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Symposium on identity in language teaching and learning

Convenor: Jeremy Page with **Andrew Blair** and **Jules Winchester** and
Florentina Taylor (*University of York, UK*)

This symposium brought together three speakers whose research had engaged with issues of identity in language teaching and learning from a range of perspectives.

In the first presentation **Andrew Blair** examined the linguistic and professional identities of 'SOLTEs' (Speakers of Other Languages Teaching English) in the light of evidence that a growing majority of English speakers are L2 users with *lingua franca* communicative purposes. Citing recent research, the presentation discussed 'impostor syndrome', the conflicted attitudes of NNS teachers towards English as a *lingua franca*; and Moussu and Llorca's (2008) call for more focus on the 'many layers' that constitute language teachers and their dynamic, context-dependent identities. The presentation drew on data from teacher interviews and online discussion facilitated by the speaker to ask how SOLTEs construct, develop and manage their identities as learners, users and teachers of English in a globalised context. This study sought to identify the principal personal and professional influences on these multilingual, multicultural teachers in terms of initial training, development, discourse and beliefs about teaching and learning. Issues of confidence and competence were addressed, along with the tensions and paradoxes (for example relating to

NS norms) evident in their reflections. Their status as role models for language learners, linguistic multicompetence and pedagogical experience arguably make them ideal teachers in many contemporary ELT contexts. In conclusion, the presentation attempted to clarify what it means for these SOLTEs to say ‘I am an English teacher’.

In her presentation **Florentina Taylor** asked if identity awareness could facilitate better foreign language learning. It is sometimes said that learning a new language means learning a new identity, yet little research has addressed this topic in adolescence, when most foreign language learning occurs and when emergent linguistic competence overlaps with an emergent sense of self in society.

The presentation reported on a mixed-method cross-sectional study of adolescents (N = 1,045; mean age 16.5) learning English as a foreign language in Romania (Taylor 2010). The study validated a new theoretical framework that regards identity as the sum total of the *private self*, *ideal self*, *public selves* and *imposed selves*, which are postulated to result in four main self systems: *submissive*, *duplicitous*, *rebellious* and *harmonious*.

Exploring students’ L2 identity perceptions in four relational contexts (English teacher, classmates, best friends and family), a serious discrepancy was found between the public selves that the participants displayed in these contexts and their private selves: what students believed about themselves as language learners was very different from what they showed about themselves in these contexts. Moreover, their public selves were highly correlated with their imposed selves – that is, participants showed an identity that they believed was expected of them in the four relational contexts. This suggested a great potential for the internalisation of language learning into the students’ identity. Their willingness to display an identity that was expected of them could be utilised by language teachers, who could encourage students to try out certain behaviours associated with successful language learning and give them constructive feedback. Although this potential has yet to be researched, a ‘motivated, interested and engaged’ public self will very likely end up being internalised into the learner’s private self.

The study highlighted the importance of teachers’ identity awareness in the foreign language class, as students who felt appreciated personally by the teacher loved English more, were more confident language learners, more learning-oriented, more interested in the language class and more likely to internalise language-learning into their identity. By appreciating students as individuals, allowing them to be ‘themselves’ in class and to talk/write about personally relevant matters, teachers could facilitate not only their students’ linguistic development, but also their personal and social identity development, at an age when finding a place for oneself in society is of utmost importance to adolescents.

Finally, **Jules Winchester** considered the potential impact of the teacher on classroom identities. The main focus of the presentation was on the role of the teacher in the negotiation, co-construction and legitimisation of learner identities within the language classroom. The talk took a sociocultural perspective to language learning, whereby language is regarded as a social as well as a cognitive phenomenon, and learner identity, as a multi-layered and fluid construct, is regarded as key to classroom interaction. Within this framework, the teacher holds a pivotal role in the socialisation of learners into their academic communities.

The presentation drew on a recent empirical study, conducted by the speaker, involving a group of post-intermediate learners undertaking a ten-week course of General English at the

University of Sussex. With reference to a variety of research data (namely learner and teacher journals, transcribed interviews and class discussion), as well relevant literature sources, the presentation posited that the teacher can impact on learner identities in the language classroom in a number of ways: by focusing on learners as intellectual and cultural resources, by giving primacy to learners' 'transportable' (as opposed to 'discourse' or 'situated') identities and by giving learners the communicative 'tools' (i.e. linguistic, pragmatic and intercultural competences) to assert identities as an expression of agency.

