SOCIAL IDENTITY IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the interdisciplinary field of inquirey which investigates people's capacity to learn a second language (L2) or subsequent languages (L3, L4, etc.) once the first language (L1) has been acquired. Thus, the onset of acquisition occurs at some time during the L2 learner's late childhood, adolescent, or adulthood years in either naturalistic (informal) or instructed (formal) settings. When the inquiry into SLA began in the late 1960s it drew equally from what was known or theorised in the fields of linguistics, psychology, language teaching and child language acquisition. In the years that ensued, SLA developed ties with the fields of anthropology, education, bilingualism, psycholinguistics and sociology, and since the mid 1990s there has been a significant theoretical shift from what was once a near exclusive concern for psycholinguistics aspects of L2 learning, or 'language in the mind', to a focus on the socio-pragmatic aspects of L2 acquisition, or 'language as situated in social contexts' (Ellis, 2012).

Kata Kunci : *Second Language Acquisition, linguistics, psychology, language teaching*

One significant influence on this line of SLA inquiry has been social identity theory - a poststructuralist perspective first introduced into SLA by Bonny Norton Peirce (1995). The theory integrates concepts from sociology (Pierre Bourdieu), cultural anthropology (Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger), literary criticism (Michael Bakhtin) and feminism (Chris Weedon) to respecify 'sense of self as both socially contructed and socially constrained' (Ortega, 2009, pp. 241-242). In fact, the purpose of this paper is to outline what social identity theory contributes to our understanding of L2 acquisition. In doing so, the paper highlights some perceived flaws in the assumptions posited by Schumann's (1976, 1986) Acculturation Model as well as in the notions of 'instrumental' and 'integrative motivation' as expounded in the Socio-Educational Model of Gardner and Lambert 91972) and Gardner (1985) to show how social identity theory may better account for L2 learners either succeeding or failing in their endeavours to become competent speakers of the target language (TL) in both circumstantial and elective contexts.

It needs to be said that acculturation into the target language society in itself is not a guarantee of successful L2 aquisition as 'success or failure in L2 learning are too complex to be explained by static membership into a group or by individual choice alone' (Ortega, 2009, p.59). Nevertheless, the Acculturation Model (Schumann, 1976, 1986) predicts that the closer the learner can socially and psychologically become the TL society, 'the more successful his or her eventual learning outcomes will be' (Ortega, 2009, p. 59). In this model 'social distance' refers to L2 learners' desire to become members of the TL society and 'psychological distance' refers to how comfortable they are with their L2 learning tasks (Barkhuizen, 2004, p. 562). Unfortunately, this assumption does not take into account the ways in which inequitable relations of power affect interaction between L2 learners and TL speakers (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 12) because the latter have 'gatekeeping powers' (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 501) with which they

can either grant – or deny – L2 learners 'access' to the social networks that provide them with the opportunities to speak (Heller, 1987, as cited in Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 13). Thus, it is either this lack or denial of access to TL social networks that becomes detrimental to L2 development (Norton, 2000, as cited in Block, 2007, p. 868) – not the learner's perceived lack of either instrumental or integrative motivation nor the learner's commitment to learning the TL (Norton Peirce, 1995, pp. 16-17). The major weakness in the Acculturation Model, therefore, is that it automatically assumes that TL social networks are willing to accommodate attempts by L2 learners to socially participate or integrate (Norton, 1998, p. 456) and as such it ignores the existence and significance of the native speakers' gatekeeping role 'in enabling (or constraining) full linguistic participation and acculturation by non-native speakers' (Ushioda, 2006, p. 153). It also ignores the asymmetrical relations of power between 'the superiority of the native speaker' (Velez-Rendon, 2010, p. 638) which by default implies the 'inferiority' of the non-native speaker. With respect to the Socio-Educational Model and its instrumental and integrative motivation constructs, its major weakness is that it looks solely at 'the *motors* of human behaviour in the *individual* rather than in the social being' (Dornyei, 1994, p. 274) and as such it ignores the reality that language is social action and its very source of development – or non-development – 'resides in the environment rather than in the individual' (Lantolf, 2006, as quoted in Ortega, 2009, p. 224).

