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## Feature Article

# Content Learning and Identity Development

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This paper explores the intersections between identity formation, content-focused learning, and second language acquisition. In acquiring a second or foreign language, there is an aspect of identity formation that will accompany the experience. This paper examines the broad foundation of identity studies, then goes on to explore how to promote the development of identity in the EFL classroom. This aligns within the theoretical framework of identity-focused language acquisition. It is important for educators to understand the concept of identity formation. Furthermore, educators must address issues with material to make them accessible to all students, not just students considered normal. Finally, it is necessary to understand the range of goals that define students' imagined future-selves in order to prepare content that meets the needs of that self and associate that content with English. In doing so, teachers change their role from leader to guide, and we guide students to their imagined future identities. Content-oriented language development is a powerful tool for helping students to develop their identities through language. In particular, content and language integrated learning has demonstrated a compatibility with L2 identity formation. It effectively ties together academic and professional goals related to the content of the coursework, which is tied to the language.

## Identity

Definitions matter. This is particularly important when dealing with identity, as what identity is and how it defines us are important and specific aspects of psychology, sociology, and pedagogy. Because people do not stay within a single social context, identity is complex. The concept of a monolithic identity is no longer sustainable, as people move from one group to another, or within one group over time; identities shift (Scheibe, 1995). This requires our definition to

be flexible enough to allow for the reality of identity as it is. Identity is a function of how we are perceived by society, and how we perceive ourselves within society (Gay, 2013). Thus the final element of the definition needs to include aspects of taken identity as well as imposed identity. Within feminism, identity is perceived as a dual narrative: the narratives we tell about ourselves and the narratives others tell about us (Benhabib, 1999). Identity is the complex and fluid balance of how we define ourselves and are defined by others in a social context.

That social context necessarily involves power relationships. Researchers from within their own cultures focus on empowerment and power dynamics (e.g., Umera-Okeke, 2016). Understanding where one stands in terms of identity can be mapped out in terms of power dynamics between different social groups. One manner in which this power imbalance is enforced is through the concept of the normal. The “normal” is considered generalizable and empowered, whereas that which is not “normal” is “queer” and becomes disenfranchised (King, 2008). While heteronormativity is a concept from within LGBT identity studies, it has broad implications. Furthermore, heteronormativity in English education exists at all levels, even in elementary schools (Barozzi & Ojeda, 2016). Thus, the very way in which identity is presented in textbooks and class materials needs to be questioned. One of the most prominent examples of this imbalance is within gendered discourse. It is important to address differences in gendered discourse expression because to do otherwise would feed into the patriarchal norm, to the detriment of both men and women (Tannen, 1990). Therefore, it is important to have a range of female and male voices.

Language is an important aspect of identity, as we define and express our identities through our language. Identity is expressed through interpersonal interaction and language use (Gee, 1996). The act of discourse, therefore, is “an on-going project of self-authoring” (Menard-Warwick, 2005, p. 270). In addition, identity is an essential aspect of the classroom. When considering our students, it is important to understand that they have a broad range of identities and that it is important to use a broader range of intended goals when designing curricula (Chang, 2016). Therefore we need a broad range of models within the course narrative.

## **Intersectionality**

There are rich discourses within feminist, LGBT, and minority cultures research about the formation and importance of identity. The differences in approach between these fields allow for a broader perspective of how identity can be considered. It is, however, important to understand these concepts in a holistic manner through intersectionality.

Because identity is complex, it requires a different framework for understanding. That framework is intersectionality. Intersectionality examines identity from a holistic perspective, rather than focusing on race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status or any other identity marker in vacuo. The concept of intersectionality arose in the 1980s, particularly among black feminists. The study of feminism tended to exclude minorities, while minority studies excluded women which erased black women's experiences in America (hooks, 1981). The theory was further developed in the field of legal studies, wherein those at an intersection of protected, or special, classes were not given sufficient consideration in legal proceedings (Crenshaw, 1989). The study of intersectionality continues to develop (e.g., Anthias, 2011). However, there needs to be a greater understanding of intersectionality within the EFL field of study and practice.

Acceptance of intersectionality does not simply mean accepting the validity of feminist, LGBT, and cultural critiques. Intersectionality requires an understanding that there are a broad range of identity markers that need to be addressed in a holistic and inclusive manner. This requires the inclusion of a range of identities and an understanding of the cumulative implications of different forms of marginalization. This is also important as we address the development of identities within our students.

