

Self and Identity in Adolescent Foreign Language Learning

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Self and Identity in Adolescent Foreign Language Learning

Florentina Taylor

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the world go round*

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1 Introduction

The research described in this book is rooted in my decade-long interest in what it is that helps students participate genuinely in learning activities that they consider personally relevant, and how these factors could be turned into learning capital in the classroom. Many library shelves have been filled with books about how to motivate students to learn, but we sometimes forget a simple truth that Kohn (1993: 198–199) reminds us of:

... children do not need to be motivated. From the beginning they are hungry to make sense of their world. Given an environment in which they don't feel controlled and in which they are encouraged to think about what they are doing (rather than how well they are doing it), students of any age will generally exhibit an abundance of motivation and a healthy appetite for challenge.

A control-free environment that nurtures personal growth and an appetite for challenge is particularly needed in adolescence – a child's apprenticeship to responsible self-determined functioning in society. Given teenagers' increasing bids for independence and autonomy, contexts that do not support their explorations and personally relevant choices lead to frustration and conflict. The situation is further complicated by the different relational contexts in which a teenager functions: family, school, peer groups and so on. If interactions with adults are restrictive and unappreciative of one's individuality, there is often a peer group that is happy to accept a youngster on condition that a particular code of conduct is adopted. Depending on the nature of the adopting group, this can be either detrimental or beneficial. Superficially displayed attitudes can end up reshaping one's identity, but it is a totally different matter if the change is triggered by, for example, a questionable street gang or by a well-intended teacher.

The developmental stage when identity processes are at their most complex peak – adolescence – is also the period when most foreign language

learning occurs, given that foreign languages are usually studied in secondary school. Identity complexities inherent in adolescence therefore overlap with the identity complexities that are inherent in language learning. It is sometimes said that learning a language means learning a new identity. Being an adolescent also means learning a new identity: the identity that one will manifest in one's community, at the hub of an intricate network of social relationships. Just as a new language is learnt by trial and error, by pronouncing a word wrong until one gets it right or by making a grammatical mistake until it does not feel 'right' anymore, in the same way teenagers learn 'who they are' by trying out and discarding alternative selves until one of them meets with social approval and gets adopted and sometimes internalised into their own identity.

Foreign language classes can be either a curse or a blessing for an adolescent's emerging sense of self. Expressing ourselves in a language different from our own might expose us to ridicule, projecting a vulnerable self in the eyes of peers who may have fun counting our mistakes. However, expressing ourselves in a foreign language can also be an excellent tool for identity exploration, and that is especially relevant during adolescence, when identity exploration is of paramount importance. Genuinely communicative language classes would appear, in this light, as the most suited to identity development of all academic subjects. As long as students have learnt to express themselves fluently, the teaching has been successful. But for this they need to be able to express *themselves*, to talk about what worries and what thrills them, as well as about what helps them engage more and learn better. When such communication occurs in the foreign language itself, the teacher gains crucial insights into the learners' own motivational processes, while the students gain socio-communicative competence that they will be able to use later, in real-life encounters, besides exploring and consolidating their identity through this very communication. One could almost say that successful foreign language classes are CLIL lessons where the subject matter is the student's own identity.

However, the overlapping complexities inherent in adolescence and foreign language learning are not the only double-edged challenge in class. The classroom is a space where two socio-relational contexts overlap. Whereas the teacher is just a teacher at all times (except, perhaps, when the class is being observed by a superior member of staff), students are always both students and classmates, having to juggle with often contradictory social expectations: will they be (or pretend to be) hardworking and please the teacher, or will they be (or pretend to be) sworn enemies of learning and please their work-avoidant peers? The ensuing identity negotiations necessary to avoid conflicts are also encountered in adolescents' personal lives,

when being in the same place with one's parents and one's best friends would often require the diplomatic display of particular context-dependent identities. It is these spiralling 'complications' that make foreign language learners' identity such a rewarding research topic.

Starting from such considerations, and having completed a study with Romanian learners of English as a foreign language (Taylor, 2008), which revealed a vast array of manipulative-escapist behaviours that students displayed in class when they were not appreciated personally and their views were not taken into account (see also Taylor, 2013a), an investigation into what helps students feel appreciated in class was a natural continuation for my research interests.

Research Background

This book reports on a research project that aimed to facilitate a better understanding of the adolescent foreign language learner caught in a web of social relations that may not always be self-actualising, with particular emphasis on the factors that may help learners feel personally appreciated in class and the ways in which these factors could be used to enhance their engagement and achievement. My chosen research context was the Romanian secondary-school system, because it is a context with which I am familiar both as a student and as a teacher, because my interest in this research topic was kindled by my previous study in a very similar research site, and because it is a medium where teaching is still regarded by many as knowledge transmission by an authoritative teacher figure, thus promising rewarding insights into differential classroom identity display. In addition, the student's identity and its relationship to language learning are significantly under-researched areas in this educational context.

