

Agency, Identity, and Investment through Environmental Engineering

Naoki Yamaura, *Kawagoe Higashi High School*
Tim Murphey, *Kanda University of International Studies*

Abstract

Yamaura's (2008) MA study of learner identity and motivation in foreign language learning critically examined individual students' language learning histories (LLHs) to understand how each student constructed their language learner identities. Yamaura also investigated three case study student's social construction of new identities in and after a six-week content-based instruction course. He described how individual learners constructed their new identities as English learners, as well as how they invested themselves in learning English through intensive interactions in English with other peers. This smaller article drawn from the larger study focuses on two students' complex processes of development in language learning. We look particularly at how their historical circumstances and actions in learning mediate their investment and agency over time.

Yamaura(2008)は、外国語学習者アイデンティティと動機づけを研究テーマとした修士論文で、各々の学習者がどのように学習者アイデンティティを形成するかを理解するため、個人の言語学習経歴(language learning histories)を分析した。Yamauraはまた、6週間の内容中心教授法(content-based instruction)に参加し、観察者としてデータ収集を行い、3名の学習者の新しいアイデンティティ形成について調査した。筆者は、集中的な学習者間のインタラクションを通し、各々が英語学習者としての新しいアイデンティティをどのように形成するか、また、英語学習に対する投資(investment)がどのように変化するかを論じている。本論文は、Yamauraの研究を基に外国語学習者の複雑な認知発達のプロセスに焦点を当てる。本論では、修士論文のデータから2名の学習者を取り上げ、過去の言語学習経歴と行動が、それぞれの学習に対する投資と学びに対する主体性 (agency) の変化にどのような影響を及ぼしているかを論じる。

Introduction

This study looks at how identity, investment, and agency co-construct each other in the social milieu, and the contribution of that social environment to these co-constructions. It hypothesises that agency and investment are created and attenuated in social interactions and examines two case studies, particularly their language learning histories, to attempt to understand how this happens. Both high levels of investment and agency are generally thought to enhance language learning processes.

Identity and Language Learning

Norton (2000) uses the term 'identity' to refer to 1) how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, 2) how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and 3) how the person understands possibilities for the future. In this sense, identity can be understood as an individual's interpretation of his/her relationship to society and self and other positioning within each circumstance. Not only is an individual's identity socially constructed, but it also changes over historical time

and social space, as people construct multiple identities through their activities in daily lives.

Along with identity, we find several other concepts useful to analyse how people change and learn. Norton Peirce (1995) introduced 'investment' to refer to 'the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it' (Norton, 2000, p. 10). Norton (2000) further explains that individual learners have a complex social history and multiple desires, which change according to the learning environments and people they communicate with. The concept of investment was developed from Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) term 'cultural capital', which refers to 'the knowledge and modes of thought that characterise different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms' (Norton, 2000, p. 10). Norton comments as follows:

If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment – a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources. (p. 10)

We will see these uneven investments in the case studies that follow and their consequences for not only learning but social involvement. Norton sees language as not only a tool to exchange information between/among individuals, but also as a mediator of the relationship between the individuals to the social world, which is used constantly to organise and reorganise a sense of who they are.

The Concept of Agency

We use the notion of *agency* as originally introduced by Snyder within the framework of hope theory in psychotherapy. Snyder, Michael & Cheavens (1999) state that two types of thinking must be present to experience hope. The first type is called *pathways thinking*, referring to 'the thoughts that persons have about their ability to produce one or more workable routes to their goals' (p. 180). The second type of thinking is called *agency thinking*, 'the thoughts that people have regarding their ability to begin and continue movement on selected pathways toward those goals' (ibid.). We understand these ways of thinking as originating from social interaction, from the Vygotskian intermental, between minds in interaction, and then being *intramentalised* to the individual. Along with Norton, we see agency as socially co-constructed in particular contexts and also realise that it is through socialising that we discover many valuable pathways.

