefs and activism during the Iranian revolution, she harboured a strong desire to pursue a socio-political mission in her life. She experienced a new subject position as a journalist and translator before her immigration to Australia. Within her interviews she highlighted her educational and political background and revealed her hope for this identity to be acknowledged.

Marjan joined the revolutionary movement in Iran for the purpose of enacting social change, and not out of religious motivations. She expected the revolution to enhance her rights and advance her social and intellectual opportunities. She made her debut by engaging in political activism, joining dissident groups, getting involved in book reading clubs and participating in subversive anti-regime activities. She discovered a new sense of identity by refusing to conform to the traditional norms of life in her family and engaging with the new intellectual trends in the society. This choice demanded deep and intense psychological adjustments and continual personal renovation.

One's upbringing, cultural milieu and means, according to Bourdieu, all contribute to form one's attitude, how one sees and interacts with the social environment, and how one experiences academic life (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). It is evident that language learners' needs to learn an additional language are intertwined with the way they view themselves in the world, the symbolic resources (Bourdieu, 1991) they desire to acquire and their lived experiences. In other words, the rationale for desiring a second language is informed by who a learner wishes to be. Marjan developed an ideal image of herself as a woman pursuing a political and academic life, basically as an intellectual reaction to the drastic changes taking place in the social and political climate of post-revolutionary Iran. In order to be able to interpret the social changes that had left a deep impact on all aspects of her life, she undertook to complete a double degree in Political Science and English Language Translation, after which she also managed to overcome her feelings of hesitancy and self-doubt.

After the revolution, Marjan learned to contend with a drastic distance between her real life and her intellectual life. Her life was affected by war, social pressures of different kinds and a discriminatory and corrupt system in the university entrance exam that hindered her access to postgraduate studies despite her proven academic capabilities. She wished to continue her postgraduate studies but was rejected for having a 'history' of political activism. When war broke out, her family moved to another city and they became internal refugees. They learned to scale back their lifestyle, adjusted to new realities and started to set up a new life all over again. Here she found no motivation or rationale to conform to her father's expectations and instead readjusted herself to the new situation by becoming even more rebellious:

The way the revolution influenced me was to say 'No' to whoever was in a position of power without thinking whether it is right or wrong. And even at home we had a lot of disputes with my father because we saw him as a symbol of authority; and being a symbol of authority, we had to say 'No' to whatever he said.

Marjan the passive woman: Subdued voice

Marjan immigrated to Australia to build a better future for her child and to become liberated from the constraints and pressures of the Islamic regime, which didn't provide a constructive atmosphere for political discourse in which young adults could communicate their ideas while pursuing higher education goals.

After her immigration to Australia, Marjan felt a sudden shift in her identity status. Her bachelor's degree in English Language Translation notwithstanding, the reality of her inability to communicate effectively within an English-speaking environment put that degree under a question mark in her esteem, and shook her confidence in herself. She accepted the full responsibility of running the household and looking after the children. Her links to the outside world were limited to trivial conversations in the playground or a chat with a landlord whose English was not all that fluent. She had lost her self-confidence after her initial contacts and displayed severe signs of depression:

I was quite depressed since I was at home all the time ... and the outlook for any kind of social activity and getting out of the house did not seem very bright.

Subsequently, Marjan's failed attempt to enrol in a postgraduate program in Political Science in Australia stifled any intellectual ambitions she had, and she simply aborted the idea and settled into a life of domestic routines. She stated that her aim had been to get her PhD. Her application to do a Masters degree in Iran had been vetoed by the university selection committee because she had been involved in anti-regime activist groups, and now she had experienced academic rejection again in her new country.

Marjan's non-assertive voice could be heard throughout much of her narrative at this point. She tried to assert herself by not accepting the way the system works, but in response to obstacles she didn't meet the challenge to assert her capabilities. She avoided any type of intensive or demanding contact with the wider English-speaking society for quite a while. Then she found a job as a filing clerk in an engineering company. The job was not in line with her real interests and she initially adopted an avoidance strategy in order to deal with the social pressures of her workplace:

They were mostly technicians with little education, some did not even have a diploma; and well their manners and language left a lot to be desired. They had no qualms about using foul language in the presence of a woman, and they constantly cussed [used four-letter words with] each other and ... Sometimes, I had some business, and when I went into their rooms, sexy magazines were strewn all over the place ... Well, I could not establish any relationship with their type, and I was always uncomfortable in that male culture as a woman.

According to the research, immigrants' 'ideological setting' (McAdams, 1996) has a determining impact on the nature of their identity capital and the ways they need the language. Ideological setting refers to

the person's religious, political, and ethical beliefs and values as they are instantiated in [their life history narratives], including the individual's account of how those values and beliefs came to be. (McAdams, 1996: 308)

In this context, Marjan's ideological setting had left a critical imprint on her inducements and need for English, and thus on her language learning experience. Ultimately Marjan left her job at the engineering company after getting into an argument with her boss. She viewed the episode as a result of her boss being unable to communicate with her directly, and therefore judging her performance through what others said about her. The confrontation signalled a turning point in the transformation of her social identity. It was after this that her non-assertive voice faded away as she recalled how she found the courage to deal with her social environment more effectively. Though the job had not provided her a strong sense of identity, through this experience she found the courage to assert her capabilities and developed a more positive identity image for herself:

I went and told him that if he had talked to me directly, I would have told him that what he points out as my mistakes are not really my fault. And I told him that if he wanted to judge my performance based on my English, it would be a mistake, because I am not a native speaker and should not be expected to speak as fluently as them; but that I have a brain that is working just fine! I told him that he should judge me by my brainpower and not by my language! This was something that, just six months earlier, I did not have the courage to say!