## **Pedagogical implications**

A key aspect of EFL pedagogy is that students are developing an L2 identity. "We cannot make assumptions about what their languages will mean to bilingual and multilingual individuals, or what a language will evoke or encode. It is clear, however, that an individual's languages encode different power relations and

that individuals experience themselves differently as they translate themselves between their languages” (Burck, 2011, p. 376). Language is an aspect of who we are at a core level. It is essential to our definition of identity, which is why students need to be agents. Many of the issues addressed in different fields of identity studies stem from the imposition of identity. By making the classroom an agent of imposition, teachers discourage the development of identity.

The following sections help to clarify how teachers can develop classrooms wherein students can act as agents of identity development. These tools incorporate aspects of material choice and development as well as the development of student autonomy. These sections explore a range of available tools that can help promote identity development in a range of contexts.

**Awareness.** It is important for educators to be aware of the concept of identity formation. “Educators must develop awareness of ELs’ ability to adopt identities that serve them well in various environments” (Byfield, Shelby-Caffey, Bacon, & Shen, 2016, p. 43). Identity formation is different from redefining one’s identity; identity formation is building a new system of self-definition adjacent to concurrent identities. Of particular interest is the focus on the dynamic of rejection of one’s culture of origin and assimilation into one’s adopted culture within cultural identity studies; “the terrible choice that so many students in the world are asked to make between working in solidarity with their people or taking advantage of modern education and the individual opportunities it affords” (MacPherson, 2005, p. 598). This underlying premise is especially problematic in this article as MacPherson acknowledges that the goal is the “liberation from all fixed or prescribed identities” (2005, p. 604). Traversing this false dichotomy and addressing the formation of identity in a specific rather than a broad cultural complex is the challenge we face as language educators.

Good language learners appear to be able to work outside their own culture; this is not to say that they adopt their second language (SL) or foreign language (FL) culture while rejecting their own, but that they are able to work in a context distinct from the context of the culture in which they were raised. For the purpose of language education, this means that culture has to be defined in terms of the specific content of the course and the context of the lesson. This

narrow definition is necessary to promote engagement outside of one's own culture without pursuing the rejection/assimilation dynamic. In addition, educators need to work on developing this ability in order to promote the ability to transcend culture.

There are many ways in which the ability to transcend cultural can be promoted. One is through the use of non-scripted role play activities. Role play activities are a tool to allow students to develop other perspectives. That is why they can play a key role in transcending culture. Going one step beyond, extended role playing games, like Dungeons and Dragons, can also be powerful tools in developing this skill. In this case, however, you need to consider both administrative and student perspectives of the activities before moving forward. While I have not been in an educational setting wherein this was a classroom option, I have used it in a self-access learning center (SALC) setting. I utilized a simplified set of rules that de-emphasized the use of dice, but promoted the story-telling aspect of the role playing game (RPG), and used a variety of settings primarily which were mostly contemporary. The reason I made this choice was to focus more on student creativity. Creativity is fundamental to the development of expression, and by allowing students the freedom to express a creatively-formed other identity outside of ethical judgement, students can develop the ability to step outside of their own cultural context. One of the drawbacks of the SALC setting for RPGs is that each session has to be accessible to students who have not engaged in prior sessions. This requires an episodic approach to the story. On the other hand, this adjustment allows for more exploration, which gave students more control and promoted creativity.

A different approach is to use timed writing activities as a tool for critical thinking (CT) development. To be specific, to promote CT development with timed writing activities, a teacher must identify topics that are broadly agreed upon by the class and have the students write papers that oppose that view. I call this approach, defending the indefensible. This approach can be taken for a variety of writing styles. For descriptive writing, an essay about a pet octopus would force students to consider a non-normative pet. For business letter writing, asking students to write a letter of complaint to Apple, suggesting

that their iPhone is broken because they cannot update to Android 6.0 would be useful. There is a broad range of argumentative topics that can be assessed related to the topics within the textbook or in the news. The foundation of empowerment education is development of the critical faculty (Freire, 1973). The critical faculty is about the ability to make sound rational judgements, which require the examination of alternatives. Thus this type of activity promotes the empowerment of students through the development of the critical faculty, while also promoting the transcending of their current identity by forcing them to see the world through an opinion other than their own.

