

# Identity in Language Learning and Teaching

The previous chapter discussed the issue of gender identity in terms of expressions of and motivations for learning English, especially as immigrants in the United States. For many second language (L2) learners of English, that move from their home country to the destination where English is used as a first language can be full of instability and difficulties as they begin to develop a new identity in a new social context. As Wenger (1998) has noted, identity develops in day-to-day experiences that occur through participation in communities of practice. This identity development, according to Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), can be *imposed* and thus not negotiable, *assumed* and accepted but still not negotiated, or *negotiable* and thus changed by the L2 learner. This chapter outlines and discusses the issue of L2 learner identity as well as TESOL teacher identity within the realm of sociolinguistics.

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When students whose first language is not English first encounter the learning of English as an additional language, they cannot really avoid

the issue of learner identity (be it imposed, assumed, and/or negotiated) because they must participate in a community different than what they are used to. An interesting study by Morita (2004) provides a good example of how L2 students from Japan negotiated their membership and identities in new academic communities in a Canadian university. A common identity illustrated by the Japanese students was being less competent than other local students because they said that they could not fully understand reading materials, lectures, and classroom participation rituals. In addition, these students often constructed this identity based on the ways other peers perceived them. However, some of the L2 students began to negotiate their identities, and one student in particular employed several strategies such as preparing items to talk about before class and asking instructors questions after class.

Although Morita indicates that L2 identities can be negotiated rather than remain static, there are examples in the literature where this was not the case. Liu's (2002) study, for example, showed how Chinese students constructed their L2 identities through silence in the language classroom. These students were concerned with losing face if they gave incorrect answers to teachers' questions, so they listened attentively instead of orally participating, and this was part of their identity as L2 learners. That said, the students still had high academic achievement scores, whether or not they spoke during the L2 class. The research indicates that TESOL teachers should be aware of the cultural differences students bring to their classes and that L2 students will experience different challenges and struggles when attempting to develop new identities as L2 learners while gaining membership in a different community of English speakers. In some cases the L2 students may need guidance from their TESOL teacher, especially if they construct identities based on how they think others perceive them rather than their true reality of what identity they want to negotiate.

Connected to the identity of L2 learners is how TESOL teachers see themselves and the various roles that are imposed, assumed, and/or negotiated while they teach in different settings. In addition, teacher identity includes how teachers are seen as TESOL teachers by others and as such influences decisions made by the teachers themselves in the L2 classroom. Throughout their careers teachers construct and reconstruct (usually tacitly) a conceptual sense of who they are (their self-image), and this is manifested through what they do (their professional role identity). Farrell (2011) has suggested that reflecting on teacher role identity gives language educators

a useful lens with which to view the *who* of the teacher and how teachers construct and reconstruct their views of their roles as language teachers in relation to their peers and their context. Farrell's case study identified 16 main role identities divided into three major role identity clusters: teacher as manager, teacher as professional, and teacher as "acculturator." This last cluster may be unique to ESL teachers, and it supports Duff and Uchida's (1997) findings about language teachers as cultural workers: "Whether they are aware of it or not, language teachers are very much involved in the transmission of culture, and each selection of videos, newspaper clippings, seating plans, activities, and so on has social, cultural, and educational significance" (p. 476). Indeed, this role identity cluster puts ESL teachers in closer proximity to their students than would normally be the case for teachers of other subjects such as math or science. So TESOL teachers, who are often the first contacts for newcomers in ESL situations and cultural informants in EFL situations, play a key role in not only helping to construct their L2 learners' identities but also determining how they want to construct their own identities as TESOL teachers.

## The Role of TESOL Teachers

TESOL teachers can play a crucial role in not only identifying but also helping to transform L2 learners' identity and perhaps encouraging their involvement in classroom participation. At the very least, TESOL teachers can reflect on their own L2 learning experiences as well as their intercultural experiences and identity formation and then revisit their classroom teaching practices with these reflections in mind. In this way, TESOL teachers can be sensitive to their L2 students' identity formation and development so that they can develop identity options for their students not previously envisioned. The fact that some L2 students' construct their identities through silence may be a result of culture or gender differences, but it may also be because of the format of the course and/or lesson, the TESOL teacher's choice of lesson activities, pressures from other classmates, or any number of other complex issues at play. The more a TESOL teacher reflects on such possibilities, the more he or she can become more aware of L2 students' identity formation and factors affecting classroom participation. By becoming more aware of the communication and interactional patterns in their classrooms, TESOL teachers can be advocates for inclusion rather than exclusion and thus embrace diversity rather than fear it. In this manner,

both L2 learners and TESOL teachers can continue to develop and shape their identities appropriate to their circumstances.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What is your understanding of Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) three identities: imposed, assumed, and negotiated?
- Are you an L2 learner of English? If so, did you experience any of these identities, and if so, how did you feel?
- How can L2 learners of English negotiate their identity through silence?
- Do you think that TESOL teachers' role includes that of teacher as cultural worker?
- What is your understanding of the identity role of teacher as acculturator?

## Conclusion

This chapter focused on the identity development of L2 learners and TESOL teachers. As L2 learners enter a new community of practice when they learn English as a second or foreign language, they inevitably take on an identity different in some manner than when in their L1 community. This identity is more pronounced when L2 learners have moved to a country where the L2 is used as a first language. In this case, L2 learners can have an identity imposed, assumed, or negotiated. TESOL teachers as well can have identities imposed, assumed, or negotiated, so for both L2 learners and TESOL teachers it is a good idea to first articulate their identities and then reflect on whether this is in fact their true identity as learner and teachers or whether they need to (re)negotiate it to their desired identity.