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Rethinking the Language Learner in the Post-method Era The Question of Identity

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Abstract

Taking into consideration the requirements of postmethod era which, according to Kumaravadivelu (2001), called for particular stances of language teachers towards the role of language learning theories in practice and putting the language learner within the frameworks of such theories as competition model, this paper attempts to verify and substantiate the claim that the language learner does not have a particular identity. This substantiation draws on two interrelated issues: (1) as people concerned with language education, teachers are responsible for practice which is mediated by different theories in the postmethod era, and (2) each theory allows for looking at the learner from one perspective according to which only partial understanding of the learner is within reach (only partial theoretical resource to pave the grounds for effective learning opportunities is available). Furthermore, since depending upon a particular theory there might be an understanding of the learner different from and sometimes even the opposite of that formed on the basis of another theory, and because in the postmethod era practice in general and moment by moment instances of practice in particular are quite likely to be subjected to opposing theories, it is concluded that the foreign language learner does not have a particular identity.

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to verify who the language learner really is in order to develop insights into the ways in which he/she can learn the second/foreign language. One way to do this could be to focus on the learner in accordance with teacher roles within language teaching methods and to associate language learners with roles along the lines suggested by (Rodgers, 2001, p. 3). What the table implies is that the methods employed for language instruction specify and impose roles for both the teacher as well as the learners.

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Hence, the moment a language learner enters an instructional program in which, for example, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is employed, he will have the role of an improviser as well as a negotiator while under the condition that the method employed is the Audio-lingual, the role assigned would be that of a practicer of patterns and an accuracy enthusiast.

As a result, if the teacher is in favor of CLT and the instructional system allows for it, being an improviser as well as a negotiator becomes an inseparable characteristic for the language learner as least as far as the interaction with the teacher is concerned. Such roles are originally theory-oriented and they are suggested in accordance with theories behind the methods. To elaborate the issue, the proponents of the Audiolingualism saw the language learner as a practicer of patterns as well as an accuracy enthusiast due to a notion of learning shaped on the basis of the underlying behaviorist theory. The same is true regarding other methods such as the roles assigned to the language learner by Natural Approach which depends upon Krashen's learning hypotheses in accounting for the difficulties second language learners are facing in acquiring a language communicatively.

2.Learner roles in post-method era

Although seeing learner roles in accordance with the above table suggested by Rodgers might seem convenient and straightforward, what the language teaching practitioners of the post-method era are said rather implicitly is to move beyond assigning the language learner roles along such lines. Justification for this recent perspective comes in the form of the top-down criticism (methods impose on teachers how and what to teach), lack of research basis for language teaching methods, and similarity of classroom practices undertaken on the basis of particular methods. There are other justifications including attaching importance to the role of contextual factors and emphasizing the need for curriculum development processes, (see Richards & Rogers, 2001, pp. 247-248).

To elaborate the issue, the proponents of justifications along the above lines raise various issues (Richards & Rogers, 2001): one point suggested in this regard is that since methods imposes upon teachers how and even what to teach, the advocates of methods are in the danger of accepting "on faith the claims or theory underlying the method and apply[ing] them to their own practice" (p. 247). Another point is that method perspective seeks unwarranted worldwide solutions to the problems associated with language learning. In other words, the role of contextual factors, including "the context constituted by the teachers and learners in their classrooms" (p.248), is ignored when advocating methods as instruments to teach languages in any context. Hence, as far as the language learner is concerned, the post-method objections coming in the form of top-down criticism or considering method perspective as lacking solid research foundations, and striving for the role of contextual factors were in a way rejecting the idea of pre-decided language learner roles discussed above.

