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Exploring language learner identities through poetry-writing: a Malaysian perspective

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ABSTRACT

The current post-structuralist perspective views language learner identities as fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing. However, the notion of language learner identity is still under-researched. This exploratory qualitative study, which is part of a research project that examines the nature and role of identity in language learning, aims to qualitatively explore the language learner identity through poetry-writing. In this exploratory qualitative study, 6 students wrote poems expressing their feelings and emotions through free-form verse. In the subsequent interviews, feedback was given on how they felt while writing the poems, on their self-expression through poetry-writing and their reaction to other students' responses to their poems. These responses were then analysed using Taylor's Quadripolar Model of Identity (Taylor, 2013), which identifies the Private selves - featuring a person's intimate representation of his/her present attributes, the Public selves - featuring various social presentations that a person; their Ideal self - featuring a personal representation of what somebody would like to be in the future, and finally their Imposed selves - featuring representations of other people's hopes, desires and expectations of what an individual should achieve. Results from Phase One of the study indicated that the learners were clustered under the Harmonious configuration, which is when convergent Ideal and Imposed selves generate congruent responses. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keyword: Language learner identity, motivation, language learning

1. Introduction

The complexity of defining linguistic identity has been augmented by the diversity of philosophies underlying identity itself. Identity can be seen as the product of understanding oneself, and Norton defines 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" (Norton, 2013, p. 45). Identity is also seen as a social process rooted in the social constructivist perspective (Duff, 2012; Weedon, 1997) and relates primarily to how individuals position themselves in relation to the positioning of others, which was a process marked by "social, historical and cultural contexts" (Block, 2013, p. 18).

However, the view that identity can only be seen as a social phenomenon has been challenged and a burgeoning call to reframe identity from a psycholinguistic perspective surfaced (Block, 2013; Layder, 1997; Bendel, 2002, Granger, 2004, Wetherell, 2007). The concept of identity was then posited as a process where the social self and the internal self both interact to produce a cogent understanding of reality for the individual. Yet, despite rationalizing how identity can be considered as much a psychological process as well as a social one, there existed a fundamental lack of conceptual models that could adequately capture this process using operationalized constructs, specifically in language learning (Taylor, Busse, Gagova, Marsden and Roosken, 2013).

In Malaysia, the concept of identity is usually discussed within the spheres of ethnic identity and national identity (Ting, 2013) and up to this point there have been virtually no studies that looked specifically into language learner identity within the Malaysian context. Public institutions of higher learning use the national language (Bahasa Malaysia) as the main medium of instruction, while private institutions use English. This variance in linguistic environment holds many different implications both for the learning process, as well as the potential development of one's language learner identity. How would this impact their language learning identity, specifically among learners who are using English as the medium of instruction? This paper shall

explore the language learner identity of private university undergraduates, through the unique data capture method of poetry-writing.

2. Literature Review

Identity and language

The post structuralist view on identity posits that the self is placed within the domains of subjectivity (Weedon, 1997), in that the concept of the self and one's identity is considered relational to one's socio-political milieu. Simply put, no one is an island and humans do not and cannot exist in a vacuum. Post structuralism thus relates to how individuals view their existence in relation to the world around them, which in turn alters their concept of investment for their current and future states.

Investment is the "sociological complement" to the psychological construct of motivation and is the nexus between "human agency" and "identity", providing the sustenance needed for individuals to persevere in pursuing their goals for economic, social and personal gains (Norton, 1997; Kramsch, 2013). With each performance of written and spoken discourse, individuals are building and structuring their notions of identity, with Weedon concluding that "identity is constituted in and through language" (in Norton, 2013, p. 12). Language can be seen as the main conduit of self-expression (Ochs, 2008) and since the nature of human experiences is constantly evolving; learning something new, such as a language, can irrevocably affect one's identity. Since the post structuralist view of identity is that meaning and identity are not static, but rather "created through social discourses and practices" (Miyahara, 2014, p. 207); it can be said that one's identity is thus in a constant state of flux, being shaped and re-shaped through processes of interaction within one's environment.