Participants

The participants in this study were 30 first year university students (see Yamaura, 2008) in a content based instruction class about ways of learning. For this article, we are focusing on two students whom we call Yu and Ryohei. Interviews were tape recorded individually during the spring and fall of 2007. Unstructured interviews after the course helped to better understand the students' histories, eliciting crucial events or periods in which attitudes changed prior to the class. During the interviews with Ryohei, the conversations were in Japanese. However, since Yu had one year study abroad experience in the U.S., English was the dominant language during the interviews. During the last two interviews with Yu, Japanese was used to avoid any misunderstanding and ambiguity. Yamaura interviewed each of them three times during their free time between or after classes, usually in an empty classroom for 20 to 30 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Yu

Yu is an 18-year old Japanese female freshman college student majoring in English. Yu's language learning history (LLH) started at the age of two to three when her mother tried to teach her English. She began to learn English to communicate unlike other typical Japanese students. Yu's first investment in learning English came from her mother's desire for her child to be able to speak English fluently. However, Yu recognised that she spoke a different language from her friends, so she rejected English. Yu described it as follows:

I, you know, I had friends. They don't speak English. And one day I recognised it... that I can't communicate with them, because I spoke a different language, you know. So I rejected to speak English and complained my mom, that you know, "Mom! I can't talk with them. How come? They don't get what I'm talking about." (Personal interview, Original in English, July 6th, 2007)

Although Yu stopped speaking English for a while, she started to attend English conversation school two or three times a week during the 4th or 5th grade of elementary school. Learning English at junior high school (JHS) was also enjoyable for Yu. According to Yu, her English teacher made an effort to make her students speak and use English by singing a song and playing games in class. Yu also had the chance to talk with other friends in English in class. Thus, Yu's English learning environment during JHS was more communicative. Students felt safe to speak English, as she commented that 'it was not scary at all making mistakes' (Yu's LLH, May 2nd, 2007). However, when Yu entered high school, she was faced with a different reality. English classes at Yu's high school were in the traditional Japanese teaching style with teacher-centered instruction. Although Yu was forced to become more or less passive in class, she took action by herself to change her learning environment. She found a poster for a 'Rotary Exchange Programme' at school and applied for that programme. She was accepted in June during her first year at high school.

The programme started in the end of August during Yu's 2nd year at high school. Yu and the other students in the programme prepared for study in the spring. Once a month, the students had a few meetings for five to six hours at city hall in which they learned Japanese culture to introduce Japan. Since Yu was accepted into the programme and started to go to the meetings, her attitude toward English classes at school changed. She became more engaged in improving her English as a communication tool and began to imagine herself speaking in her future encounters abroad. Being able to speak English like a native speaker was not 'unrealistic' for Yu anymore.

Yu stayed with a local family and attended public high school in Wisconsin in the U.S for one year. This study abroad was crucial for her not only for her English but also in constructing her new learner identity. At the beginning, she did not understand much. Her reaction was to seek help. Yu assertively visited her teachers to ask questions. Through accessing a social network of teachers, classmates and homestay family members, she constructed her new learner identity as an 'active international student'. Yu described it as follows:

I went to see the teacher many times and asked many questions like 'I don't know this' or 'I didn't understand that' until I understood. I also tried to finish my homework as much as I could. Then, I had compliments like 'You are working very hard'. And I simply felt happy with such compliments. Since then, I noticed that if I make an effort, there is a return for that (Personal interview, translated by the author, Nov. 19th, 2007).

Norton (2000) argues that in natural language learning such as an ESL environment, the learners often have inequitable relations of power so that they 'struggle for access

to social networks that will give them the opportunities to practice their English in safe and supportive environments' (p. 113). Norton also insists that it is often the language learners who have responsibility for making comprehensible communication between themselves and the native speakers. According to Yu, most of her classes in the U.S. consisted of student-centered instruction such as discussion and group work activities, in which Yu had many chances to communicate with her peers.

