



Fifteen years of research on self & identity in *System*



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ABSTRACT

This is the second in a series of Virtual Special Issues published by *System*, which showcase selected articles that have appeared in the journal. In this issue, we focus on the psychological construct of the self in language teaching and learning, as viewed from diverse theoretical perspectives. Forty articles published in the last 15 years were reviewed, of which ten were selected for inclusion in this issue, taking into account their impact, their conceptual salience or their potential to exemplify theoretical developments in the field. In doing so, we draw attention to the theoretical and methodological diversity of research into the self, as represented in the journal. We identify three milestones in research, which seem to be associated with high-impact publications, but, at the same time, we note the continued presence of certain key self constructs. In addition, we trace changes in the ways that the self has been conceptualised and researched. Finally, we point out a tendency to report on aspects of the self that relate to language learners, rather than teachers, which appears to be typical of much research into language learning psychology.

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Recent years have seen an incredible upsurge in research and writing on the self in SLA. This vibrant activity has been instrumental in highlighting the importance of the self in language teaching and learning, and has afforded considerable advances in our understanding of the self and related constructs. In this special issue, which appears just over 15 years after the publication of Bonnie Norton's seminal volume on identity and language learning (2000), we would like to take stock of the research conducted in the field, as reported in *System*, and to showcase articles which we feel have been influential or are in some way representative of broader conceptual developments and concerns. Another aim of our review of the literature published in *System* is to identify theoretical and methodological trends, consider how the work on self has been represented in this journal, and discuss what future directions could be.

While the rapid expansion of the field can be seen as a positive development, it has also been accompanied by some terminological and conceptual challenges, not least of which is a multiplicity of terms, some of which overlap, some which are distinct, and some which lack a clear definition (Mercer & Williams, 2014). In our review here, we decided to apply an inclusive criterion regarding the terms used, and therefore considered papers which appear to focus on the self in whatever form or from whatever theoretical perspective. For example, we have included studies which investigated perceptions of self as one among many individual differences (e.g., LoCastro, 2001), and others that took a more holistic view (e.g., Mercer, 2011). Similarly, we have looked into papers that approach the self from a sociocultural perspective (e.g., Lee, 2014), from perspectives informed by Dörnyei's (2005) L2 motivational self-system (e.g., Papi, 2010), and complexity-informed perspectives (e.g., Feryok, 2010). We have included papers that focus on the self-related constructs of teachers (e.g., De Los Angeles

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Clemente, 2001), trainee teachers (e.g., Cabaroglu, 2014), and learners (e.g., Walker, 2015). In all, 40 papers were reviewed, of which 10 have been selected for inclusion in the special issue. In making the selection, our intention was to represent a spread of topics and approaches, which – from our admittedly subjective perspective – constitute salient areas of research on the self and related constructs.

Milestones in self-related research

Up until recently, research on language learners has predominantly tended to examine various individual differences with a view to understanding how these relate to language learning processes. Yet, the self was not typically included as a type of individual difference, nor was the self *per se* the focus of explicit empirical or conceptual work. However, recent years have seen three major developments that have served as notable markers for the developments visible in this collection. The first major publication that really drew broader attention to a self construct was Norton (2000) (although see earlier work by Cummins, 1996). Rather than examining the self as one of multiple variables in a larger study, Norton brought the self construct identity to centre stage, examining it and the related construct of investment from a sociocultural perspective. The publication of this book prompted a considerable body of research in the field, including work that was explicitly informed by her perspective, as well as other studies that followed different theoretical pathways. We have therefore chosen to use the year 2000 as a starting point for our review, to see how and in what ways this milestone, and others that followed it, have been witnessed in *System*.

The second major milestone in self research came in 2005, with Zoltan Dörnyei's publication describing the L2 self system of motivation. While its main aim is to understand motivation in language education, the system gives prominent place to mental representations of self-concept and possible selves. It is the perceived discrepancies between the actual self and various possible selves that serve as the drivers of motivation. This conceptual development has also proved hugely influential in self-related research, notable in our overview by the dramatic increase in papers that appeared in the years following this publication. As might be expected, there was a delayed effect before the influence of Dörnyei (2005) became notably visible in the peer-reviewed literature. The first paper to appear in *System* that explicitly referred to Dörnyei's framework was Alastair Henry's (2009) article on gender differences in L2 self-concepts. However, following on from this paper, there were at least 16 articles published in *System* alone, which explicitly incorporated Dörnyei's (2005) framework in their methodological and interpretative design.

The third and final development, which is only gradually beginning to make its presence felt in the field, connects to the shifting understandings of individual differences and in turn the self. The key change is that individual differences are no longer being thought of in a fragmented manner, as was typically the case in early individual difference research. Rather, the field is witnessing a re-conceptualisation of individual differences taking more holistic theoretical perspectives. Increasingly, the self is being described through theoretical frames, such as complexity-informed perspectives, that foreground the interconnections and the situated and dynamic nature of individual characteristics. Perhaps a key publication associated with this development is Dörnyei and Ryan's (2015) *The Psychology of Language Learning Revisited*, which reconceptualises the field of individual differences research in SLA. As this volume was only published in 2015, it is likely that the next few years may witness yet another upsurge in publications and conceptual developments inspired by this line of thinking.

Overview of self-related research

By examining the articles that appeared in *System* and bearing these three developments in mind, our review revealed several notable, and occasionally surprising, findings. In the paragraphs that follow, we discuss the major themes and constructs that have been studied in relation to the self, and we then proceed to describe what we perceive as some trends in self-related research as represented in this journal.

One major strand of research into the self, which appears to be underrepresented in *System*, looks into identity and investment. Both constructs stem from Norton's sociocultural conceptualisation of identity and motivation (2000; also Norton Pierce, 1995). This strand of self-related work is present across the timeline we reviewed. In fact, one of the earliest papers of note in the timeframe covered by this review, LoCastro (2001), discusses 'self-identity', a construct which is not explicitly defined, but which appears to be inspired by Norton's work. Apart from this early paper, which also looked at other variables, we only found four more main articles that drew direct attention to the constructs of identity or self-identity, some but not all of which are explicitly informed by Norton's work (Farrell, 2011; Kim, 2014; Lee, 2014; Xu & Gao, 2014). This was a surprising finding, given the significance assigned to Norton's sociocultural conceptualisation in the broader literature, and we had expected to find more articles centring on this construct and framework. Comparing this against the coverage in other journals, in the same period of time (2000–2015) there appear to be well in excess of 20 articles discussing identity from a sociocultural perspective in *TESOL Quarterly*, the journal in which Norton's seminal article on identity first appeared (Norton Pierce, 1995).

Another self perspective present in the journal is 'person knowledge' as a form of metacognition, which stems from the seminal paper by Flavell (1979). In the period of this review, only Cotterall and Murray (2009) refer explicitly to this perspective. Given the date of the original trigger for this work, the absence of recent research in the period under review here is perhaps not surprising (although see Wenden, 1999; White, 1999). Nevertheless, research in related areas such as self-awareness and self-perception and research on metacognition generally have shown just how important this is for

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