Language and identity in Malaysia

In the decades after Independence, Malaysia implemented language and education policies that have resulted in far-reaching socio-economic impacts (Phan, 2013). These policies have also created an ambiguous sense of cultural and national identity as learners are caught in the crossfire of weak policy implementations. On one hand, Bahasa Malaysia is viewed primarily as a medium for upholding national identity, while on the other, English is seen as the business lingua franca (Gill, 2006; in Phan, 2013). In short, learning in English is seen as pragmatic and beneficial for one's future, and so the language learning identity in Malaysia among university students could probably be seen to uphold this view.

Up to this point the literature on identity and language has largely been focused on second language research among immigrant communities in USA, Canada and Australia (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000), and only lately has there been an emerging interest in uncovering different perspectives on language learning identity among non-immigrants, especially since the motivations among college age students would be different from that of adult immigrants. Another factor to consider is age, as young adulthood brings with it many conflicts as they shed the identity of children and morph into adults, with responsibilities and expectations about their future. The uniqueness of the developmental phase of studying a target language during this period can impact identity in many ways (Cote, 2009), which warrants further study.

This prompted Taylor and her colleagues (Taylor, Busse, Gagova, Marsden & Roosken, 2013) to propose the Quadripolar Model of Identity, which views identity as "a composite notion characterised by two self-dimensions - possible/actual and internal/external (2013) as can be seen below :

Table 1

Quadripolar Model of Identity (Taylor, Busse, Gagova, Marsden & Roosken, 2013, p.5)

Self -dimension	Internal	External
Possible	Ideal	Imposed
Actual	Private	Public

It draws upon Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2009), which is based on 2 concepts of the self: *possible selves* (Markus and Nurius, 1986) and *self-discrepancy* (Higgins, 1987). The theory consists of 3

components: the *Ideal self*, the *ought-to self* and the *L2 learning experience*, and believes that the motivation to master L2 is the result of an innate longing to close the gap between ‘our actual and ideal selves.’ (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29).

The model put forward by Taylor, and which is used in this study; delineates four aspects of the self: (1) the Private self (actual, internal), which refers to “a person’s intimate representation of his/her present attributes”; (2) the Public selves (actual, external) which relates to “various social presentations that a person may display depending on the relational context and audience”; (3) the Ideal self (possible, internal) which can be seen as “a personal representation of what somebody would like to be in the future, irrespective of other people’s desires and expectations”; and finally (4) the Imposed selves (possible, external) which can be viewed as “representations of other people’s hopes, desires and expectations of what an individual should achieve, the number of such representations depending on the number of social relational contexts in which the individual functions” (Taylor, 2013, p.5).

These collection of selves are further clustered into 4 possible configurations, namely Submissive, Duplicitous, Rebellious and Harmonious. The Submissive configuration is where the strong imposed self has more dominance against the ideal self. The Duplicitous self is where the ideal and imposed self both appear to “generate parallel responses” (p. 5), while the Rebellious self is where a strong ideal self rebels against the imposed self. Finally the Harmonious self indicates both ideal and imposed selves as being one and the same.

Taylor’s study reported that at times, these configurations of interaction between the public and private selves resulted in a “strategic identity display”, which means that learners learned to show an imposed self to the public, regardless of whether that was who they really were in private. It was also reported that students were very careful with the self that they presented in the classroom (Taylor, 2013). This observation reflects the complexity of the development, or emergence of one’s language learning identity, in that how learners *perceive* themselves to be and how they *present* themselves to others may not be necessarily congruent. It would be interesting to see if this would be captured in a Malaysian classroom with local language learners.

In addition, this study uses poetry-writing to explore language learner identity. Using poetry for identity development is an idea rooted in Vygotsky’s Inner Speech Theory (1986) and the construction of the “voice” is the building block for the emergence of identity, according to the social-expressivist approach, where the “self” is created externally through exposure to language and culture before one’s own self-identity is established internally (Iida, 2010, p.29). The use of poetry-writing in language classrooms has been championed as a beneficial one (Hanauer, 2010), where it provides learners with both a form for self-expression and a tool for developing the necessary language skills for communicating with others. It has been used at various levels from pre-school right up to college level and beyond (Furman, 2011) and teachers and language instructors have creatively used poetry-writing in their classes (Schwarzer, Haywood & Lorenzen, 2003; Sloan, 2003; Stavans, 2001; Iida, 2008). Since there are not many studies that delve into exploring language learner identity using poetry-writing, and certainly none from a Malaysian perspective, this paper aims to shed more light into this phenomenon.