The tools developed through role play activities and defend the indefensible writing are both linguistic and identity-focused. By asking students to work outside their perspective, teachers can develop the skill of CT, which can aid them in SL or FL identity development.

As teachers becoming aware of language learning as identity formation, it is also important to consider idealized future identities. Teachers often approach a specific class with assumptions as to what their students' goals are. In a university, students will be moving into professional or graduate school scenarios; however, a student may choose to seek a more domestic situation or even a period of partial or full unemployment following university. Students enter the classroom with a broad range of goals and social identities (Chang, 2016). I had a student in one of my presentation classes. The student was assigned to present on issues related to a minority through random selection. I talked to this student about being willing to be open about their Ainu identity and talking about Ainu in Japan. By facilitating openness the student was able to better identify with the project and thus make the project more meaningful and productive. Some of those social identities will be a foundation for future identities, whereas the goals of students help define the identity they would like to formulate. It is easy in narrowly designed classes to define the path; however, with many classroom scenarios it is difficult to imagine the scope of possible futures the students have imagined for themselves. Initially, teachers will need to prepare materials that have a broad range of representation. This also means that there needs to be a range of representation within the scope of different groups. In moving forward,

teachers will either need to do an analysis, similar to a needs analysis, to identify what identities need greater representation to promote student engagement. In more autonomous classrooms, teacher guidance towards finding diverse sources is essential. It is generally better to focus on representation within the materials and content, rather than trying to force diverse representation through assessment tools.

It is also important to limit the range specifically so that the material can be meaningfully associated with those future identities. This is why autonomy or student analysis is a key aspect of the identity-focused language classroom. Unfortunately, that is not always possible. In situations where the materials are limited, it is key to avoid stereotypes and have a range of voices that represent a range of gender, sexual, and ethnic identities. It is also sometimes useful to use role models of good language learners. Good language learners each have their own story; however, they represent a realistic and meaningful possible future-self for students. Role models can be represented through guest visits, anecdotes, or material representation.

**Imagined communities.** One of the key concepts in dealing with identity development in EFL conditions is imagined communities. Imagined communities are the conceptual idea of what the society should be that function implicitly or explicitly within schools (Kanno, 2003). In the EFL context, the dialogues and course content define what is acceptable and normal. In defining the community that speaks English, the school plays an important role in whether the community is one which is enticing to students.

Ideally, the imagined communities of English language speakers should have a broad range of participants and be inclusive of different ways of thinking and being. The reality, however, is that imagined communities are often too limited (Harrison, 2011). It is especially important to consider the role of imagined communities for intersectionally marginalized individuals. By incorporating a range of role models within the text, this problem can be prevented. Teachers need to consider not only representation from a broad range of groups, but also a range of ideas within members of those groups. Furthermore, it is important to consider individuals that represent the intersections of various groups; people

can be women and members of ethnic minorities and LGBT. In addition, it is important to offer a range of ideas within various groups. No group is a monolith, and that diversity needs to be shown through materials that avoid stereotypes.

On the same line as imagined communities, giving students opportunities to interact in English language using communities can be beneficial. While this is difficult in the EFL setting, it is possible through the use of virtual communities. In virtual communities, learners can establish their identity through meaningful and personal interactions (Byfield, Shelby-Caffey, Bacon, & Shen, 2016). The use of virtual communities allows students to interact in real time, while also having access to online support resources. In certain situations, this can be done within the classroom. Guiding students through *Second Life*, an online open (no goals) multiplayer experience can be done within the classroom. This platform provides a platform for student creativity similar to RPGs while also promoting the ability to transcend their culture through real-time immersion in another culture. However, the key value is that it can be continued outside the classroom.

Other tools, such as internet video telephony, can allow face-to-face encounters across great distances. While this type of activity does not allow the degree of creativity and immersion seen in *Second Life*, it is more real in that it is closer to our everyday experience. Internet video telephony can be difficult to schedule depending on the region you are coordinating with. A colleague of mine used this tool in a program that coordinated interpersonal exchange between a university in Japan and a university in the Middle East. The ability to develop interpersonal relationships, perceive other cultures, and form a community between the two universities made this a valuable activity despite the issues around scheduling the internet video telephony sessions.