The combination of strong international influences and developments, on the one hand, and a controversial political atmosphere with changes of government triggering changes in educational policy every four years, on the other hand, has taken Romanian education through a never-ending cycle of reforms and structural changes in recent years (European Commission, 2008a; Mihai, 2003). As far as the teaching of English is concerned, the result may be seen as an example of *less-than-healthy glocalisation* (Friedman, 2000).

Admittedly, monochrome Stalinist textbooks have been replaced by glossy materials featuring age-relevant issues (Andrei, 2006; Popovici & Bolitho, 2003), students watch English language films in class and may be assessed on projects more than on their proficiency in literary translation, regulations stipulating that by the end of upper secondary school productive

and receptive skills are emphasised in equal measure (European Commission, 2008b). However, it is debatable to what extent these recent developments are truly *glocalised* in Romanian English language teaching. As Andrei (2006: 774) puts it, 'there still is a nostalgia for the past certainties, for more stable and more predictable curricula'. Although syllabi are in theory based on a functional-communicative model of learning and teaching (National Curriculum Council, 2007a, 2007b), in practice, however, teaching is still heavily driven by grammar-translation methodology, and the structure of the final examination – which for most pupils still represents the main reason for studying – has long contradicted the theoretical principles stated in the official documents, as emphasised by Mihai (2003). Project work was still an alien concept not long ago (Medgyes, 1997), whereas English classes are often *taught in Romanian* with only illustrative patterns written in English on the blackboard, and while some teachers still perceive themselves as *the* source of knowledge in class, many students have adopted an attitude of tolerance towards their tutors and, expending just enough effort to leave the impression that they are involved in classroom tasks, they actually attend to their own – not always educational – agendas (Taylor, 2008, 2009).

Paradoxically perhaps, many Romanian adolescents are proficient speakers of English. Their intrinsically driven competence, however, is often unrelated to their school foreign language lessons. They learn the language from the films they watch, from the music they listen to, from the computer applications they use, from online socialising networks where they use English for authentic communication about personally relevant issues (Constantinescu *et al.*, 2002; Istrate & Velea, 2006). In one of the very few investigations that have documented the mechanics of motivation and classroom involvement for Romanian foreign language learners, Taylor (2008) found that since they had started studying English at school, adolescents' excitement and interest for their language lessons had decreased, although their perceived confidence and declared proficiency had actually increased. Her participants also declared that they skipped about one third of their English classes and, when present, were engaged for about two thirds of the time, admitting to a wide range of activities they resorted to in class while giving the impression they were on task. The qualitative component of the study identified as the main reason for such conduct perceived teacher distance (or alleged arrogance), as well as perceived lack of acknowledgement and appreciation for students as individuals with personal values and interests.

Responding to a scarcity of research linking identity and foreign language learning in general, and in Romania in particular, the project reported in this book aimed to: (a) gain new insights into the identity of Romanian

adolescent learners of English as a foreign language and its relationships to classroom involvement and declared achievement; and (b) serve as the initial validation of a new theoretical framework, *A Quadripolar Model of Identity* (see Chapter 4). Having a dual inductive–deductive purpose, the project was governed by a pragmatic research paradigm that called for a parallel mixed-method approach (Creswell, 2008; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The data collection methods were self-reported structured questionnaires and semi-structured individual interviews, which were combined according to the research strategy of concurrent triangulation and the principle of complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses (Brewer & Hunter, 1993; Johnson & Turner, 2003). Specifically, questionnaires were used in order to seek validation for the new model of identity and to collect cross-sectional trend data, whereas interviews had the purpose of complementing and enriching the questionnaire data with rich qualitative insights.

The data collection instruments were a purposefully designed questionnaire (see Appendices A, B and C; available to download from <http://www.iris-database.org>) and interview guide (Appendix D), which were piloted prior to data collection with 82 similar students in a different Romanian county. The concepts measured/explored in these instruments were derived indirectly from my understanding of the background literature and directly from the theoretical framework detailed in Chapter 4. Both data collection instruments used the Romanian language, as it was important that participants' understanding of the questions, as well as their answers, did not depend on their English language proficiency. The quantitative data were analysed with the IBM SPSS® 19 package and the qualitative data were submitted to thematic content analysis using the NVivo® 9 software. The qualitative analysis was conducted in the original language, with selected quotations translated into English and used for illustrative purposes in Chapters 5 and 7.