3. Methodology

For the purpose of this exploratory qualitative study, the emergence of language learning identity will be captured through the use of a narrative device, namely poetry-writing. Poetry may considered as the “emotional microchip” that functions as a storage device for one’s life experiences. (Furman, 2011, p. 1). There are some unique benefits to using poetry to capture the journey and experiences of language learning. One salient feature of poetry writing, as opposed to responding to questionnaire items, is that the respondent is more relaxed and this opens them up to being more honest and forthright in their responses. In this regard poetry research can potentially generate a more profound understanding of a language learner’s identity development (Furman, 2004, 2007, 2009; Hanauer, 2010).

Essentially, poetry research is a method that uses poetry as data, and Furman (2006) believes that the “research poem can present evocative, powerful insights that can teach us about the lived experience” (p. 2). It has been utilized in research (Furman, 2004, 2006; Stein, 2003; Willis, 2002) and portends a greater emphasis on the creation and presentation of data, as opposed to poetry as merely a form of expression. It aims to capture

the scope and depth of experience and human emotion in the form of lyrical representation, something which cannot quite be achieved through other forms of data collection, such as questionnaires and interviews.

Participants

The current literature on language learner identity features an emphasis on participants who are immigrants in a foreign land, learning a foreign language. This study however, focuses on language learners who are learning a foreign language in their own homeland.

The participants consisted of 6 first-year undergraduates in a Malaysian private university. They were all from the Engineering Faculty, 2 were majoring in Architecture (female), while the remaining 4 were from Software Engineering (male). Their ages ranged from 20 - 23 years old. The proficiency of the participants ranged from average to above average proficiency. The majority of the participants noted watching TV series and movies as their language related hobbies. However, English was not their first language. English was the second language for all bar one participant who claimed to use English as his first language. All participants were of Chinese ethnicity.

Research design

The study took place over a period of 6 weeks, and was conducted during tutorials for the Interpersonal Communication course, which is a language-based elective course for first-year students. Participants were engaged in learning activities where they were expected to convey their thoughts, opinions and arguments and they were also exposed to theories related to interpersonal communication. One of the researchers was also the tutor for this course.

The researcher spent some time to describe the concept of free-form poetry writing to the students, and in some sessions the researcher gave the class a little time to let their consciousness wander, to enable them to get in touch with their emotions. In the first lesson the researcher presented some poems for the students to read. These poems were written by foreign language learners and detailed the challenges of learning a foreign language. The participants then listened to their favorite music in class through headphones. In the next 2 lessons the researcher used mood music, featuring songs aimed at creating different moods (samples ranged from rap music from Eminem to bring on a more aggressive mood, and ethereal New Age music from Enya to bring on a more calming mood). The music was more atmospheric and introspective. After listening to the music the participants were given some time to produce their poems. This was considered a warm-up activity prior to actually producing the poems. Participants reported positive feedback for these activities as it was very different from their other class activities. There were also free-form in-class discussions where students could talk about themselves and their identities, which contributed to the data collection and triangulation.

The final session featured the actual poetry writing session in Week 6, with the theme: "*Learning English in University*". Students were prepped for this task with a short brainstorming activity which required the students to state their feelings on cue cards, and they had to match these words with a drawing that captures that emotion (eg: a picture of books for studying). This activity was then followed by the session for poetry-writing, where soft music was played to encourage the students to "get into the mood" for poetry-writing. Once the participants had completed their poems, the researcher probed with some questions to capture their thought processes during that task. The questions were:

- a) *Is this your first time writing poetry in an English course?*
- b) *How did you feel while writing?*
- c) *Do you feel that by writing this poem you were able to express your emotions?*
- d) *How do you feel when people react/give their responses to your poems?*
- e) *Does this activity encourage you to keep writing poetry in the future?*
- f) *Do you feel comfortable being yourself during your English classes?*

4. Findings

The interview data were transcribed and analyzed for recurring/emerging themes. The findings are reported according to the extracts of the poems written by the students, followed by the truncated responses to the interview questions.