These activities open an international door to students. By scaffolding the early interactions within these environments, teachers can prepare students to be safe (protecting of their own boundaries while being considerate of the boundaries of others) and active participants. This scaffolding, when properly facilitated, can also help with the process of student self-motivation towards making students agents of their own language and identity development.

**Content.** Cognitive content engagement (CCE) is an important theory to

understand in shifting towards a content- oriented language teaching approach. CCE addresses the role of content in the language classroom; this theory posits that a key factor in language acquisition is meaningful engagement with the content (McLaughlin et al., 2005). While there are several theories related to engagement, this theory's focus on the primacy of content significantly moves the theoretical pedagogical framework forward. As such, this theory works well with the model of language learning as identity formation. Students need content that can be suitably applied to an imagined future-self. This content then becomes engaging and meaningful to the learner. While there are many factors associated with CCE such as level of difficulty, novelty, and accessibility; the ability of students to associate the content with their developing identities is arguably the key factor.

CCE feeds into the content and language integrated learning (CLIL) model. CLIL is effective at connecting linguistic and personal development goals (Fodor & Lugossy, 2016). This allows students to connect English competency with their personal development as students, professionals, and individuals. The integration of language and content benefits both language and content. Content-orientation allows the language program to integrate into students' broader field of study. By being part of the broader program, it gives English classes more weight than if they are viewed as stand-alone external requirements. In addition, by engaging in the content through English, the students gain access to a broader range of resources and opportunities. At the same time, CLIL promotes a path towards identity development.

English course content is often disconnected from students' other coursework. This creates the illusion of separation. In order for English courses to be truly effective, they need to focus on integrating into the broader coursework. On the other hand, it is also important to explore areas that are outside the presupposed goals of the department. Not every student will go to graduate school or a career in a Japanese company. Providing content for students that fits the presupposed goals, while also providing a range of content outside of those goals, is essential to a strong language classroom. At the same time, the content must be integrated with the language skills that students will need to fulfil their

goals. By providing a core that is strongly linked to the department, while also having sufficient content outside of that core is the goal of an identity-focused classroom.

Some of this process is about knowing your students. By speaking with your students about their future goals and plans, you can tailor examples to fit their imagined future-selves. On the other hand, this is not always possible, especially with larger class sizes. In these situations, it is important that you include models that do not match presuppositions into the coursework. This may be simple identity inclusion: female, transgender, or racially diverse models. However, it may also mean bringing up issues that are usually avoided, such as having a female speaker correct an interlocutor when the interlocutor uses “boyfriend” rather than “girlfriend” when inviting the female speaker and the female speaker’s significant other to an event. Finally, there is a need to support a variety of scenarios in role-plays or dialogues. Having every role-play or dialogue fit into the company or graduate school model is not only boring, it also isolates students with divergent future-selves.

**Focus.** Developing the focus of a content-oriented program requires an understanding of the future goals of students. Identity formation in EFL is best supported by programs where the content matches the future-self conceived by the students. The material needs to be of a sufficient level to be engaging to students at their level of development within the subject. At the same time, the material needs to be novel. In universities, the novelty of subject matter requires continual and open negotiation with the departments associated with the language program. This allows the language courses to fit within the broader context of the curriculum.

One area where CLIL courses tend to fit well in curricula is research. Courses teaching students about researching, presenting, and writing are useful for students. Scaffolded research paper writing is especially interesting, as it allows students to select content that fits their own personal interest. This is an area wherein CLIL often ties into project-based learning (PBL). CLIL often requires a degree of autonomy; PBL emphasizes this aspect of CLIL and can be used to create a broader structure for the integration of language and content with

identity as the focus. In addition, students who are looking at careers in research will need to write research papers in English. Therefore, it fits ideally into the students' imagined future-selves. Students going into business can benefit from presentation courses wherein they do research to prepare for their presentations. This is a skill that many students will need in the future, and being able to present in English gives them an advantage in the job market.

Another area of focus that can often fit within a broader curriculum is the teaching of foundational principles. In the course I helped design at Ritsumeikan University, I organized the content around the scientific method and helped with the development of a section on the engineering process. Students do not cover this content in their other science and engineering coursework. As such, some students did not have sufficient understanding of the foundational concepts of these fields. The English program was asked to develop coursework to address this need. This allowed the English program to help address shortcomings of the program and better integrate into the broader curricula. The integration of the English program into the broader curricula allowed it to be more aligned with students' future-selves by attaching the language to an area of interest wherein they are already attempting to develop an imagined future-self.