Norton Peirce (1995, p. 12) posits that social identity is both produced and structured by relations of power and that inequitable relations of power curb the opportunities that L2 learners have to practise the TL. These relations of power may be institutional, social class, race, or gender and are reflected in everyday interactions (Siegal, 1996, p. 360). Thus, Norton Peirce argues that social identity for the L2 learner is 'a site of struggel' – but one in which the learner has 'agency' to either accommodate or resist how they are positioned within a given discourse by establishing counter-discourses which position the learner 'in a powerful rather than marginalised subject position' (Norton Peirce, 1995, pp. 15-16). Enhanced L2 learning success in this model also requires the learner to make an 'investment' in the target language because 'an investment in the target language is an investment in a learner's own social identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space' (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 18). Extending use of Bourdieu's (1997) economic metaphors she argues that learners will either expect or hope to obtain a decent return on their investment – one that will give them access to until now unattainable symbolic and cultural resources which convert into 'symbolic' and 'cultural capital', but emphasises that the return on the investment has to be seen as 'commensurate with the effort expended on learning the language' (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 17). It is important here to differentiate between this notion of investment and that of instrumental motivation because the former views the L2 learner as being in a fluid relationship wih a changing social world in which he or she has 'a complex social identity with multiple desires' while in the latter view of Gardner (1985), 'motivation is a property of the language learner – a fixed personality trait' (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 18).

Social identity theory also posits that appropriate usage of the TL not only requires learners to understand the 'rules of use' but to understand the way that these rules 'are socially and historically constructed to support the interests of a dominant group within a given society' (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 18). Thus, she argues that a learner's 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1971) must include 'an awareness of the right to speak' or what Bourdieu (1997) refers to as 'the power to impose reception' (as quoted in Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 18). One year after Norton Peirce's (1995) paper appeared, McKay and Wong (1996) employed social identity theory to examine interconnections of discourse and power in circumstantial L2 formal settings in the United States. These researchers studied four 12-year-old Chinese-speaking immigrants – three boys and one girl – who at the beginning of the two-year study had been in the country for less than two months (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 581). The immigrant children were placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class and during the research period five distinct discourses involving inequitable relations of power were identified at the junior high school (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 583) One of these discourses – colonialist/racialised – requires further discussion to show how these L2 English Learners were subject positioned through these discourses (McKay and Wong, 1996, pp. 579-580).

Colonialist/racialised discourses are said to reflect a Eurocentric/Amerocentric attitude of superiority over those countries in the world with which "Western powers have held colonial, neocolonial, or quasi-colonialist relationship" (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 583). In American educational settings, these discourses are frequently revealed "through derogatory remarks and acts toward immigrant students, which typically attack both their general behaviour and ability to learn English" (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 583). This was in fact witnessed in some of the teachers and teacher aides at the school where the study was conducted. For example, a seventh-grade male ESL teacher was reported to clearly consider Spanish speakers inferior, Asian students better than 'culturally-handicapped' Latino students and singled out a White female immigrant student to the researchers as the 'model student' (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 584). Such views are not surprising given that nearly 80 percent of English language teachers entering the profession in America are White, middle-class and monolingual (Velez-Rendon, 2010, p. 638), which bolsters the ideology that 'Standard English is equated with Whiteness (Pavlenko, 2001, p. 330). In these discourses the two boys and girl who were born in Taiwan were seen to be 'positioned higher' than the mainland Chinese-born boy because Taiwan has been under strong American influence since the 1950s. As such, the Chinese-born boy, Brad Wang, was deemed to have less assimilation potential because of his 'heavily accented English and less Westernised behaviours" (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 585). Within these discourses where assimilation and Americanisation are prioritised by language policy makers (Judd, 1992, as cited in Kinginger, 2003, p. 222) Brad was positioned as powerless because his 'post-immigration class standing was lower than his Taiwanese peers' (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 598). Unlike Taiwanese-born Jeremy Tang and Michael Lee who had respectively taken up the coping strategies of accomodation and

