
Approaching L2 Learning Identities from a Poststructuralist Perspective in Saudi Arabia

Louis Sharpe

Med TESOL, University of Exeter, UK

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/bjel.2013/vol14n11622>

Published June 06 ,2026

Citation: Sharpe L. (2026) Approaching L2 Learning Identities from a Poststructuralist Perspective in Saudi Arabia, *British Journal of English Linguistics*, 14(1),16-22

Abstract: *This paper examines L2 learning identities from a poststructuralist perspective in the context of an international school in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Drawing on key frameworks in second language acquisition (SLA) research — including social identity theory, investment, communities of practice, situated learning, and Dörnyei's L2 motivational self — the paper explores how identity shapes and is shaped by language learning. Using qualitative classroom observation as its methodological basis, the paper presents two case studies illustrating how imagined community affiliation and institutionally imposed identities affect student participation and L2 development. The findings suggest that a reorientation away from form-focused, assessment-driven pedagogy toward cooperative learning and identity-affirming approaches can meaningfully reconstruct positive L2 learner identities. The paper concludes by calling for further research into the ethical limits of poststructuralist identity promotion in contexts where Islamic identity and Western liberal paradigms intersect.*

Keywords: L2 identity, poststructuralism, Saudi Arabia, SLA, communities of practice, investment, cooperative learning

INTRODUCTION

It is argued that the behavioural patterns and cultural norms of a people are ultimately shaped by the identities they assume or are imposed with, and the reverse can also be said to hold true. Given the importance of identity in human behaviour, it naturally becomes an integral factor when approaching education and, more specifically, second language acquisition (SLA). This paper covers integral aspects of modern theories of identity in SLA research. These approaches are deeply rooted in the philosophical conceptions of structuralism, humanism, and postmodernism among others, and the epistemological foundations of these philosophies directly shape SLA theorists' positions towards identity. Particularly important to this field is the poststructuralist view, which conceives identity as multiple and changing.

At a time when Saudi Arabia is becoming increasingly diverse with communities emigrating from South-East Asia, Europe, and Africa, struggles surrounding identity negotiation between contrasting cultures are rising to prominence. The divergence of power relations between different ethnicities affects many facets of life, including the perception of English as a second language (ESL) identity. This paper explores these dynamics theoretically and contextually, and proposes practical pedagogical responses grounded in SLA identity research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING**Essentialist and Non-Essentialist Views of Identity**

Identity has been approached through a number of views, either falling beneath the wider umbrella of essentialism or non-essentialism (Virkkula & Nikula, 2010, p. 253). According to the former, identity is perceived as something connected to a person's self and considered to be singular and rather stable (ibid.). The humanist view presupposes that every person has an essential, unique, fixed, and coherent core (Atkinson, 2011, pp. 78–79). From a psychological perspective, identity is viewed through lenses of mental imaging and physical characteristics of an individual (Milner, 2010, pp. 5–6). In the field of sociology, theorists argue that the context surrounding an individual shapes their identity through power relations within institutions such as the family, school, and courts of law (Norton, 2006, p. 502).

The non-essentialist view brings in the perspective of change — identity is unfinished, fluid, fragmented, multiple, and constantly changing (Virkkula & Nikula, 2010, p. 253). This has led specifically in SLA to a shift from a predominantly psycholinguistic approach to include greater focus on sociological and anthropological dimensions of second language learning (Norton, 2006, p. 502).

Social Identity Theory and Imagined Communities

Branching from the non-essentialist view, social identity theory factors in the individual and their relationship to their social structures. Social identity is understood as the sense of belonging to a particular social group, whether defined by ethnicity, language, or any other means (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 246). Related to social constructivism, the concept of imagined communities arose through considering the idea of the nation as an imagined political community (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). As Atkinson (2011, p. 81) asserts, an imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and this particular identity can be the focus of considerable social and political struggle.