It was held that these assertions have implications for language learning in that increased motivation, or 'investment' in learning, gained through the assertion and legitimisation of identities in the language class, can have an impact on the extent to which learners notice and 'acquire' language items as well as on learners' receptivity to correction. Similarly, it was suggested that a recognition of learners' need to exercise personal agency in their learning, reflected in style shifting, can have an impact on which particular language items are noticed and ultimately acquired.

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'Doing the product: An experiential task-based approach to inspire learners'

An exploration of the 'deep-end strategy' with low level learners

Simon Williams and Yolanda Cerda

Having observed the success of certain challenging classroom tasks in which learners produced an end product, including a letter of complaint or performance of a two-minute Shakespeare play for example, we wanted to explore the reasons behind learners' obvious engagement in certain activities. We found that such tasks were essentially communicative, meaning-focused, had a deadline, and in some way catered to individual needs. Our enquiry led us to re-examine the *deep end strategy*, a term coined by Johnson (1982) but first described by Brumfit (1979). This approach reverses traditional classroom procedure by putting communication first, so that *present – practice – produce* becomes *communication – presentation /drill – enhanced production*. It can be aligned with task-based learning as well as the learning of other skills such as sports, singing or driving because learners start learning by *doing*.

The title of the workshop refers to the 'Just do it' Nike slogan which encourages even novices to rise to the challenge of complex tasks. In language learning terms, it means the absence of input and pre-planning before executing a task with a finite aim. As Brumfit (1979) argues, too much initial focus on form is sterile because it treats language as a closed system divorced from the socio-cultural contexts it obviously refers to for meaning; too much deep end communication, on the other hand, can render the classroom redundant. Error correction and diagnosis of learner language needs are therefore central to the success of this kind of approach.

We acknowledged more specific disadvantages of the deep end approach. Apart from Johnson's (1982) observations that it may not be for the novice teacher and would require 'a large resource bank ...' of materials (Johnson, K 1982:198), deep end tasks could also lead to fossilisation (Johnson, H 1992). In an attempt to deal with this issue, Johnson adopts a so-called 'tennis clinic strategy':

- Teacher sets the communicative goal
- Students plan their language needs
- Students learn by conferring individually with the teacher
- Students communicate. (Johnson, H 1992: 185).

Other suggestions include extended briefing and debriefing after task performance, but whatever strategy is adopted, we believe highlighting the failures or potential improvements in language performance will ultimately lead students to better communication.

Two small scale research studies exploring deep-end tasks with a low level foundation class were described. For the first intervention, it was noticed that, despite daily correction and explicit formal practice, learners continued to produce non-standard question forms. The first intervention, therefore, set up tasks in which the students would produce the forms spontaneously in more realistic settings. They (1) interviewed other students already on the course they aspired to join; (2) reported the results; and (3) produced a newsletter recounting the interviews. Two points emerged from the activities: (1) the students produced a wider range of related structural forms than would otherwise be expected; and (2) producing the illustrated newsletter in the time frame of 24 hours revealed sophisticated literacy and IT skills possessed by at least two of the students; a product designer and a computer support worker.

For the second study, learners watched a video of half an authentic lecture on the UK jury system. No language input was provided and learners answered comprehension questions based on their lecture notes. This activity was also 'deep-end' because there was no language grading and students were involved in a real world listening task rather than the typically limited classroom listening. Participants answered questionnaires about listening before and after the task, and their comprehension test results were analysed. Although several findings emerged, perhaps the most significant was the problem learners had inferring overall meaning and speaker intention and understanding cultural referents and their significance. This highlighted clear areas where learners could be helped with their listening skills which were, surprisingly perhaps, not exclusively linguistic and went far beyond the type of practice and development provided by course books.

Finally, workshop participants were encouraged to produce their own deep end tasks. We concluded that apart from its obvious use as a diagnostic tool, deep end strategy is highly appropriate to balance the diet of mechanical and often atomistic language tasks often

prescribed to low level EAP students. Deep-end tasks involve the learners as whole people and prevent infantilising students by providing exposure to complex and real activities. They highlight individual needs that would otherwise be neglected; they can give learners confidence; and learning *from* the tasks as well as *for* them give students and teachers the essential insights for further language and skills development.