Table 2
Extracts from students' poems

<p>Student A</p> <p>I am here in university</p> <p>I am not here for free</p> <p>I want to go to the city</p> <p>In my hand is my degree</p>	<p>Student B</p> <p>The sun goes down</p> <p>The stars came up</p> <p>The scope you here</p> <p>I'd glad you came</p>	<p>Student C</p> <p>To study, takes years,</p> <p>To exam, takes hours,</p> <p>To review, takes minutes,</p> <p>Blink of an eye,</p> <p>There goes my university life</p>
<p>Student D</p> <p>It's a heaven</p> <p>Or hell</p> <p>Its depend</p> <p>On your choice</p>	<p>Student E</p> <p>You seize me with</p> <p>Your rules and regulations</p> <p>And you make me a</p> <p>Prisoner in the jail</p> <p>Of education...</p>	<p>Student F</p> <p>Oh university!</p> <p>Came to you with dreams</p> <p>You killed it with your never-ending test</p> <p>Oh mummy!</p> <p>Is this what you want</p> <p>Me to go through</p> <p>No....!</p>

Analysis of poems

Overall, it can be said that these poems have captured their emotions about being a language learner in university (see Table 1). Their identity as language learners is established as a site of struggle to meet the expectations of parents and the university. The vocabulary choices indicated strong emotions (*hell/jail/prisoner*) indicating that their language learning identity was fraught with difficulties. Student A appeared more calm and focused (*In my hand is my degree*), while Student E was despondent (*you make me/a prisoner in the jail/of education*). Student D was philosophical (*it's a heaven/or hell/it depends/on your choice*), Student C seemed more dispassionate (*Blink of an eye/there goes my university life*). Student F was the only one to mention his family, and portrayed despair at the experience of student life (*Oh mummy! Is this what you want/Me to go through./ No..!*).

It is interesting to note that they mentioned learning as a whole, rather than mention language learning specifically. This suggests that they do not see language learning as separate from the learning process as a whole.

Interviews

For the first interview question *Is this your first time writing poetry in an English course?*, four of the participants reported that they had no prior experience in writing poetry while two participants answered that

they have had any experience with poetry writing. For the second interview question: *How did you feel while writing?*, the first time writers had responses that ranged from positive to negative :

"It was a relief for me because I was finally able to ...express myself and my emotions about my life" (Student A)

"It was a struggle for mehmm...because I don't know...what to write..."

(Student B)

"Quite fun! It was...a new experience for me.." (Student C)

"It was hard...for me...this is my first time" (Student D)

Meanwhile two participants reported that they had prior exposure and experience in writing poems. Their responses indicated that they were quite comfortable in expressing themselves in verse:

"I write poems occasionally whenever I ..wish to be heard. I also write poems for people so that they can understand how I feel about them.." (Student E)

"...it makes me excited to let go of my feelings.."(Student F)

In response to the third question *Do you feel that by writing this poem you were able to express your emotions?* , three participants answered with a positive response:

"Yes.."(Student A)

"Yes, I was able to express myself.."(Student B)

"Yes ... I feel like I can let out how I feel..I could write what I feel (about the university)"
(Student F)

Meanwhile the remaining three responded negatively:

"Hmmm...not too deep (sic) just the tip of my emotions...as the theme was not anything close to my heart" (Student E)

"No ...I feel like I haven't said (sic) anything ..."(Student D)

"Not really..for me this activity was not able to release my feelings and emotions...quite hard to express feelings through words" (Student C)

For question 5, *How do you feel when people react/give their responses to your poems?*, their responses were mixed:

"I am open to any kind of constructive criticism.."(Student A)

"No any (sic) particular feeling.."(Student B)

"Nervous..I care about others (sic) opinions towards my poem because it represents me"(Student C)

"(I) agree..with their feedback..." (Student D)

"Indifferent...I don't feel anything"(Student E)

"(I am).... happy!" (Student F)

For the next question, the participants were asked *Does this activity encourage you to keep writing poetry in the future?*, their responses were mostly in the negative:

“Not really...” (Student A)

“No...because I am not interested in writing poems... (Student B)

“Not by any chance!” (Student C)

“No...not for me...” (Student D)

“No ...I have always had desires to write poems and this activity did not give any significant effects (sic)....” (Student E)