Poststructuralism and Identity in SLA

The poststructuralist approach to identity explores the relationship between the individual and the sociocultural structures they live within. Norton (cited in Darwin & Norton, 2015, p. 36) proposes that identity is how a person understands their relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future. Poststructuralism asserts that identity is multiple and fluctuating — diverse, contradictory, dynamic, and changing over historical time and social space (Atkinson, 2011, p. 79). Individuals are perceived as agents in the construction of their own multiple, dynamic identities (Murray et al., 2011, p. 78).

Because SLA identity theorists necessitate a view of identity encompassing the individual language learner alongside social power structures (Atkinson, 2011, p. 73), and due to the emphasis poststructuralism gives to language in identity, it has become the approach of choice for the field (Virkkula & Nikula, 2010, p. 253). As Norton (cited in Atkinson, 2011, p. 74) notes, the construct of identity as multiple is particularly powerful because learners who struggle to speak from one identity position can reframe their relationship with their interlocutors and reclaim alternative, more powerful identities — with profound implications for SLA.

Situated Learning and Legitimate Peripheral Participation

An important concept in SLA related to identity is situated learning, which stems from the socially situated theory of cognition. The foreign language (FL) learner is understood as someone inextricably formed by the sociocultural sphere, whose psychological processes are first experienced as social processes of interaction with others and only later internalised as individual cognitive processes (Kramsch, 2000, p. 318). As Gee (2004, p. 44) asserts, language is tied to people's experiences of

situated action in the material and social world. Approaching language through situational examples is therefore integral to the learning experience.

Related to situated learning is legitimate peripheral participation, which draws upon the idea that communities are built upon varying degrees of participation between their constituents (Norton, 2006, p. 504). The social structure of communities and the power relations within them define the learning possibilities available to members (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 241).

Power, Capital, and Investment

Power is central to the negotiation of relations that exist between members of a community, understood through Bourdieu's metaphors of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (cited in Block, 2007, p. 866). Norton's (2006, p. 504) concept of investment draws directly from these metaphors, signalling the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practise it. When learners invest in a language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will enhance their cultural capital, their identity, and their desires for the future (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 4).

Communities of Practice

The aforementioned conceptions enter into the observations of Toohey (cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013, pp. 89–90), who viewed English-medium kindergarten classes as communities of practice — aggregates of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour (Eckhart & McConnell-Ginet, cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 241). Toohey found that identities were quickly assigned within these communities — successful/unsuccessful, talkative/quiet — and that these imposed identities, combined with differing degrees of success in establishing legitimate peripheral participation, could lead to student isolation and restricted participation.

Possible L2 Selves

A key researcher in L2 motivation, Dörnyei (2009) proposes that motivation in learning an L2 can be developed through the imagination — conceived through the image of a desired future self as the core content of the ideal self (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 17). The more elaborate the possible self in terms of imaginative and visual content, the more motivational power it is expected to have (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 19). Contrasting with this ideal self is the ought-to-self, which manifests based upon the expectations of others — that part of identity related to what a person feels compelled to become (*ibid.*, p. 47) — and which can lead to student anxiety and aversion to L2 learning.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative, practitioner-based case study methodology. The data and observations drawn upon are derived from the author's experience as a Grade 4 English teacher at an international school in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, over an academic year. The school caters to students aged 9–11, divided into two sections: Arabic as a Second Language (ASL) classes and ESL classes, encompassing students from a range of national and linguistic backgrounds including Saudi, Syrian, Egyptian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indonesian among others.

Classroom observations were conducted informally and reflexively, with the author documenting recurring patterns of student interaction, participation, and identity-related behaviour. The cases presented are illustrative rather than statistically representative, and are interpreted through the theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 2. This approach is consistent with practitioner research in

TESOL, which acknowledges the legitimacy of teacher-generated knowledge and contextually grounded insight as a valid form of qualitative inquiry (Burns, 2010). Ethical considerations are maintained through anonymisation of all student identities.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Imagined Community Affiliation and Power Struggles

A key finding arising from classroom observation is the presence of imagined community affiliation as a source of discord and power struggle between students. It is not unusual to witness groups of Egyptian and Syrian students reporting that 'the Saudi kids are saying bad things about our country', or a predominantly Pakistani ASL class complaining that 'the ESL class are making fun of our language'. These dynamics illustrate how national and ethnic imagined communities shape in-group and out-group behaviour within the classroom.