resistance, Brad became dispirited as his English learning deteriorated and even when approached, did not speak much. Midway through the study, Brad Wang left the school (McKay and Wong, 1996, p.600). Through the social identity theory prism the study concluded that Brad Wang 'did not arrive at a functioning mode that enabled his investment in English learning to achieve results, and he failed to develop identities that would allow him to feel competent, appreciated, and valued as a social being' (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 600). It is also evidence that 'language learning and social positioning often occur simultaneously in the L2 classroom' (Menard-Warwick, 2007, p.267) and unfortunately, asymmetrical relations of power between language teachers and their students limit classroom participation (Norton and Pavlenko, 1994, p. 511).

In circumstantial contexts, newly-arrived immigrants in English-speaking countries frequently find social interaction with the TL community frustrating, especially when the native speakers are 'unwilling to accommodate to their level of proficiency' (Yates, 2011, p. 459). Even when immigrant families have resided in a country for many years and have raised children in the community, they may continue to be subject positioned by colonialist/racialised discourses as 'illegitimate speakers (Bourdieu, 1977, as cited in Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 21). Thus asymmetrical relations of power between majority and minority communities in the broader society can also limit participation (Harklau, 2000, p. 40). This informs SLA that 'the pursuit of an enriched linguistic identity is never simply in the hands of the motivated individual learner' (Ushioda, 2006, p. 153).

Influenced by Lave and Wenger (1991), Norton (2001, pp. 162-163) integrates their notions of 'communities of practice' (occupational communities) and 'old-timers' (experienced members of the community) and 'new-comers' (inexperienced wish-to-be members seeking a sense of belonging) into social identity theory and L2 learning. In this view, the old-timers are the native speakers and new-comers are L2 learning. As such, in ESL classroom communities the teachers are the old-timers and the students are new-comers who are seeking both access to the TL and a sense of belonging in the TL community. Wenger (1998) hypothesises that there are three modes of belonging-engagement, imagination and alignment (as cited in Norton, 2001, p. 163). Of these three modes, social identity theory borrows 'imagination' or 'imagination in the sense of looking at an apple seed and seeing an apple tree' (Wenger, 1998, as quoted in Norton, 2001, p. 163) to develop the notion of 'imagined communities' – a notion which requires a reconstruction of an L2 learner's past and an imaginative construction of his or her future (Norton, 2001, p. 164). Thus it is argued that gaining access to the learner's imagined community – or getting past the gatekeepers – requires an 'imagined identity' as well as the learner's investment in the TL (Norton, 2001, p. 166). A good example of an elective L2 learner who was able to 'imagine herself anew' succeed through her investment in learning French and favourably reposition herself in social class relations of power is in the 1997-2000 study of a young American woman by Kinginger (2003) – a study which emphasises 'significance of access to social networks, or of marginality within such networks, in the process

of negotiating and (re)constructing a coherent and satisfying identity' (Kinginger, 2003, p. 220).

The subject of Kinginger's (2003) study is Alice who comes from a social background that Alice describes as being 'lower class with a high class mind, kinda' (as quoted in Kinginger, 2003, p. 225). Alice's impoverished adolescent years were characterised by transience, periods of homelessness and time spent in a community shelter for homeless and battered women (Kinginger, 2003, p. 226). As such, her L2 learning experiences differ greatly from many other American foreign language learners who come from privileged social backgrounds and are 'members of the monolingual elite' (Kinginger, 2003, p. 224). The most significant difference is that Alice's investment in learning French 'constitutes a bid for a better life' (Kinginger, 2003, p. 224). Alice's L2 French learning initially transpired in formal settings in Quebec and then later in both formal and informal settings in France where she was a study-abroad student. It was Alice's 'mission' to become a competent L2 French user so that she could 'realise a dream' – one in which she envisioned herself as a future member of an imagined community of professional language educators 'committed to the role of language learning in promoting intercultural awareness and social justice' (Kinginger, 2003, p. 227).

