Researching Identity in Applied Linguistics

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Abstract

This chapter introduces identity as an under research topic to the researchers within the field of applied linguistics. At first, identity is defined from different viewpoints and the underlying theories informing research within this area are explicated. Then, the research designs, tools, and methodologies related to this topic are discussed. Qualitative and mixed-methods research designs along with case study are introduced as the most appropriate designs for this line of research. Moreover; interviewing, ethnographic observation, questionnaire, and diaries/journals are proposed and discussed as the most appropriate research tools to explore identity. Finally a short critique is provided on researching identity.

Keywords: Applied linguistics, diary/journal, ethnographic observation, identity, interviewing, mixed-methods research, narrative inquiry, qualitative research

Introduction

Research paradigms in Second Language Teaching/Learning field have shifted drastically in the past thirty years. Current publications and studies indicate that researchers have recently oriented toward sociolinguistic issues related to language learning and psycholinguistic issues are not as attractive as they used to be. This is what David Block (2003) calls '*the social turn in SLA*' in his monograph. One of the realizations of this new trend is the recent interest in researching identity in language studies. In other words, identity has attracted the attention of applied linguists with applied sociolinguistic and critical orientations. Initial scientific and modern studies of language and identity can be envisioned in the publications in the 1970s and 1980s. Also according to Norton (2008) in the 1990s three groups of academic publications including special issues of *Linguistics and Education*, edited by Martin-Jones and Heller in 1996, *Language and Education*, edited by Sarangi and Baynham in 1996, and *TESOL Quarterly* edited by Norton in 1995 and 1997 established the prominence of this issue in language education studies.

Identity and language defined: Theory and practice

Identity generally refers to "who am I?" question. It also refers to a sense of who we are and how we relate to the social world (Norton 2000), and it is dynamic and complex, having the characterizations of being 'lived, negotiated, on-going, changing constantly across time and space, social, multiple, it is also a learning process with its pasts and future incorporating the present' (Wenger, 1998, p.163). Identity is also what some feminist post-structural theorists refer to as subjectivity (Norton, 2011). The following table shows the different types of identity and their relevant definitions.

Table 1: Individual/collective identity types (based on Block 2006a: 37 adopted from Block, 2006b

Ethnic: A sense of a shared history, descent, belief systems, practices, language and religion, all associated with a cultural group

Racial: Biological/genetic make-up, i.e. racial phenotype (NB often conflated with ethnicity)

National: A sense of a shared history, descent, belief systems, practices, language and religion associated with a nation state

Gendered: Nature and degree of conformity to socially constructed notions of femininities and masculinities

Social Class: Associated with income level, occupation, education and symbolic behaviour

Language: The relationship between one's sense of self and different means of communication: language, a dialect or sociolect. Could be understood in terms of Leung *et al.'s* (1997) *inheritance, affiliation* and *expertise*

Identity is investigated in a myriad of fields including anthropology, psychology, education, sociology, literature, politics, etc. Within the field of language education, TEFL/TESOL, and Applied Linguistics the last two decades has witnessed a growing rise of interest on identity and the exponential growth in publications verify this claim (e.g. Jenkins, 2007; Liamas & Watt, 2010; Ricento, 2005; Riley, 2007; Varghase et al., 2005). In other words, with the emerging mass publications on identity (e.g. Block 2007; Joseph 2004; Morgan & Clarke, 2011; Norton 1995, 1997, 2000, 2008, 2010; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), this topic is no longer on the periphery and is receiving maximum attention in applied linguistics.

The main theories informing these studies on identity include Bakhtin's poststructuralist theory of language, Critical Theory of Marx and Foucault, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Weedon's feminist poststructuralist view of subjectivity, Tajfel's social identity theory, Bourdie's theory of power in discourse, and finally Hall's and Bhaba's postcolonial perspective. However, most of the studies focus on the poststructuralist view adhered by Mikhail Bakhtin, Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Hall, Anthony Giddens, Manuel Castells, Chris Weedon and Zygmuut Bauman, who have all contributed to the development of a general poststructuralist and constructivist view of identity.

Studies on identity in language education have tackled different issues including identity and ideology, identity and race, identity and gender, identity in writing, language learner identity, and teacher professional identity. In another classification according to Block (2007) studies on identity can be mainly grouped into three main categories including: L2 identity among the immigrants, L2 identity in second language context, and L2 identity in foreign language context. Regarding the setting, studies done in the area of language and identity cover a wide range of contexts including the United States (Lu, 2005), Canada (Norton, 2000), the United Kingdom (Block, 2007), Vietnam (Ha & Que, 2006), China (Cui, 2006; Gu, 2010), Japan (Duff & Uchida, 1997), Hong Kong (Tsui, 2007), and Indonesia (Widianto, 2005) among many other research contexts.