The advocate of such post-method requirements seem right in associating the method era with problems such as the ones concerning the pre-decided roles assigned to the language learner. That is because one outcome of this perspective can be the generalization of the roles to all students. To elaborate the issue, let's imagine that a teacher is depending upon Total Physical Response as an appropriate method for language instruction. Under such circumstances, the learner's role as 'the order taker and performer' which has its roots in theory could come to be taken for granted and generalized to all learners leading to an approach in which no student is believed to be able to learn, for instance, based on other means of learning such as improvisation and negotiation. This might seem irrelevant at the first sight. Nevertheless, the moment we understand that these latter means of learning (improvisation and negotiation) are emphasized over any other means by the proponents of Communicative Language Teaching; we will have a better understanding of the nature of the problem. Of course, there might be objections on the grounds that a teacher might not favor a particular method in which case the first point would be how that teacher is going about teaching the language. This can also give rise to further problems. As an example, if the approach taken is eclectic, as pointed out by (Stern , 1992, p. 11), the problem:

"...is that it offers no criteria according to which we can determine which is the best theory, nor does it provide any principles by which to include or exclude features which form part of existing theories or practices. The choice is left to the individual's intuitive judgment and is, therefore, too broad and too vague to be satisfactory as a theory in its own right."

3. Parameters in post-method era

Suggested solutions to the problems associated with the method perspective including pre-decided roles assigned to the language learner discussed above have come in the form of three parameters suggested by Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2003). The first parameter is *particularity* based on which, the sort of techniques teachers use depends on where, when, and whom they are teaching. Situations determine how of teaching, and the socio-cultural and political issues affect the type of instruction employed. That is why, the parameter specifies “any language pedagogy, to be relevant must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in particular socio-cultural milieu” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p.34). To put it in simple terms, there should be a relationship between the teaching context and the applied methodology (see also Prabhu, 1990).

Another parameter proposed in this regard is *practicality*. What this parameter advocates is that a method should be applicable in real situations; otherwise, a working relationship cannot be established between theory and the practice. In other words, a theory is of no use unless it can be applied in practice. This is because theory in this sense enjoys the required resources to motivate teachers theorize their practices and practice what they have theorized. The idea here, as pointed out by (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), is that the teachers who attempt to derive a theory from their practice get practically in touch with the existing language teaching problems. These teachers, the argument continues, can develop much deeper insights into the difficulties associated with language teaching and become more versatile in addressing them. That is possibly why some teachers are believed to have an unexplainable sense of what sets the scene for good teaching which is called “a sense of plausibility” (Prabu, 1990, p. 172).

The last parameter suggested by (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, 2003) is *possibility*. Pedagogy of possibility takes into account the critical dimension of language teaching. As far as this parameter is concerned, the “broader social, political, historical, and economic conditions that affect the lives of learners and teachers also affect classroom aims and activities” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 239). What this parameter is emphasizing, therefore, is actually a need: “the need to develop theories, forms of knowledge, and social practices that work with the experiences that people bring to the pedagogical setting” (Giroux cited by Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p.543).

4. Language learner in post-method era

The three parameters discussed above are deemed as interwoven dimensions of post-method pedagogy, each shaping and getting “reshaped by the other” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p.37). Such parameters can have useful implications for language teachers since they furnish teachers, at least in theory, with the means of addressing some of the pressing problems related to methods which were discussed above; such problems as imposing the how and what of teaching on language practitioners. Nonetheless, although Kumaravadivelu intends to move beyond the method era, his main concern is once again staying on the methods and the way in which the language is taught. To elaborate the issue, *practicality* is mainly concerned with the degree to which a *method* is applicable in real situations and the major focus of *possibility* is the relationship between the *techniques* teachers employ in language instruction and where, when, and whom they are teaching. There are, however, other factors which can be at least as important as methods or techniques in furnishing effective learning situations in the post-method era. One of these factors is *the language learner and the possible ways in which he/she can be seen by teaching practitioners in the post-method era*. That is why there seems to be the need to make a claim here. A claim likely to sound quite pessimistic or even absurd in the first glance but intended to be justified in due course. The intended justification takes us through the type of inquiry which, as will be concluded, ought to be an inseparable dimension of language education as opposed to training. Language education, in the sense suggested by (Widdowson, 1990), which is considered as an enterprise concerned mainly with equipping language teachers with effective principles of practice under any situations as opposed to pre-specified learning atmospheres. And now what is the claim? The claim is that *the language learner does not have a particular identity*. However, in order to elaborate this issue, we first need to clarify what we mean by the term “identity”.