The theoretical frameworks for the scientific method and engineering process were too philosophical to fit within the students' other courses. However, these theoretical frameworks are the foundation of all the other coursework that students need to complete. These theoretical frameworks can be addressed without a lab, and provide source material that can be associated with linguistic concepts. In the course we developed, the link that can be drawn between independent/dependent clauses and independent/dependent variables allowed students to integrate linguistic devices with content material in a unique manner. Language is the manner in which we perceive the world within a conceptual framework. Independent can affect dependent clauses in the same way that independent can affect dependent variables. This is tying the tool of perception with the tool of conception; in other words, it is a link between their imagined future linguistic self and their imagined future academic/professional self.

Every field is based within a conceptual foundation. While understanding

that foundation is beneficial to students, it is often omitted from the regular coursework. This offers an opportunity for language programs to integrate with their associated departments. In cases where the connection between the language and the concepts can be made explicit, such as with clauses and variables, it can become a powerful tool to connect the linguistic and academic/professional future-selves. The connection to an imagined future-self that students are already developing should promote the development of an English-speaking identity.

On the other hand, many English classes are not directly connected with a department. For this type of coursework, it is possible to promote the development of an English-speaking identity through a focus on culture or popular culture. Courses designed around literature provide a great deal of input for students while also giving the students an imagined community within each book. The same can be said of comics, movies, or modern short novels. By associating English with entertainment that is already engaging to students, the teacher can help promote an imaginary future-self that can enjoy a broader range of popular culture in English. The key factor is for the teacher to be open to the students' interests rather than simply pushing stories, movies, or television programs that are of interest to the teacher but students can not relate to.

## **CLIL and identity**

CLIL is a form of language education that juxtaposes dual purposes, language and content. This gives students the opportunity to craft their L2 identity in relation to the content. Because content is often positioned within a culture, CLIL engages students with that cultural content that helps them develop cultural or intercultural identities (Sudhoff, 2010). Those identities allow the students to be agents. However, the content of CLIL is often not just culture, but professional or academic skills. In this way, students can simultaneously develop linguistic and professional/academic skills (Fodor & Lugossy, 2016). This simultaneous development allows students to develop their identity in a manner that is more effective than other forms of language education.

A large part of identity is the assigning of meaning. CLIL allows students

to shift the learning focus from mistakes to meaning (Fodor & Lugossy, 2016). Meaning that is relevant to an imagined future identity allow students agency in building that identity through engagement in the class. By allowing a degree of autonomy, through research and projects, the CLIL classroom can become even more effective at helping students develop their agency. And, in developing agency, students move towards the realization of the imagined future identity, an identity that is integrated with both the content and language of the coursework that the student is involved in.

## **Conclusion**

The ultimate goal of language education is to produce students that can use the language. To do this, we have to accept that language is a quintessential aspect of identity. We develop and demonstrate our identity through discourse. Therefore, it is essential that we reconsider our role as educators; we are guides. We are helping students develop L2 identities. The most effective tool for helping students to develop identities is the use of CLIL. However, in utilizing CLIL, we need to take an identity-focused language acquisition approach to language learning. Students are creating a second or foreign language identity when they are learning. By accepting that reality and providing broad enough contexts to allow all students to find their niche, we teachers can better meet the goal of developing those identities.

CLIL works because people develop identities over time. Identities are formed through choosing a narrative, and enacting that narrative through discourse. The reason that CLIL fits this concept is because it effectively ties the content-related academic and professional goals to language. In doing so, the students develop an imagined future-self that is connected to goals related to both the content and the language. The language becomes a meaningful aspect of their imagined future identities. Over time, the students move closer to and develop those imagined future identities. In this conceptual framework, educators act as guides. Educators need to act as guides because an important aspect of developing identity is the claiming of agency. Students provided with meaningful and engaging content, linguistic support, and guided agency can

develop their identity. It is difficult for some educators to accept the role of identity-focused language acquisition guide; however, by accepting our role as guides for identity formation, educators can become more effective, and students can benefit from this shift in perspective.

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