



## Performance, performativity and second language identities: How can we know the actor from the act?



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### ABSTRACT

Recent arts-based research has explored how instructional use of performance supports participants in embodying and challenging social equity issues. Informed by performativity theories (e.g., Butler, 1999) and a systemic functional linguistics (SFL) perspective on meaning making, this paper investigates how multilingual educators in a graduate language education course analyzed and negotiated language teacher identities. Specifically, the paper explores if and how a performance process, which included storytelling, performance, and discourse analysis, supported the focal participants in developing awareness of interaction as discursive negotiation of institutional, cultural and agentive factors. Two implications of language education and research are discussed: the potential of performance as an instructional resource to support critical discourse awareness among language educators, and the potential of SFL as a resource to research performative processes in multicultural education contexts.

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### Introduction

Recent sociocultural research in the field of second language learning has highlighted how normative classroom discourses often affect the ways in which linguistically diverse teachers and students are positioned in instructional contexts (e.g., Harklau, 2000; Miller, 2012; Moll, 2001; Valdes, 2001). Harklau's (2000) ethnographic study showed how bilingual learners were afforded a different classroom discourse (e.g., curriculum, interactions with teachers) in their last year of secondary school as opposed to their first year of community college. The institutional representations of immigrant students, conveyed through classroom practices, were appropriated by the students in one context and actively resisted in the other. Often emergent bilingual learners in K-12 contexts experience difficulty in their academic and social trajectories when their prosodic, linguistic and/or cultural patterns of communication are devalued by institutional practices. Even subtle super-segmental factors such as stress and pitch can lead to problematic positioning of second language speakers (e.g., Pickering, 2001).

Non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) in higher education in the United States and elsewhere experience similar forms of discrimination and marginalization, often stemming from the privileging of Western ways of speaking and knowing (e.g., Braine, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; Chiang, 2009; Kramsch, 1998; Lin, Wang, Akamatsu, & Riazi, 2002). As Llieva and Waterstone (2013) highlighted, international students are sought after by Western academe for economic reasons but often

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end up positioned in deficit ways by their new home institutions. Institutional discourses, in sum, tend to shape the level of audibility and intelligibility of language minoritized<sup>1</sup> speakers (cf. Amin, 2004; Kubota, 2011; Miller, 2004).

These issues have become more pressing in recent years, as migration shifts in North America and elsewhere have led to a steady increase in the number of multilingual classrooms in university and K-12 contexts. To support diverse classroom populations, language educators need to develop and foster critical awareness of interaction as a social process as opposed to emerging from a priori constructs such as the 'native' versus 'non-native' language user (Chiang, 2009; Cummins, 2001; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). For example, the second author of this paper, Xiaodong Zhang, is a Chinese NNEST graduate student while the first author, Ruth Harman, is an Irish-raised English-speaking professor of education. When writing this paper as a collective process, we needed to keep reflecting and thinking about how and if we could use different modes (e.g., Xiaodong felt easier sharing some of his findings through written texts first before sharing them verbally with Ruth) to disrupt the power differential between us.

Critical performative pedagogy (CPP), as designed and implemented by the first author and colleagues (e.g., Harman & French, 2004; Harman & Varga-Dobai, 2012), is a pedagogical resource used to embody and probe social equity issues such as the deficit construction of bilingual students. The findings of one of Ruth's previous studies suggested that performance fosters critical language awareness of dominant practices only if combined with a group analysis of the performance (Harman & McClure, 2011). To contribute to this previous research, our current study explores if the combined use of performance and discourse analysis in graduate language education fostered awareness of social interaction as emerging from a nexus of cultural, institutional, and agentive factors. We explore how focal international participants embodied and analyzed re-enactments of second language teaching experiences in a range of course modalities (e.g., narratives, performance, video clips, presentations, and papers).

## Theoretical framework

Butler (1999) conceptualized performativity as the iterative corporal enactment of social identity, regulated by institutional and cultural discourses (e.g., teacher becoming authoritative teacher through repeated enactment of curriculum standards and high-stakes accountability behavioral regimen). In recent years, performativity theories have been applied to the exploration of second language issues such as teacher identity, adult language learning and institutional discourses (e.g., Morgan, 2004; Miller, 2012, 2014; Pavlenko, 2001; Pennycook, 2007; Wooten, 2012). Wooten (2012), for example, conducted a performance ethnographic study to explore how nine non-native teachers of Spanish in grades 6–12 in Georgia public schools constructed and acted out their second language identities. Language learners/teachers deeply invested in their second language identities struggled with feelings of inadequacy when caught in the native speaker/non-native speaker binary but felt empowered when able to see themselves as connecting to "the *both/and* of linguistic and cultural identities" (p. 359). As Miller (2012) stated in her study of adult language learners, performativity theory provides us with a way to "focus on the dynamic constitution of social realities in discursive practice" (p. 89).

Because of its inherently reflexive nature, performance such as improvisation and storytelling is an ideal medium to explore institutionalized, parodic and liminal ways of representing ourselves. When performing a role of teacher and students in a role-play, for example, "performers reflexively examine the discourse as it is emerging, embedding assessments of its structure and significance in the speech itself" (Bauman & Briggs, 1992, p. 69). To foster use of performance as social action, Boal (1979, 1992) developed image and forum theater to support Brazilian regional communities in embodying and challenging local or national inequities. In using Boalian theater techniques, critical educators ask participants to re-imagine and perform scenes representing oppression from their everyday lives. When watching the scenes that revolve around collectively experienced oppressive issues, "spect-actors" from the audience are encouraged to interrupt the scene's key moments and take on the role of the protagonist when they feel they can embody a more effective strategy. By seeing how they can shape the reaction of their interlocutors through changes in verbal, action and visual modes, participants are encouraged to see their everyday discourse as a form of social action (see Bauman & Briggs, 1990 for discussion of recent trends in performance research related to performativity and social action). Our paper explores how the act of stepping out of everyday interactions and re-creating them through Boalian-inspired performance may provide participants with an embodied interpretive frame to begin invoking, disrupting, and analyzing the orchestration and dissonance of meaning making in social discourse (Denzin, 2003; Edmiston, 2014; Goffman, 1974; Gumperz, 1982; Phelan, 1993). Each of our speech acts is both repetition of sedimented stretches of discourse and unique in its new co-construction and this social process can be explored pedagogically through performance and analysis (Bakhtin, 1981; Denzin, 2003; Miller, 2014).

As Achugar (2009) articulated in her study of the professional identity of bilingual participants in a creative writing program on the Mexican border, "by performing certain acts and displaying certain stances, points of view or attitudes, participants attempt to claim or assign social identities" (p. 65). Achugar used an SFL discourse analysis to explore the interactions and artifacts of her participants at both discourse semantic (e.g., appraisal) and lexicogrammatical levels (e.g., mood of clauses). In our case, we combine Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) concept of meaning making as a semiotic process that shifts according to context of culture and situation with theories of performativity and performance, to design the overall pedagogical and methodological framework of this study. Because of its focus on the dynamic constitution of

<sup>1</sup> We have borrowed the term 'minoritized' from Irizarry (2011)

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