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The Norwegian Forum for English for Academic Purposes

Alison Chisholm and Rachel Cole

The Norwegian Forum for English for Academic Purposes (NFEAP) was established six years ago by Ann Torday Gulden to provide a network for EAP practitioners in the Nordic countries, who tend to feel professionally somewhat isolated. In June we attended the NFEAP annual two-day seminar, which this year focussed on the topic of feedback. There were a number of interesting presentations, many of them looking at issues of learner identity in English Medium Instruction (EMI) settings. The identity discussion has a different resonance in countries where the level of English among L2 speakers is C1/C2 or even near-native speaker level.

Most relevant to the issues we face here at Sussex, however, was an interesting presentation concerning the assessment of the language level of lecturers working in an EMI institution. In an atmosphere of increasing internationalisation, it can no longer be assumed that all lecturers will have the same linguistic background, which, in the case of Denmark, had previously meant that the level of English did not present a problem. Joyce Kling, from the University of Copenhagen, described an innovative pilot programme to assess lecturers' proficiency in English.

While academics' L2 written skills are generally strong due to the need to write for academic publication, their oral skills often lag behind. Weak oral skills are immediately noticeable to students, and diminish their confidence in the overall competence of the lecturer. The Test of Oral English Proficiency for Academic Staff (TOEPAS) was therefore developed to assess the communicative ability of lecturers. The issues highlighted in the presentation concerned the difficulties of testing qualified academics in a sensitive manner. It was therefore particularly important that the test design ensured that both feedback and feed-forward should

be sufficiently beneficial to overcome resistance. The test consists of a simulated lecture situation. A group of three lecturers from the same subject area are invited to the Language Centre, where they meet with two language assessors. A third language assessor is also present as an independent observer. The assessment, which is filmed, is carried out in three stages:

- Part 1: warm up (not assessed) – 10 minutes
- Part 2: a mini-lecture/presentation (assessed) – 20 minutes
- Part 3 : Q and A (assessed) – 5 to 7 minutes

Five assessment criteria cover:

- Fluency
- Pronunciation
- Grammar- range and control
- Vocabulary
- Interaction skills/ the ability to negotiate meaning

Using these criteria and the filmed recording, confidential and detailed feedback is provided to the lecturer being assessed. The scores are given to the Dean and Head of Department, but they do not see the full report. The grading is on a scale of 1 -5. Levels 3, 4 and 5 indicate that the lecturer's level is acceptable. Although not mapped against CEFR, level 5 is considered to be C2+. If a lecturer scores under 3, they are required to have individual support, for which further funding is provided.

This pilot has been very successful, and is likely to be implemented on a permanent basis at the University of Copenhagen. In the UK, at a time when there is a greater awareness of the need for lecturers to be trained (as is evident from the promotion of the PGCertHE), such a focus on language proficiency as well as teaching proficiency seems apposite. Any university interested in becoming more internationalised may well wish to consider such an initiative to ensure teaching standards are not compromised by resolvable language issues. In addition, it seems to us that an aspect which the TOEPAS fails to address is academic culture; possibly an area for all lecturers to reflect upon, especially if practices within a university are changing alongside internationalisation.

We have been invited to return to Oslo next year to give a paper on the theme of EAP and Distance Learning. We plan to talk about whether the MA TEAP module could be delivered on a stand-alone basis, part distance and part face-to-face.

Events

The new SCLS **'Language and Culture'** series gets underway in the autumn term with events scheduled for Monday 15th October and Tuesday 20th November. The first event, 'Poems from Russia', will feature readings from British poet Sasha Dugdale and Russian poet Irina Mashinsky, while the second will be a lecture on 'Languages of Colour' by Sussex art historian Alexandra Loske.

The **'Research on ELT'** series of talks will also continue in the autumn, with the first session being presented by Clare Fielder (University of Trier, Germany) on 'Positive Feedback in the English Language Classroom', on Wednesday 26th September. Future talks include 'Dogme ELT' and aspects of English as a Lingua Franca. Suggestions for topics and speakers for both the above series are very welcome.

Full details available soon on the SCLS website.

Contacts

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