A particularly illustrative case involves a 10-year-old Saudi student referred to as 'Ahmad', who spent most of his life in Manchester and joined the school speaking fluently in both Saudi Arabic and English with a distinct Mancunian accent, and was placed in an ASL class of predominantly South-East Asian students. The distinct differences in identity between Ahmad and his classmates surfaced as power struggles. Ahmad would make comments such as 'why is he saying that in a funny way', or 'teacher, he's not saying it properly', asserting what he perceived as linguistic superiority.

However, this did not consistently work to his benefit. Antagonised classmates would unite upon their shared imagined community, excluding Ahmad and shifting power dynamics against him — transforming him from a perceived 'native' speaker to an alienated 'other'. This emphasises the observation of Lightbown and Spada (2013, pp. 89–90) that learners' identities impact on what they can do and how they can participate in classrooms.

Institutionally Imposed L2 Identity

A second significant finding relates to the role of both parents and the institution in imposing a particular second language identity onto students through conceptions of what constitutes successful ESL learning. Considerable importance is given to exams and quizzes that involve memorising words and phrases, with a specific grade dictating the success or failure of a student. This compartmentalised view of language derives from educational discourses that tend to itemise language into its constituent parts and can be uncondusive to promoting a positive L2 identity (Virkkula & Nikula, 2010, p. 259).

This manifests as an ought-to-self (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 47) driven by parental expectations — a culture of 'top marks or nothing' where students become anxious about not reaching 100% in quizzes. Also observed is the assumption that native speakers provide the model towards which learners are striving (Virkkula & Nikula, 2010, p. 255), evidenced during parents' evenings where many complain that their children's accents are too 'Arab' or 'Indian'. Students themselves have been witnessed to internalise this discourse, criticising non-native English teachers as unable to speak 'proper' English — demonstrating how identities related to learning have been assumed by or imposed upon participants (*ibid.*, p. 268).

DISCUSSION

The findings above illustrate how the theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 2 manifest in practice within a linguistically diverse Saudi school context. The case of Ahmad demonstrates the fluid, contested nature of identity described by poststructuralist theorists: his position shifted from linguistic authority to social exclusion depending on the power dynamics of his imagined community. This

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development—UK supports Block's (2007, p. 864) contention that identity is fragmented and contested in nature rather than fixed.

The imposed L2 identity described in Section 4.2 reflects the consequences of a monoglossic, form-focused educational culture that prioritises the ought-to-self over the ideal self. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009, p. 28) note, studying in order not to fail or disappoint parents is part of the ought-self and can lead to anxiety and aversion to L2 learning — findings directly observable in the described context.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the conditions of this context necessitate pedagogical approaches that affirm student identities, reduce power imbalances, and shift the conception of L2 learning away from deficit-oriented assessment toward identity-affirming participation.

Implications for Research and Practice

Cooperative Learning

In response to issues of student alienation and exclusion, the research of Dörnyei (2013) on cooperative learning (CL) offers a practical framework. Rooted in a social psychological approach to the study of small groups (Dörnyei, 2013, p. 484), CL focuses on enhancing student motivation and group cohesion. Dörnyei (2013, p. 485) notes that acceptance of another person does not occur without getting to know them well, and that enemy images often stem from insufficient information about the other party. CL could potentially bond ethnically diverse students to one another, fostering harmony and tolerance by transcending imagined or imposed identity affiliations that inhibit learning.

