Multiple Perspectives on the Self in SLA

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Edited by
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Front cover: With thanks to Desmond Morris for kindly granting permission to use his painting 'The Imaginer'.

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Marion Williams was formerly Reader in Applied Linguistics at the University of Exeter, UK, where she coordinated the postgraduate programmes in TESOL. She is interested in all aspects of psychology in language learning. Her research interests include motivation, attributions, teaching of thinking and teacher education. She is the joint author of *Psychology for Language Teachers: A Social Constructivist Approach*, *Thinking Through the Curriculum, Teaching Young Learners to Think,* and co-editor of *Psychology for Language Learning.* She is also a former President of IATEFL.

1 Introduction

Marion Williams and Sarah Mercer

What This Book is About

In recent years, the key role of the self in second language acquisition (SLA) has increasingly been gaining recognition from SLA writers, and there has been a dramatic increase in research on this topic. However, accompanying this growth in interest in this area, there has been an escalation in the range of theoretical conceptualisations of the self. While this is a positive indication of the vibrancy of developments in this field, there exist a number of confusions owing to the variety of definitions and overlapping terms. The aim of this book is to bring together a range of perspectives on the self, which are often seen as competing, to unite what is currently a somewhat fragmented field and to provide an overview of some of the different ways in which the self has been conceptualised. Our aim is to provide an insight into the way in which each perspective contributes to our overall understanding of the self in SLA. We hope that viewing these perspectives collectively in one volume will lead to a deeper understanding of the concept and an appreciation of the merits of the theoretical and methodological diversity in this area.

Why We Compiled This Book

For a number of years both editors have shared an interest in the insights that can be gained from the field of educational psychology in furthering our understanding of language learning processes. For example, Williams, in her book together with Burden (1997) *Psychology for Language Teachers*, examined a number of psychological areas that were receiving attention at the time and linked these to language teaching. Some 15 years later, while together compiling the book *Psychology for Language Learning* (Mercer *et al.*, 2012), both editors were struck by the growing focus in the field on perspectives related to the self and the many different ways of conceptualising these that exist. For example, in her chapter on motivation in the 2012 book, Ushioda, referring to

Dörnyei's (2005) L2 self system of motivation, theorises the motivation construct from a self-related viewpoint, arguing that concepts of 'self' have come to dominate research on motivation in education, and that examining the self system reframes the motivation construct in enlightening ways. In addition, recent work in other areas of language learning psychology, such as goals, self-determination, attributions, mindsets and perceptions of successes and failures, all centre around notions of the self.

Similarly, in writing her book *Towards an Understanding of Language Learner Self-Concept*, Mercer (2011) found considerable overlap between various self-related terms, such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-concept and identity. Brinthaupt and Lipka (1992: 1) explain that there is 'wide disagreement about how to define the self, measure it, and study its development' and highlight the problems that researchers thus face in selecting constructs, differentiating between terms and comparing studies. However, we do not see this diversity as inherently problematic, but rather we choose to view it as a potential strength; if employed and integrated appropriately, epistemological and methodological diversity can give rise to a richer, more comprehensive view of the self than a single perspective alone.

As the self is a field of study that is expanding rapidly within SLA, it seems to be timely to examine the different perspectives that exist and consider the implications of the various viewpoints for the future of this growing field of research. We therefore felt a need to bring the different perspectives together to help us to see their commonalities, differences and areas of overlap to facilitate a more unified view of the self. Our intention is to see how different views might complement each other and, when combined, elaborate our understanding of the self. If we want a full picture of the self, we need to bring all the pieces of the picture together.

In working on the book, we have been delighted by the enthusiastic response of the contributors and it has been extremely rewarding and enlightening to work with such a collection of distinguished scholars, each with a different perspective on the field. While we may embrace different conceptualisations of the self, we all share a passion and conviction of the importance of the self in SLA and the need to better understand its nature and role in language learning processes.

Who This Book is For

This book is essentially aimed at those interested in the topic of the self in language learning, whether carrying out research in this field or teaching on postgraduate programmes, training teachers, studying at postgraduate level or teaching a foreign language. In order to ensure the volume remains accessible to those working at various levels of specialisation in the field, we have attempted to explain different concepts clearly as they arise. In addition,

each chapter ends with guidance for further reading in the particular area, and we hope this will motivate a whole new generation of specialists in the self in SLA to keep moving the field forward.

