Motivation, investment, and identity in English language development: A longitudinal case study☆

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Norton's (2010) conceptualization of motivation as investment, this longitudinal case study investigates how a Korean international graduate student's motivation affected her English language improvement and learning strategies. In the study, the researcher not only analyzed a series of regular face-to-face interviews with the participant conducted over 12 months, but also considered how the participant, her teachers, and her friends evaluated her oral English. Specifically, the study explored how the participant's investment helped her gain legitimate peripheral participation in academic and non-academic settings. This study interpreted these processes to present the participant's experiences, and to show how her identity was socially constructed across time and place.

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1. Introduction

Many second language acquisition (SLA) scholars regard L2 classrooms as sites of struggle, where the social, cultural, and political pressures of learning a second language influence L2 learners' identities (Gee, 2000; Hirst, 2007; Kim, 2003; Luke, 2003; Norton, 2006; Weedon, 1987). These socially constructed identities, they argue, are often multiple, varied, and contradictory (e.g. Gu, 2010; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Norton Peirce, 1995). As pointed out by Ricento (2005), these sociocultural approaches to identity do not treat identity as a fixed and invariant attribute in the mind of each individual learner. Instead, they emphasize how learners relate dialectically to the "various worlds and experiences they inhabit and which act on them within sociocultural approaches" (p. 895). Norton's research underscores that these relationships are constructed "across time and space" (2000, p. 5), and she traces "similarities among conceptions of identity and the collapsing of boundaries between the 'social' and 'cultural'" (2006, p. 24). Rather than simply trying to define appropriate and meaningful cultural and linguistic interaction (Kim, 2003), Norton (2006) reminds us that identity is complex, contradictory, and multifaceted; it is constructed by language; and it has to be understood through both larger social processes and relations of power. Within the classroom, Barnawi (2009) argues, "language and identity should be seen as a single entity, which suffices to identify student membership in a given group" (p. 66), since language is the most important tool for both communication and identity (de)construction. In other words, as a linguistically mediating tool, language enables L2 learners to gain participation, legitimacy, and membership in L2-mediated academic and non-academic discourse communities (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Kim, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Morita, 2004; Norton, 2001).

Unfortunately, many L2 learners have experienced difficulties with constructing their learner identities among different and diverse people and surroundings. Keeping up with American practical speaking speeds and understanding native speakers' expressions without any misconceptions are the most difficult tasks, especially when combined with social, cultural, racial, and national differences from the students' respective home countries. As a result, L2 learners who are new to the US, such as international students and immigrant students of all ages, have a hard time communicating with native speakers of English, as well as participating in their academic discourse communities.

L2 learners' struggles to learn English should also be understood in terms of the complex interactions between socio-cultural meanings and identities (Kim, 2003). Consequently, it is critical to understand how L2 adult learners engage with these new imagined communities (Anderson, 1991): how they overcome linguistic barriers to participation (Morita, 2004), how they develop their engagement strategies, and what strategies they use to enhance their communicative competence in the target language community. To address these important issues, this longitudinal case study examines how a highly motivated L2 learner developed and practiced her English in imagined academic and non-academic discourse communities, and how her investment impacted her identity construction.

In this study, I draw on Norton's (2006) definition of identity and emphasize how the participant's learning strategies and L2 interactions changed her identity in significant and interesting ways. I also apply Norton's theorization of investment to enrich the role of motivation in language development and identity construction. Unlike previous studies of motivation which focused on psychological constructs (Dörnyei, 2001), this holistic approach pays more attention to the close association between the participant's motivation (theorized as investment), learning strategies, and identity construction. To better understand language learners' investment, Pavlenko and Norton (2007) contend that "we need to examine their multiple communities and understand who can and who cannot be imagined as a legitimate speaker of a particular language variety in a specific context" (p. 595). For this reason, the present study focuses on how the participant's investment and English learning strategies change as she engages in academic and non-academic communities. This is especially relevant to SLA contexts, since most international students and immigrant students undergo significant changes in their lives while adjusting to new countries and new academic environments. In the following sections, I will discuss motivation in terms of investment and identity construction, as language learners have complex identities and multiple desires. Next, I will contextualize this study's findings with reference to three earlier studies on motivation, language learning, and adult L2 learners' identity construction. Finally, I will argue for the necessity of utilizing a holistic methodology in researching motivation and L2 learning and recommend possible directions for future research on adult L2 learners' motivation, language learning strategies, and identity change.

2. Motivation, investment, and language learning

2.1. Motivation vs. investment

Norton theorizes motivation as *investment* "to make a meaningful connection between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language and [his or her] changing identity" (Norton, 2010, p. 354; see also Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 420). Investment goes beyond mere instrumental motivation. According to Norton Peirce (1995), the notion of instrumental motivation "generally presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who desires access to material resources that are the privilege of target language speakers," such that "motivation is a property of the language learners—a fixed personality trait" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 17; see also Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 75). Conversely, the notion of investment "attempts to capture the relationship of the language learner to the changing social world," and likewise "conceives of the language learner as having a complex identity and multiple desires" (Norton Peirce, 1995, pp. 17–18; see also Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 75). Even though both concepts can operate simultaneously in terms of acquiring new skills or knowledge, only investment allows for specific identity negotiation and development. This is because investment targets a more complex and specific learning context than motivation does, especially in terms of the often-vague concepts of 'class participation' or 'community involvement.' As a result, a learner is not simply *invested* or *not invested*, but rather specifically invests "in the target language practices of [a given] classroom or community" (Norton & McKinney, 2011, pp. 75–76).

As this difference suggests, a given number of students "may be highly motivated language learners, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom" (Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 76). In other words, even though a learner is highly motivated, she "could be excluded from the language practices of a classroom, and in time positioned as a poor or unmotivated language learner" (Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 76). In this regard, the present study follows Norton and Toohey's (2001) advice that studies on L2 learners' investment should be conducted in terms of "learning context, human agency, and identity in SLA research" (Norton & Toohey, 2001, as cited in Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 256).

2.2. Review of recent empirical studies: motivation, L2 learning strategies, and identity construction

This section draws attention to the potential of motivation to facilitate language learning and identity changes, by assessing three studies of adult L2 learners' identity construction. Specifically, I show how the various learners in the revised studies employ their own strategies to engage their respective academic discourse communities. These strategies help them