“Yes ...I enjoy it..”(Student F)

Finally, the participants were asked *Do you feel comfortable being yourself during your English classes?* The students responded overwhelmingly in the positive:

“Of course! I have always been myself, no matter in

what (sic) situation” (Student A)

“I don’t feel comfortable being anybody else...so I am me..all the time..” (Student B)

“Yes.. I am comfortable during English classes...because the teacher is very friendly..” (Student C)

“I am happy ...being myself..I can learn more better (sic)..more natural ..”(Student D)

“Yes, of course be myself is more relaxed (sic) and no stress..” (Student E)

“I believe in being yourself..no matter what...I guess you can say I am comfortable being me in class” (Student F)

5. Discussion

It was found that the participants’ language learner identities as captured in the interviews and in-class discussions indicated that they were comfortable with their language learning identity, and that they viewed learning a language as a necessity, hence their motivation in completing their coursework and participating in activities such as this one.

Their abilities in expressing their feelings and emotions through poetry writing were evident, however this was not enough to further encourage some of the participants to continue in pursuing poetry writing. The feedback to the poetry of the participants, helped give them some encouragement and confidence. However, they reportedly do not see themselves writing more poetry due to the fact that it does not help them in their immediate studies at the university as they were pursuing technical courses that did not value aesthetic expressions of language. They viewed using language as being purely functional rather than aesthetic. Thus, in this case they identified with the language learning process as something that would be of benefit to their future career.

In addition, the findings were then analysed using the Quadripolar Model of Identity (Taylor, Busse, Gagova, Marsden & Roosken, 2013). According to the analysis, the participants in this study have no conflict between their Private selves and their Public selves. They wrote the poems to express their emotions, tapping into their Private selves. They responded to questions about their future poetry-writing for others, tapping into their Public selves. However, they divulged that they would not want to try exploring the activity of poetry-writing further as their Public selves were not expected to be dabbling in poetry-writing. Thus in this case, both their Ideal selves and Imposed selves were consistent with each other. According to the Quadripolar Model of Identity (Taylor, Busse, Gagova, Marsden & Roosken, 2013), this indicates that they clustered under the Harmonious configuration, which is when convergent Ideal and Imposed selves generate congruent responses. These findings reveal that the participants are very comfortable with their language learning identity, and they have no compulsion to engage in any form of strategic identity display.

These findings could be attributed to a few factors. One is that the participants in this study are more mature (20-23 years of age) and are more secure in their sense of personal identity, as opposed to Taylor's European study that featured a sample aged between 14-19, which meant that they were still in high school and both their personal and language learning identities were still being formed. Secondly, the participants were also at a life stage where their personal motivations regarding language learning were parallel with their career aspirations (ie: I want to be good in English because it will boost my career as a software engineer/architect), which reinforced their identity development further. It is vital for learners to be able to view their future successful L2 selves as "realistic and attainable" so that the desired self can be actualised and also to provide an increased boost to the learning process (Miyahara, 2014, p. 215). This is consistent with the view that Malaysian students have a pragmatic view on the use of the English language.

The study also revealed (in class discussions that were not captured by interview questions) that despite all the years of studying English in high school and university, the participants still see their language learning identity as a continuous process. They believed that learning would still continue at the workplace and beyond. In other words, the positioning of the language learner could then progress to that of language user at the workplace, discovering new terminologies and situated learning conditions that would surely shape their identity in new ways.

6. Conclusion

This study has uncovered that using poetry to capture emotions and experiences can reveal some interesting insights into how individuals perceive their world. The participants revealed through their poems that life as a university student, in relation to their language learning is a very stressful one, yet the interview questions revealed that they were motivated to do as well as they could in their English classes for the sake of their future career.

This study has discovered that it is possible for language learners to have a Harmonious configuration to their language learner identity, meaning that they have no conflict between their private, public, ideal and imposed selves. They are comfortable with their own personal identity and this is reflected in their language learning identity. Findings from this study also imply that language learning identity can take different forms at different stages of one's life. It is quite possible for learners to have different configurations depending on the relational context and situation. Thus, the implication of these findings is that instructors can manage their class environments to enable more harmonious configurations to take place, as this would hopefully generate a more positive learning environment.

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