My participants were 1045 Romanian learners of English as a foreign language, aged 14–19 (mean 16.47), in five maintained schools of various specialisms. 339 participants were male and 645 female (61 did not report their gender). These completed paper questionnaires during regular class time after written permission was obtained from head teachers. The participating classes were selected so as to ensure a balanced spread of levels and according to the classroom teachers' availability and willingness to participate. The five schools were selected through geographical cluster sampling from a city in central Romania with an ethnically and economically heterogeneous population. Participation was completely anonymous and confidential, and the students had the option to refuse to participate (which some did). The teenagers had studied English as a foreign language for periods

ranging from 1 to 15 years in mixed-ability grouping, with kindergarten and primary school the only periods when foreign languages were optional subjects. Depending on their specialism, the number of English classes per week was between 2 and 7. Of the 1045 students who completed the self-reported questionnaire, several dozen volunteered to be interviewed and 32 were selected for an in-depth one-to-one follow-up discussion on the school premises.

Aims and Outline of the Book

The aim of this book is to raise awareness of concepts and relationships that have not attracted much attention in foreign language learning research, although they may be regarded by many to make intuitive sense. Many adults know, for example, that adolescence is a turbulent period of identity exploration and also a period when many students lose their interest in school while becoming more interested in finding a place for themselves in society. Many adults know that teenagers sometimes pretend to be engaged and interested academically when interacting with adults, while pretending to be disengaged when interacting with peer groups that do not have strong academic values. What processes determine our children to juggle with these identities? What factors determine their desire to become one type of person or another? What factors determine whether or not their intrinsic curiosity and fascination with learning survives the classroom atmosphere and peer pressure? And, crucially, how can we help them learn better and be more fulfilled as fully functioning members of society?

This book seeks to answer some of these questions by (a) discussing the previous literature and research exploring the role of identity in adolescents' development in general, and in foreign language learning in particular, (b) reporting on a study that was inspired by the need for more research into the role of self and identity in adolescent foreign language learning and (c) discussing the findings of this project in relation to other similar studies, commenting on practical, conceptual and research implications. The book has the following structure:

The next chapter provides a literature background to the self, identity and related concepts in social and educational psychology, with an emphasis on developmental processes in adolescence. Four of the main influences on teenagers' identity development – parents, friends, teachers and classmates – are discussed briefly before a summary of the literature discussing differences between private/public and actual/possible identity perceptions. The chapter ends with an overview of Carl Rogers' conceptualisation of 'fully functioning

persons', a notion which is considered to incorporate key elements from all the literature strands reviewed before, and which has influenced the new theoretical model proposed in this book to a great extent.

Chapter 3 reviews previous research that has explored foreign language learning from a self or identity perspective. The chapter begins by defining the focus of this book and the research presented in it: the learning of foreign languages in countries where the L2 is not the official language, through limited contact time at school. Whereas identity has been a prolific research topic in the second language acquisition literature documenting the adaptation and integration of immigrants into their host countries, it has only relatively recently come into focus in foreign language learning research. Key studies that have reported on the self and identity in foreign language contexts are discussed, as are various motivational, self-regulatory and relational perspectives that may not be regarded to have researched the core concepts of this book but which have, nevertheless, had an important influence on the design of the research project reported later. The chapter ends with five reasons why more research is needed into the role of self and identity in foreign language learning.

Chapter 4 proposes a new model of identity, which constituted the theoretical framework of the study reported later in the book. The model incorporates the social and educational psychology concepts reviewed in Chapter 2, while also drawing on concepts discussed in Chapter 4. The Quadripolar Model of Identity regards identity as an aggregate of internal and external selves, both actual and possible, associated with one individual. The chapter describes the components of the self system, the main relationships that these components are hypothesised to engage in, and the main self system configurations that these components may cluster around. The chapter ends by acknowledging some of the limitations of the proposed model.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 discuss key findings of the research project that served as the initial validation of the new identity model for learning English as a foreign language. Chapter 5 draws on the qualitative data, reporting on the insights gained about the main self system configurations with extensive quotations from the interviews. Chapter 6 discusses highlights of the quantitative findings, supported by qualitative data, which confirm many of the hypotheses described in Chapter 4. It provides evidence that strategic identity display was rife in the selected research context (with some interesting gender differences), that adolescents responded in the predicted manner to the expectations of the social circles they interacted with and that identity display that is not rooted in the participants' actual identity has serious consequences for declared achievement in language learning. Chapter 7 discusses in further detail the role of the teacher in the classroom, at the centre of