Research methodology

Hansen and Liu (1997, p. 573) content that "because social identity is a dynamic phenomenon, it should be a study with a methodology that is dynamic both in philosophy and in practice". The research design appropriate for studies exploring identity should be qualitative in nature. Though qualitative research is offered here, care should be taken to report the data appropriately. In other words, the data in qualitative research should be reported to lend itself to the theory it is after. Along with qualitative research method, mix-methods are also recommended for obtaining a more detailed picture of identity in applied linguistics. Although some might argue against quantification when it comes to researching identity, researchers can skilfully adopt quantitative tools such as questionnaires when dealing with a large population in a study. In mixed-methods research, researchers adopt both qualitative (e.g. interviewing) and quantitative (e.g. questionnaire) research tools. Also case study is highly recommended in such studies. According to Yin (2003), case study is one of the ways of doing research in social science and is the 'preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed and when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary event within some real-life context', 'especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (p.1 and p.13). Regarding methods for researching identity, Norton and Toohey (in

press) argue that 'methods that scholars use in identity approaches to language learning...often draw on critical ethnography, feminist poststructuralist theory, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology'.

Doing away with the appropriate research methods when exploring identity issues, the next important matter is the length of study. Researchers in this case should adopt longitudinal studies in order to study the development of identity within and across individuals. However, if identity at a particular time is sought, case study and cross-sectional studies within a short period of time can also be utilized.

After considering the research methodology, design and the length of the study on identity research, appropriate applicable research tools should be adopted. Useful research tools within this area of research include:

Interviewing

Researchers can use either individual interviewing or focus-group interviewing in order to unravel language learners' or teachers' identity. In order to do so, they can adopt structured or semi-structured interviewing. However, the best tool can be structured interviewing where the researcher has already prepared his/her questions prior to having the interviews. In structured interviewing the researcher asks already prepared questions related to identity in order to elicit the relevant construct, i.e. identity. Also follow-up interviews can be run in order to wipe out possible sources of ambiguity in the main interview sessions. In other words, there are times when what has been articulated by the participants in the interview sessions is unclear to the researcher. In order to make out what the participants meant, follow-up interviews are run.

Researchers can also have focus-group interviews by inviting a group of participants to the research site and subsequently by asking the questions in group manipulate more in-depth sources of data. According to Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1990):

> **…**many participants are not aware of their implicit perspectives, and hearing others' perspectives gives the participants a chance to voice their points of view as well as learn from each other, while giving the researcher data that is not possible to get in another way. This also provides insight into how the participants understand their similarities and differences (p. 31).

Doing focused interviewing has a number of advantages including:

- The participants feel better to express their ideas and tell their stories. In other words deeper sources of information are reached.
- Since the focus group interview involves asking, answering, challenging, opposing, etc. the data obtained is richer in content.
- Interviewing can be categorized within conversation analysis or discourse analysis method in doing qualitative research. In other words, the data gathered can be analysed using conversation or discourse analysis frameworks (see Dolon & Todoli, 2008). One of the studies on identity using this instrument was Norton (2000).

Ethnographic observation

Ethnography, also known as cultural anthropology or naturalistic inquiry, is a holistic qualitative method of research initially adopted in anthropology and social sciences where the researcher adopts a participatory role through participant observation in a specific research site such as a tribe or language community to study the behaviour of that particular community (Harklau, 2005). In ethnography, a researcher delves into the minds of the subjects under study and uses an emically-oriented perspective to interpret the data, i.e. trying to report things from the subjects' own point of view (Mackey and Gass 2005). Data collection is often done through participant and nonparticipant observation, interviews, questionnaires, ethnographers' diaries and field notes, films and audio recordings, authentic documents hence fulfilling triangulation in research. Main features of ethnographic studies are:

- The events in ethnography are interpreted from the subjects' point of view. However, striking a balance between an emic and etic perspective is difficult and can be considered as a drawback to ethnography.
- There must be a prolonged engagement in the research site with the subjects in order to reach a full picture of the phenomenon under study, i.e. thick description.

Studies utilizing ethnography as research tool include Toohey (2001), and De Costa (2010).

Questionnaire

Researchers can also develop a questionnaire specific to a context in order to research identity. In case researchers intend to adopt a questionnaire developed by some other researchers in a different language learning context, care should be taken into account to localize the questions because an already developed questionnaire is rarely suggested to be used for various contexts. Also the validation and reliability of the questionnaire developed are very important (see Dörnyei, 2003). The easiest way to validate the construct of identity in a newly developed questionnaire inquiring for instance language learners' identity is to pilot it or cross-validate it with some key figures working within this area of study. Usually questionnaires are developed for studies where large samples of respondents are required. Developing a questionnaire makes it easy for the researcher to recruit a large population and subsequently the generalizeability of the findings would also increase. Interested researchers can use questionnaires for a large population and conduct individual in-depth interviewing or focus-group interviewing on a selected sample of the population who have already filled out the questionnaire for obtaining a detailed and thick description of individuals' identities.