Maybe I was lucky to meet nice people [in the U.S.]. Like my teachers and friends, they supported me rather than pushing their own opinions... For example, I took math class, which was way difficult for me, by mistake. So I was going to drop it, but the teacher supported me saying 'you can take your time until you understand, so hang in there'. He gave me necessary hints step by step, helping me with my homework even till late after school. There were many teachers like him, who supported me for a long span in the U.S. They often told me like, 'don't be in a hurry, but try with your pace'. I think that worked really well with me. (Personal interview, translated by the author, Nov. 19th, 2007).

These successful social encounters enhanced Yu's agency thinking, her ability to take more control and responsibility for her own learning and understanding. After coming back to Japan, she began to take leadership in the oral communication class with an assistant English teacher (ALT) by explaining what the ALT said to other classmates. This leadership may also have contributed in constructing her learner identity as 'a person who has responsibility' and probably helped her feel more confident.

Ryohei

Ryohei is an 18-year old male college student also majoring in English who has never been abroad before. When Ryohei was in the 6th grade, his parents first made him study English by listening to short sentences from an audio player and using cards. Ryohei continued this practice with his parents once a week till he entered JHS. Thus, as with Yu, Ryohei's investment in learning English was first aligned with his parents' desire for him to learn.

In Ryohei's case, he did not identify himself with what he was actually doing, and also positioned himself as an outsider. This learning attitude, without engagement, may be common to many learners who see the target language as something foreign to them, i.e. not something they possess or intend to use.

Ryohei said that his English teacher during JHS was 'strange' and had a bad reputation among the students. Ryohei mentioned that even though he had a good motive to learn English in JHS, he soon started to get confused in studying English and received low scores on the exams because of his teacher. Ryohei's attitude toward English at school became less engaged. Thus, a few months after the first semester began, Ryohei attended a small private cram school.

Attending this cram school was a crucial point for Ryohei's English learning. He met an English teacher who was very nice and good at teaching, according to Ryohei. At the cram school, Ryohei had one hour English class once a week and started to understand grammar and learn vocabulary. Although Ryohei became good at English and often received high scores on exams during the second and third year of JHS, his actual grades were not as high as he expected. Ryohei had the same English teacher during the second and third years: 'I hated English class at junior high, but I loved English at cram school. English we learned at school was getting pretty easy, so I was studying English more at the cram school' (Personal interview, translated by the author, July 3rd 2007). By the time the entrance exam season came, Ryohei had added two to three more weekly English classes at cram school. As a result, Ryohei didn't study at home at all, but English was his best subject. So Ryohei applied to the English department of a high school near his hometown. However, he had to quit the cram

school when he entered high school because the cram school was only for JHS students.

Most English classes at Ryohei's new high school were teacher-centered with grammar translation. Soon Ryohei's grades at high school went down, and he often received the worst scores in class. His grades were 3 or 4 on a 10-point scale, with 10 being highest and he constructed a new learner identity: the identity as an 'underachiever'. Ryohei described his high school English class as follows:

At high school, people around me were all good at English, and I had no idea of learning strategies on my own since my English learning had relied on the cram school...I hadn't practiced much vocabulary or idiomatic phrases [during JHS], so, when the teacher translated some sentences for us, I didn't really understand. I didn't know what to do, so I didn't do anything...After I entered high school, English became more difficult for me and was not one I was good at anymore, but I didn't dislike English. (Personal interview, translated by the author, July 3rd 2007).

Even though Ryohei commented that he was still motivated in learning English, he positioned himself as less proficient than other classmates. His self-positioning at this time probably contributed to his passive way of learning English particularly in class during the 2nd and 3rd years in high school.

In his 2nd year, however, Ryohei began to look for some books of learning strategies and bought a few books. One book he found had a great impact on his belief change toward the way he could improve his English:

I did what the book said. I listened to one hour English tape twice every day, for six days in a week, took a break one day, and I had kept it for a while. Then, my listening score went up extremely... it was only one time improvement though...I think I was inspired by that book at that time, and I was doubting certain ways of studying English such as practicing vocabulary with lists, and I thought it was the wrong strategy. Like, it is often said, 'Even though you can read, it doesn't mean you can speak' right? This had always been in my head since I was in junior high school (Personal interview, translated by the author, July 3rd 2007).

