Chapter 13

Emotions, Experience, and Identities in L2 Narrative Research

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to propose a more balanced approach in the conceptualizing of identity in the poststructuralist paradigm. Using gathered data, the study also offered a unique perspective on the intricate interplay in which learner identity and researcher identity are negotiated. A narrative analysis model is presented to offer transparency to the analytic process in narrative studies, and calls for a reflexive approach that is context-sensitive to the co-construction of interview interaction between the participant and the researcher. The use of ‘reflexive notes’ at various stages of the research process is shown as a forceful vehicle that allows researchers to make explicit their assumptions, and evaluate how it shapes the interview interaction. In addition to the aim of the research, the study demonstrates how methodological choices, interests, subjectivities, and identities are intricately intertwined to influence the entire research process.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to offer new light to the understanding of processes of L2-related identity construction and development among learners studying English in a foreign language context. On contrary to the poststructuralist theory of identity in language learning research (e.g. Block, 2003, 2009; Norton, 2000, 2013), the study problematizes the current dominant emphasis on the social dimension of identity in the poststructuralist framework, and calls for a more balanced approach by attempting to integrate the sociological and psychological dimension of identity formation. The study offers unique insights on the role of experience, emotions, social and environmental affordances, and individuals’ responses to these, in shaping their personal orientations to English and self-perceptions as English learner-users. It shows the intricate analysis of past, present, and future dimensions of individuals’ L2-related experiences and

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trajectories, and how these dimensions are intertwined through the process of narrative construction as participants relate their thoughts, and the researcher represents and interprets their stories.

Furthermore, the study devotes a large part of its research on the methodological issues that surround narrative research. By showing the intricate interplay in which learner identity and researcher identity are negotiated, a narrative analysis model is presented to offer transparency to the analytic process in narrative studies (Miyahara, 2015). The model calls for a reflexive approach that is context-sensitive to the co-construction of interview interaction between the participant and the researcher. It also illuminates how methodological choices, interests, subjectivities and identities are intricately intertwined to influence the entire research process.

The chapter begins by outlining the theoretical framework that forms the basis of this research before moving on to the development of the research design in narrative research. It will then present a brief summary of the findings of the study and discuss its significance in relation to the issues encountered in narrative inquiry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS ON IDENTITY, EXPERIENCE, LEARNING AND EMOTIONS

Identity and Dewey’s Notion of Experience and Learning

The fundamental understanding in the poststructuralist notion of identity is that meaning and identity are not fixed, but are constantly evolving through social discourses and practices. Poststructuralist conceptualizes identity to be complex and dynamic, and understands identity to be constructed and co-constructed through activities in which individuals engage. Identities are not merely products of one’s response to the environment, but are also conditioned by, and from, what individuals bring into their interactions within a certain discourse. However, I question the current dominant emphasis on the social dimension of identity in the poststructuralist framework, and call for a more balanced approach by arguing that the analysis of identity formation should be complemented with a psychologically oriented perspective.

The understanding of self as in constant flux and transition has been regarded as one of the perplexing issues of the poststructuralist account of identity (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000). Academics have attempted to provide an explanation of this issue by proposing that change could be understood in terms of continuity or what Giddens (1991) terms as a biographical continuity: an ongoing narrative project in which we tell stories of ourselves by weaving events from the past, and present with projected events from the future to create an array of possible stories.

Such a view of continuity and interaction in the poststructuralist account of identity resonates well with Dewey’s concept of experience and learning, and it is for this very reason that I adopt Dewey’s (1938, 1997) notion of experience to explore my research inquiries. Dewey’s experience is based on the two intertwining principles of interactions and continuity. One important aspect is the influence experience has upon later ones: “every experience takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey 1997: 35). Here, Dewey flags elements such as growth, reflexivity, and transformation. For Dewey, learning is the result of what one learns from experience. The quality of that experience depends on the process of giving meaning to what is experienced and to making connections with the future.
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