



Foreign language identity and Iranian learners' achievement: A relational approach



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ABSTRACT

The integral role of self and identity has been increasingly emphasized during recent years in second and foreign language learning research. Several conceptual frameworks have been proposed for obtaining a more comprehensive picture of the dynamic nature of self and identity in the field. Despite this, few empirical studies have explicitly addressed the possible causal links between identity and actual achievement. Taking up a structural equation modeling analysis, this study attempted to evaluate a hypothesized model incorporating four self components of Taylor's relational identity model and learners' achievement in an Iranian foreign language context. Nine hundred and thirty learners from twenty-five schools participated in this study. The final model indicated learners' internal selves (ideal and private self) exerted a stronger influence on learners' achievement. Learners' private self positively affected learners' ideal self. External selves from peer group were found to negatively impact learners' private self and achievement. The study concludes with several pedagogical suggestions.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades identity and self in second or foreign language learning research have attracted considerable attention among SLA scholars (Duff, 2013; Gao, Jia, & Zhou, 2015; Miller & Kubota, 2013; Norton, 2013; Taylor, 2014). There is a growing literature on the instrumental role of these concepts in explaining learners' experience in different language learning contexts (Csizér & Magid, 2014). How learners identify themselves in connection with others and over time during the acquisition of an L2 is believed to have significant impacts on learners' genuine participation in target language learning activities (Block, 2007a, 2007b; Dörnyei, 2009; Morita, 2012; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Taylor, 2013; Ushioda, 2009).

The main focus of identity studies since their emergence in SLA research and after the social turn has been on second language contexts (Vasilopoulos, 2015). As a consequence of globalization, identity research targeting foreign language education has recently begun to grow in SLA research (Gao et al., 2015; Taylor, 2013). To conceptualize the convoluted nature of identity and self in foreign language learning, a number of theories have been proposed (e.g. Dörnyei, 2009; Kramsch, 2000; Taylor, 2010; Wang, 2004). Among these frameworks, Taylor's quadripolar model of identity (Taylor, 2010) has received critical acclaim from the scholars in the field in recent years (McGregor, 2014; Mercer & Williams, 2014; Xia & Gao, 2015). Gaining insights from self-presentation theory (Leary, 1995) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), Taylor's model conceptualizes identity as "an aggregate of a multitude of private and public selves associated with one individual" (Taylor,

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2014, p. 94). By taking a diachronic-synchronic approach toward identity, the model highlights the multiplicity and relativity of individuals' selves across different relational contexts and time intervals (Taylor, 2014).

Since its introduction to SLA, Taylor's identity model has been employed in a few studies conducted mainly in European EFL contexts (Taylor & Busse, 2016; Taylor, 2010; Taylor, Busse, Gagova, Marsden, & Roosken, 2013). These studies have provided evidence for the power of Taylor's model across different relational contexts (Taylor, 2010), educational subjects (Taylor et al., 2013) and European countries (Taylor & Busse, 2016). Despite the calls for conducting further research to examine the explaining potential of Taylor's model across different language learning contexts (Taylor, 2013; Xia & Gao, 2015), no study to date has used this model as a theoretical lens to explore learners' experience in other EFL (especially non-European) contexts which can offer fruitful insights into the model. In addition, the mechanism of Taylor's model including the possible causal links among the self components of the model and actual outcome variables has not been precisely investigated in the current related literature.

Informed by Taylor's relational model of identity, the current study focused on the identity perceptions of a sample of Iranian adolescent learners of English as a foreign language. Taking up a structural equation modeling analysis, we delved into the possible causal or correlational links among the components of Taylor's model and actual achievement. It is hoped that the findings of the study offer empirical support for Taylor's relational identity model in non-European EFL contexts and shed more light on the mechanism of Taylor's model of identity and the impact of identity perceptions on learners' achievement.

2. Background

2.1. Identity in foreign language education

Earlier studies on L2 identity have mainly targeted adult immigrant learners in majority settings (e.g. North American countries or Australia) where English is the official language (Ellis, 2008). Foreign language learning contexts have been on the periphery of L2 identity research for a long time. Only in recent years these contexts have started to draw the scholars' attention as a result of appreciating person-centered approaches to language learning at the developing age of globalization (Gao et al., 2015; McGregor, 2014; Taylor et al., 2013; Ushioda, 2009, 2011).

A few theoretical models have been formulated for explaining foreign language identity (Dörnyei, 2009; Kramsch, 2000; Taylor, 2010; Wang, 2004). Among these models, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System has gained more popularity and empirical support in different EFL contexts. Despite this, the model has been recently criticized for the lack of an actual L2 self component (Taylor, 2010). The model comprises three components of ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience. Ideal L2 self, the strongest component of self system, functions as "a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). Despite the instrumental role of actual self, there is no discussion of this self dimension in Dörnyei's model and there is no clear starting point for learners who intend to reduce distance from their ideal L2 self (Taylor & Busse, 2016). The absence of actual L2 self as a separate component undermines the value of ideal self as the strongest motivational force in Dörnyei's model (Taylor, 2014).

Responding to such criticisms and focusing on the social and relational contexts in which individuals learn a foreign language, Taylor (2010) has proposed a model to explicate adolescent English language learners' identity as they attempt to assert a new identity by socially comparing themselves in relation to important others and by displaying multiple context-dependent self images in varied social circles.

2.2. Taylor's quadripolar model of identity

Taylor's model of identity (Taylor, 2010, 2013) is founded on several social psychology theories including private self/public self dichotomy (Baumeister, 1986), self-presentation and impression management (Leary, 1995), self discrepancy (Higgins, 1987) and relational contexts in adolescence (Harter, 2012). In her model Taylor defines self as "a collection of thoughts about what individuals can and cannot do both with their mind and with their body" and identity as "self-images performed by individuals for different purposes in particular social contexts" (Taylor, 2013, p.10). Taylor conceptualizes learners' identity as a composite construct comprising internal/external and possible/actual self dimensions or an aggregate of learners' private, public, ideal and imposed L2 selves. These self components as the four poles of the model have been elaborated in Table 1.

Table 1

The components of Taylor's identity model across two self dimensions (Taylor, 2013, p. 170).

Self dimension	Internal	External
Actual	<i>Private self</i> : an individual's personal representations of his/her present attributes, which may or may not be disclosed in social interaction	<i>Public selves</i> : various social presentations that a person may display depending on the relational context and audience
Possible	<i>Ideal self</i> : a personal representation of what an individual would like to be in the future, irrespective of other people's desires and expectations about the individual	<i>Imposed selves</i> : 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 relational contexts in which the individual functions

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