Motivational Self and Imagination

Complementing CL is Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2009) L2 motivational self theory. Utilising the imagination to construct a desired future identity can prove particularly effective for young learners. As Berkovits (cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 35) notes, when a child uses imagery to find solutions to problems in their current life, they obtain a sense of autonomy and confidence. In practice, this can be implemented through group activities where students map everything they enjoy or hope to achieve, and identify how learning the L2 can facilitate those goals.

English as a Lingua Franca and Situated Learning

The research of Virkkula and Nikula (2010) documents the positive reconstruction of SLA identity when context shifts from institutional English learning to situated social use. Their study of Finnish engineering students working in Germany found that access to new social and linguistic resources resulted in the adoption of new identity repertoires — fewer psychological barriers, increasing courage, and discourses of proficiency replacing those of deficiency (Virkkula & Nikula, 2010, p. 268). Applied to the described context, shifting the classroom environment from one focused on English form to one centred on discussion and expression could create a more positive environment for students to develop ESL communication skills and positively reconstruct their identities as language users rather than learners.

CONCLUSION

Approaching L2 learning through identity perspectives reveals a range of factors previously overlooked in student development. Issues relating to motivation or student participation are not always resolved by adapting teaching materials alone; they can be intrinsically linked to deeper psychological and social issues stemming from self-concept, imagined community affiliation, or legitimate peripheral participation. Emphasising self-esteem and self-competency development, rather

than an absolute focus on L2 proficiency, offers a more holistic solution to many challenges that both students and teachers face.

Applied to the Saudi context described here, the work of Dörnyei (2013) on cooperative learning, Norton's investment framework, and the ELF-based findings of Virkkula and Nikula (2010) offer real, contextually appropriate solutions to issues of student cohesion and imposed identity. English can be taught in an ethical, identity-affirming way that respects the sociocultural backgrounds of learners.

The findings also point to a broader ethical question for the field: poststructuralism's promotion of multiple identities requires coherent limits, particularly in contexts where Islamic identity and Western liberal paradigms intersect. As Fagan (2013, p. 5) observes, poststructuralist contributions to ethics are frequently accused of an inability to make clear judgements about what may be good or harmful. This tension warrants serious consideration in future discourse, particularly regarding the fostering of ideological, religious, or social plurality in multilingual classroom contexts.

Future Research

Future research should examine how poststructuralist identity frameworks can coherently address the ethical boundaries of identity promotion in Muslim-majority educational contexts, particularly in the GCC region. A comparative study between Islamic ethics and Western philosophical liberalism's approach to identity — examining foundational concepts, overlaps, and fundamental differences — would provide a valuable theoretical foundation for this work. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the identity development of ESL learners in Saudi international schools across academic years would offer richer empirical grounding for the practitioner observations presented here.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Atkinson, D. (2011). *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition*. Routledge.
- Block, D. (2007). The rise of identity in SLA research, post Firth and Wagner (1997). *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, 863–876.
- Burns, A. (2010). *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*. Routledge.
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and a model of investment in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 36–56.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2013). Psychological processes in cooperative language learning: Group dynamics and motivation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81(4), 482–493.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2009). *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*. Multilingual Matters.
- Fagan, M. (2013). *Ethics and politics after poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida and Nancy*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. Routledge.
- Hirano, E. (2008). Learning difficulty and learner identity: A symbiotic relationship. *ELT Journal*, 63, 33–41.
- Kramsch, C. (2000). Second language acquisition, applied linguistics, and the teaching of foreign languages. *The Modern Language Journal*, 84(3), 311–326.
- Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned (4th ed.)*. Oxford University Press.
- Milner, H. R. (2010). *Culture, curriculum, and identity in education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mitchell, R., & Myles, F. (2004). *Second language learning theories (2nd ed.)*. Hodder Arnold.

Murray, G., Gao, X., & Lamb, T. (2011). Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning. *Multilingual Matters*.

Norton, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 9–31.

Norton, B. (2006). Identity: Second language. *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 5, 502–508.

Virkkula, T., & Nikula, T. (2010). Identity construction in ELF contexts: A case study of Finnish engineering students working in Germany. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 20(2), 251–273.