Diaries and Journals

Another useful tool for digging out individuals' identities is to use diaries/journals or autobiographies. In order to do so, researchers should have their participants keep journals during a certain period of time. Later on these journals can be used as a source of data. Researchers can use narrative inquiry in order to detect certain themes relevant to the individuals' identity in their diaries or journals. Narrative inquiry is one of the most helpful qualitative research methods used to investigate identity. In narrative inquiry, participants tell a story and talk about an event in their lives (see Bell, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pavlenko, 2007). Pavlenko (2001), among others, favours the use of narrative inquiry as a research method inquiring social identity. She states that:

> L2 learning stories...are unique and rich sources of information about the relationship between language and identity in second language learning and socialization. It is possible that only personal narratives provide a glimpse into areas so private, personal, and intimate...and at the same time at the heart and soul of the second language socialization process" (p. 167).

Similarly Kanno (2003) argues for the usefulness of the use of narrative inquiry as a research method in researching identity and explains that:

> Tapping into issues of identity- how one views oneself and relates to the world around one- requires an inquiry into people's experiences and meaning making, and an inquiry into those areas call for the use of narrative (Kanno, 2003, p.11).

Narrative inquiry as a research method can be employed in a myriad of forms including diaries and journals, on line written discourse or texts, spoken discourse via face-to-face interviews, and even recently the use of visual technology including photography and painting (see Page, 2010). Also written and spoken discourses are good medium for detecting individual's identity. Sometimes conversation analysis in classroom or language learning context in general can help us gain access to people's identity. Studies utilizing language classroom talk include Duff (2002).

Diaries are usually kept in a book/log. Also participants can be invited to a wiki log or weblog on the Internet to share their daily language learning lives with other participants in a study. A good and practical example is to ask one's own language learners in a class to post their diaries and views about their L2 learning journey on the web. However, some may be reluctant to share their lives with others. In such cases, security issues can be planned so that the administrator of the blog, who can be the researcher too, has access to the diaries the writers of which do not intend to share with all but only with the administrator. One of the potential problems with this instrument is related to ethical considerations. Since participants' diaries or journals may contain private and personal information, their consents regarding their willingness to participate in such studies should be superior to embarking on the study.

Hence written discourse in the form of journals, diaries and weblog posts can give us an insight into individuals' identity (see Ivanič 1998; Le Ha & Baurain 2011)

Critiques on researching identity

Though researching identity can be tackled using the above-mentioned research methods, designs, and tools there are certain criticisms levelled against them. In other words, such studies deal with a complex human characteristic, i.e. identity, and hence the data gathered might suffer from some de-

gree of pollution due to its dealing with a personal construct. Two of the potential sources of criticisms are related to the generalizeability of such research and the intrusion of subjectivity. What follows summarizes the possible criticisms.

Generalizeability

Researching within the realm of identity shows that many studies have been conducted with a limited number of participants (e.g. Cui, 2006; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Tsui, 2007). Limited number of participants limits the generalizeability of the findings obtained. Similarly the findings in such researches are shaped and determined by the sociological, political, ideological, and geographical factors specific to the context (i.e. the country or educational context) in which the study has been done. In other words, the findings obtained can only be extrapolated to the relevant context in which the study is conducted. To put it in other words, the findings achieved from a study done in India cannot be easily generalized to other educational contexts due to certain factors fluctuating from context to context. Hence, the findings are usually situated and studies should be expanded to other unexplored contexts. Subsequently more studies with more participants and across different contexts are required to shape the research on identity in applied linguistics. Such global research may result in reshaping research within this area of research and new models and theories can be developed.

Subjectivity in data collection and analysis

Another source of potential criticism against researching identity is the intrusion of subjectivity when it comes to data collection and analysis. Since most studies exploring identity follow qualitative research methods, designs, and tools; care should be taken to avoid bias and misinterpretations when it comes to gathering your data and analysing them. Sometimes hermeneutic analysis of the data gathered is falsified by adopting wrong ideological and theoretical frameworks for analysing the data. Though researchers may do their best to be completely impartial and unbiased, some sources of misinterpretations may sneak in during the data collection and analysis.

The solution to such a criticism is to maximize your attention to evade personal prejudiced decisions and employ multiple, rather than singular, data analysts to reach less biased results. For so doing data analyses should be led by multiple researchers (i.e. maximising the reliability of the findings) employing multiple perspectives rather an individualistic one.

Conclusion

This chapter gave a quick review of the studies on identity and language learning. It also provided the theoretical background to the studies conducted so far. In another move, relevant research know-how were provided to guide language teaching researchers to research identity within the field of applied linguistics using appropriate research designs, tools and methods. Finally a critique was launched about researching identity. It should be noted here that the tools introduced here are also used in other areas of research and researchers should be wary how to utilize them depending on the context, number of participants, generalizeability, and reliability/validity issues relevant to the study under research.

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