Organisation of the Book

The book is organised into 12 chapters, with 10 of them focusing on a different perspective on the self. The introductory chapter is intended to set the scene, whereas the concluding chapter attempts to pull together the main threads and considers directions for the future. While each chapter presents a particular viewpoint, we have allowed the contributors flexibility in whether their main focus is on a theoretical perspective or an empirical research study. Indeed, we deliberately intended to encourage diversity, enabling contributors to draw out their own emphasis. The chapters have been loosely ordered sequentially from more tightly defined constructs to more holistic views of the self.

The volume begins with Mills' chapter on self-efficacy, in which she explores Bandura's social cognitive theory focusing on how self-efficacy is formed. She reports on several studies in which the subsequent implications of the theory for pedagogy are empirically investigated and concludes that it is crucial for learners to 'feel competent and capable in their ability to acquire a foreign language'. Chapter 3 by Sampasivam and Clément focuses on the construct of second language confidence (L2C) and explores the literature to consider the role of different types of contexts and situations in L2C, such as inside/outside the classroom or in computer-mediated communication. In order to create some coherence to a complex area, they propose a taxonomical framework for classifying different forms of language contact. In the next chapter, Rubio addresses the two constructs of self-concept and self-esteem and proposes a neurogenerative model to help understand how the two facets of the self might be interrelated and develop over time. As well as considering possible ways of researching these two self constructs, he also reflects on the important implications for pedagogy of a sensitivity to and understanding of the nature of self-concept and self-esteem.

Chapter 5 continues with an exploration of poststructuralist theory by Norton who considers its usefulness for helping teachers and administrators to make informed decisions about classroom practices designed to support learners in constructing and negotiating their identities through the use of language. She employs the concept of 'investment' as a way of conceptualising learners' motivation and engagement with the language practices within the classroom and argues that support is needed for teachers as well as learners working in diverse linguistic communities. She also raises important issues regarding the distribution of power and potential for social change in language teaching and learning contexts and their effects on identity

positioning. The construct of identity is also addressed in Chapter 6 in which Hemmi reports on a study conducted with Japanese/English bilingual women living in Japan. She describes how the majority of the women possess multiple or at least dual identities created, in their opinion, by cultural and linguistic differences in the languages. She highlights how being bilingual can be perceived as either positive or negative; however, in the case of these women, she concluded that they hold primarily an additive view of their bilingual selves. In the next chapter, Taylor explores different types of relational selves, that is, the different sense of self one has when moving from one social interaction to another. Using three theoretical frameworks, she reports on research that has revealed the seeming contradictions and potential conflicts a learner may experience between their public and personal selves as they interact within and across different relational contexts. She draws important conclusions about the need for learners to feel accepted, and highlights the multiplicity of identities learners bring with them into the language classroom.

In Chapter 8, Ryan and Irie explore how we construct the story of ourselves and the key role played by imagination in this process. They consider how possible and imagined selves can be generated through the processes we use to create visions of ourselves beyond our actual experiences and current settings. They conclude that imagination is a powerful resource for learning and identity construction, which can also be harnessed to foster learners' sense of agency. Indeed, agency, self-regulation and motivation are key themes picked up in Chapter 9 by Ushioda. In her chapter, she explores the developmental aspects of how processes of motivation become internalised within the self. In doing so, she highlights the complex interaction of current selves, experiential factors, social-environmental influences and future-oriented dimensions of the self that affect these motivational processes. In Chapter 10, Northoff offers a less familiar perspective on the self in SLA as he explores philosophical issues about the existence of self and the role of consciousness and linguistic processing in the construction of our sense of self. He turns to neuroscience and considers findings there concerning the representation of self in terms of specific regions of the brain. He too makes the connection between self and agency, and raises important questions about the embodied self and the role of language in self representations. Finally, in Chapter 11, Mercer takes a holistic view of the self and considers how complexity perspectives can help integrate various perspectives on the self. She focuses in particular on the dynamics of the self and reports on a study examining the situational dynamics of English as a foreign Language (EFL) learners engaged in a series of speaking tasks. She concludes that a complex understanding of context is necessary in which the personal relevance of contextual factors for an individual is taken into account when exploring the interaction between self and contexts.

In the final chapter, we pull together some of the main themes that emerge across the 'multiple perspectives on the self', including definitional

concerns, the interplay between self and contexts, the temporal dynamism of the self, various approaches to researching the self and a range of pedagogical implications for teachers wishing to work in self-sensitive ways. Most of all, we hope that you will enjoy reading all of the chapters. They do not need to be read sequentially, but we hope that in their entirety they will help contribute to a fuller, more comprehensive understanding of the self in SLA.

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