Alice spent two years in France and during that time 'her images of France and of herself as a student and a speaker of French were repeatedly challenged' (Kinginger, 2003, p. 232). Instead of finding herself in an ideologically-constructed world of French cafe and art gallery goers, or surrounded by the romantic landscapes of provincial France, Alice's reality, or 'encountered

community' (Brah, 1996, as quoted in Doherty and Singh, 2005, p. 5), was a cold and dirty industrialised urban environment in which the 'old-timers' were both 'closed' and 'rude' and despite her repeated efforts to gain access to social interaction by employing the strategies she had developed in America for exhibiting her openness and friendliness, she was continuously rebuffed (Kinginger, 2003, p. 233). In her regular university classes Alice found herself socially excluded from her fellow students and she had no personal contact with her professor who she described as 'a distant figure' (Kinginger, 2003, p. 234). At this stage Alice's experiences of L2 French learning seemed to be constantly characterised by the 'withholding of knowledge by more powerful individuals' (Kinginger, 2003, p. 229). With very limited access to interactions with native speakers outside her class, Alice decided to abandon formal L2 learning and seek out opportunities to speak in whatever informal contexts that presented themselves (Kinginger, 2003, p. 235). From then on Alice's French quest for enhanced cultural consciousness was exclusively fulfilled in informal settings (Kinginger, 2003, p. 236) where she had been finally granted her right to practise the TL – 'a necessary condition of second language learning' (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 14).

These learning experiences of Alice as an elective L2 French learner and Brad Wang as a circumstantially-situated L2 English learner aptly illustrate these learners' subjectivities as being sites of struggle as well as the importance of a learner's investment in the TL in accounting for his or her 'sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practise it' (Norton, 1997, p. 411). Alice was able to use her agency and a reconfigured identity to impose

reception and get past the 'gatekeepers', whereas Brad Wang was not. As such it was exercised through colonialist/racialised discourses which not only marginalised him but negatively impacted on his earlier willingness to communicate – or 'the most immediate determinant of L2 use' (Clement et al., 2003, as quoted in Ortega, 2009, p. 202) – and resulted in 'the most extreme form of non-participation: withdrawal from the language class' (Norton, 2001, p. 160).

CONCLUSION

Social identity theory informs our understanding of SLA in ways that previous L2 learner variability models have not been able to achieve. Those models which have primarily focused on the psycholinguistic aspects of the L2 learner as an individual, instead of the socio-pragmatic aspects of the L2 learner as a social being, have failed to recognise the L2 learner's subjectivity as a site of struggle in which he or she is often unfairly subject positioned by inequitable relations of power in both circumstantial and elective settings. As such, the notion of 'social distance' as posited in the Acculturation Model which places the onus on the L2 learner to become closer to the TL society does not consider the social distance that is often maintained through inequitable relations of power played out in discourses such as the social class and colonialist/racialised discourses reported in the case studies cited in this paper. The same model also fails to acknowledge the significant role played by TL gatekeepers who exert their power through either granting or denying L2 learners access to TL knowledge and opportunities to practise the language with native speakers. Thus, this wielding of power and withholding of knowledge by more powerful individuals in the TL society also diminishes the validity of the Socio-Educational Model's contruct of integrative motivation as being a key factor in successful L2 learning because the access key actually rests in the hands of the native speakers – not with the L2 learner as an individual.

Social identity theory also informs SLA that L2 learners can be unfairly subject positioned by inequitable relations of power not just within the TL society, but through institutional, age and gender discourses played out in the L2 classroom itself. As such, L2 learners need to be made aware that they have the agency to either accommodate, or resist such positioning by establishing counter-discourses in which they can transform themselves and seize the right to speak. To do this requires a commitment to learning the TL and an investment in the TL, which is also an investment in the L2 learner's sense of self. Because the L2 learner's sense of self is both socially constructed and socially constrained, L2 learning is never just in the hands of the motivated individual. If the post-structuralists' fond use of metaphors could only conceive of L2 learning as being akin to dancing, then it would become obvious that 'it takes two to tango'.

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