... something that I did not have enough self-confidence to utter. But that day, I did it quite easily. I told him how mistaken he had been in his judgment.

Marjan exhibited sensitivity towards the way she believed she was being positioned in her workplace. She rejected the imposed negative identity and asserted her own positive self-image. From that point in Marjan's narrative one can trace the revival of her motivated voice which asserted her modified self-image.

Marjan the supporter: Community worker's voice

Marjan experienced a positive sense of identity within the Iranian community in Australia. She had a special status as the organiser of Iranian New Year (*Nourouz*) ceremony and other social gatherings. She had an established status and recognition as a helpful individual who assisted new arrivals and other community members with useful information and in other ways. Her desire to help the community and her radical, rebellious voice had now found a different outlet. Her experiences and identity formation in underground political anti-regime activities in Iran were translated into a community worker's voice in Australia, and she eventually enrolled in a university course.

Marjan found her desired self-image through these interactions. Her job as a migration agent was in line with her aspiration to be a community helper and fed into her desired assumed identity. She had to invest in her language skills and psychological resources in order to run the business, and she consolidated these in her university course and through her active involvement with her classmates at the university. She now was ready to assert her translator's self-image and studied hard to gain a status as a very good student:

Now I have to show my professor that the diploma I showed him as a translator was not a joke; there was something to it! This need forced me to put the dictionary next to me and even during exams I take it with me! [Laughter]

Her job as a migration agent offered her the chance to not only follow her aspirations to support other people but also find recognition within Australian society as a working woman running her own business.

The theory of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) is helpful in understanding Marjan's ideal self-image. The nature of personal aspirations represented different concepts through which she was able to negotiate a positive social identity and a desirable self-image. The concepts of helping the community, personal development in the form of high achievement in education and political activism were at the core of her desired self-image. On her arrival in Australia, she was unable to find an appropriate space to follow her political ambition to protest against religious fundamentalism in Iran.

She also did not have access to a negotiation process for pursuing higher education. Therefore, she chose to place her ideal mission on hold by pursuing a career through which she could help refugees and other immigrants. This career provided her access to a negotiation process and helped her build up a desired and modified self-image:

Umm ... you see, I had a sense of mission; I felt I had to do something. I felt I wasn't here to just hang about for a while, and I don't know, then settle into the life of a housewife and mother. The thought of falling into the routine of an ordinary existence [bothered me]. I felt I had a mission to be doing something all the time! That's how it was for me ... and when we came here the appearance of 'my mission' changed completely! [Laughter] ... Now I help new arrivals in need, or things of that sort ... The picture I want to see of myself generally, when I am sixty and I look back on my life is of someone who was outstanding in some way, in some achievement – occupational or otherwise – and not a mere auxiliary [to someone else] all the time. What this can be, now I think, might be a migration agent who helped this number of people with a difficult life come over and have a better life here. This idea now gives me satisfaction.

It is clear that the nature of Marjan's imagined identity underwent a process of gradual transformation throughout the course of her life history narrative. In this respect, Norton notes how

[d]ifferent learners have different imagined communities and that these imagined communities are best understood in the context of the learner's unique investment in the target language and the conditions under which he or she speaks or practises it. (Norton, 2001: 165)

Marjan's investment in her career, which entailed a high level of English language proficiency, provided her with an alternative way to define and negotiate her subject position and rebuild her distorted social identity after her initial contacts and efforts upon her arrival in Australia had proven to be unsuccessful.

Conclusion

Bourdieu makes a connection between the concepts of class and cultural capital: 'differences in cultural capital mark the differences between social classes' (1984: 69). He emphasises the arbitrariness of the signs of cultural capital and 'legitimate culture'. He concludes that considering current social practices in society as legitimate and ignoring their arbitrariness leads to a form of 'symbolic violence'. A combination of factors such as perception of racism, absence of socially visible symbolic capital and depression could have produced the sense of 'otherness' (Phillipson,

1992; Pennycook, 1998) experienced by Marjan, and thus delayed her joining the work force and advancing her English language skills in Australia.

After her unsuccessful attempt to enter English-speaking society through academia, Marjan reconstructed her desired social identity differently. The fundamental theme beneath this identity option was ‘providing social service’, that is, ‘working for the masses’, which had its roots in her socialist aspirations, a carry-over from her past acquired in the leftist ethos of the youth culture prevalent in the early years of post-revolutionary Iran. Her lifelong sense of mission acted as a stimulus to improve her English and pursue an ideal goal, and helped her find her own unique way of self-expression in the English-speaking society.

In other words, ideological setting could be understood as an ‘internal subjective component’ (Cote, 1993) of identity capital. That is to say, immigrants’ investment in their language learning represents how they define themselves and their relationship with the world (Norton, 2000). Internal and intangible aspects of identity capital are psychological qualities such as cognitive flexibility, strength and self-monitoring, which are not socially visible (Cote; 1993). As newcomers in a new society, immigrants need a strong subjective component of identity capital to be able to deal with unequal power relations in the new society in order to achieve the personification of their desired self-image. Apart from Marjan’s internal components of identity capital, the combination of a good background in English, the result of her studying English translation at the university in Iran, and her desire to perform some community service to regain her desired space in the society could have led to her continuing efforts to achieve an acceptable level of English fluency in later stages of her life in Australia.

Identity negotiation is described as ‘a transactional interaction process, in which individuals attempt to evoke, assert, define, modify, challenge and/or support their own and others’ desired self-images’ (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2004: 4). In Marjan’s case, the redefinition of her desired self-image led to the protection of her desired personal identity from destruction. Informed by Marjan’s narrative, in our educational planning it is crucial to go beyond the classroom context by considering the role of learners’ identities, the social and psychological resources they bring with them to their learning environment, and the channels through which they find access to social practice.

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