Ryohei's investment at the time, his desire to improve his listening skill and to use a good learning strategy, is somehow connected to the starting point of Ryohei's LLH. He started out practicing with the audio machine with his parents. It may be reasonable to consider that this practice influenced Ryohei to maintain his confidence in listening and eventually pass university entrance exams.

Discussion

At the risk of over-simplifying, we could say that Yu used some initial agency to go abroad and embed herself into a socially-learning-rich environment in which people freely gave her lots of pathways thinking. In her own words, 'Maybe I was lucky to meet nice people...He gave me necessary hints step by step, helping me with my homework even till late after school. There were many teachers like him, who supported me for a long span...'

Whereas Ryohei says, 'when the teacher translated some sentences for us, I didn't really understand. I didn't know what to do, so I didn't do anything....' This shows hopelessness and a lack of pathways thinking in a situation where students and teachers are not interacting intermentally and supporting each other. This also contributed to Ryohei positioning himself as an 'underachiever' in his class. Granted later he did produce some of his own agency in conjunction with a book on listening skills.

Snyder et al. (1999) point out that people often experience positive emotional responses and continue to have hope when being able to 'both pursue their goals and generate alternative pathways when needed' (p. 181). These positive emotional responses feed one's confidence and are more likely to enhance one's future agency. Murphey and Carpenter (2008) say:

When people find their pathways blocked, or when they cannot think of how to begin and execute a plan toward their goal, they often become demoralised. Their feeling of powerlessness is caused by their modes of thinking, which may in turn be caused by both psychological and actual barriers (p. 18).

The actual barrier may simply be the lack of a social group that can provide a variety of positive pathway thinking and engage more investment on the part of the learners. We think that more attention needs to be given to the building of social capital, the networking of people we can call upon to support us, in classroom groups so that students can help each other more easily to see many pathways and help increase their confidence and investments in learning. To an extent, the course these students were in at the time of the research gave more attention to the building of social networks by allowing students to write their language learning histories and read each others', share individual strategies for learning, make friends, and help each other learn. Structuring the environment in these ways for the nurturing of proactive identities and investments is indeed what we mean by environmental engineering. We feel research needs to reveal many more ways that students in collaboration with peers and teachers can stimulate this environmental engineering in education. Environmental engineering seeks to encompass the social as well as the physical, technical, material, and emotional aspects of the environment.

We also think that identities are co-constructed with the possibilities for agency and investment socially in the environments we partially construct ourselves. We do not wish to imply that students should all go abroad as Yu did, but that acting to create more learner friendly environments, where we are more apt to invest, is a pathway worth exploring more.

The Authors

Naoki Yamaura holds a BA from Southern Oregon University in Human Communication and an MA from Dokkyo University in English Education. His particular research interests are in how language learners co-construct their identities and learning communities and socialize themselves into effective SLA ecologies and affinity spaces. He is looking closely at how socio-cultural theory and autonomy research can contribute to his research. He has written a few articles for *Languaging* and one collaborative article for JALT's *OnCue Journal*. He currently teaches at Kawagoe Higashi High School in Japan.

Tim Murphey (MA University of Florida, PhD Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland) is the series editor for TESOL's *Professional Development in Language Education* four-volume series. He co-authored *Group Dynamics in the Language Class* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) with Zoltán Dörnyei. His *Language Hungry!* (McMillan Languagehouse 1998, Helbling Languages 2006) for students and teachers has also been translated into Chinese (Caves, 2005). His present research and teaching interests lie in socio-cultural theory, socialisation, and critical pedagogy with particular emphasis on student voice, identity and community construction, motivations, and the use of narratives and video as intensifiers. He teaches at Kanda University of International Studies, Japan.

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