5. What is meant by identity?

Research on identity has involved the identity of both teachers as well as learners. Teacher’s identity is the focus

of consideration for Lee and Yin (2010) who consider identity as “a complicated and multifaceted construct” employed “to describe the multiple aspects or roles presented in different social contexts” (p. 3). These researchers draw upon (Lasky, 2005) and (Nias, 1989) to make a distinction between two types of identities for language teachers namely, personal and professional identities. The main concern for Lee and Yen is professional identity which they believe to refer to the ways in which teachers see themselves and other teachers as language instruction practitioners.

Karen’s (2002) approach to defining identity is much broader and involves the language learner as well. She identifies four kinds of identities: master identities, interactional identities, personal identities, and relational identities. According to her, master identities refer to the types of personal features which are “relatively stable and unchanging” (p. 17) such as gender and national origin, but the meanings of which can undergo changes from time to time. Interactional identities involve “specific roles that people take on a communication context with regard to specific other people” (p. 18). Personal identities are, however, defined as “those aspects of personhood that reference ways people talk and routinely conduct themselves with others” (p. 19). Finally, as the last type, “relational identities refer to the kind of relationship that a person enacts with a particular conversational partner in a specific situation” (p. 19). This type of identity is “negotiated from moment to moment” (ibid).

Bonny Norton has also focused on language learner identity (see for example Norton, 1995, 2000; McKinney & Norton, 2007). For her, quite similar to (Lee and Yin, 2010), identity is not a fixed notion. It is dynamic and relative to time and place. In this perspective, the way people perceive themselves changes in accordance with the community of practice, leading to multiple identities for any one over the years or even within a day. (Norton, 2000) emphasizes the socio-cultural notion of identity over a psychological one. The idea here is that there should be a shift in the way learner’s identity is evaluated. A shift from a psychological approach to a socio-cultural one that incorporates a shift from a notion of identity as a static and one-dimensional construct to that of seeing it as multiple and dynamic. (McKinney and Norton’s, 2007) perspective is similar since they also believe identity to be multidimensional and dynamic. According to them,

“The foregrounding of identity in language and literacy education has led to a much more sophisticated understanding of language learners that locates them in the social, historical, political, and cultural contexts in which learning takes place and explores how learners negotiate and sometimes resist the diverse positions those contexts offer them.” (p. 192)

Now that we have some kind of understanding of the senses in which the term identity has been used in language education, let’s get back to the present study. Identity in this study means “who a person is”. This is also, as pointed out by (Karen, 2002, p. 7), “what communication theorists call identity” in other studies focusing on identity. Yet this is too broad a view of identity, and we need to specify it by asking further questions along the following lines: “who a person is” in which sense, on what basis, where, and for whom? Answers to these questions, as far as the present study is concerned, will be as follows: who in the sense of learning a language, on the basis of suggested learning theories such as Completion Model, Universal Grammar, and Multi-competence Model, in the learning situations such as the language classroom, and for people concerned with language education particularly language teachers. Hence, identity in this study involves language practitioners’ perceptions of the Who of the language learner, learning a particular language, in a learning context, on the basis of language learning theories.

Identity in this sense is sharing features with relational identity as suggested by (Karen, 2002). That is because similar to relational identity elaborated by Karen, identity in this study is also changeable. It is complex and multifaceted, and it may get enacted from moment to moment. There are also similarities between identity in this study and identity in the sense suggested in the studies conducted by Norton discussed above since, similar to this study, (Norton, 2000) advocates a notion of identity as multiple and dynamic over that of seeing it as a static and one-dimensional construct.

Of course, there are also differences between the way identity is conceptualized here and in the studies conducted by Norton since she considers:

“...the term *identity* to refer to how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future.” (Norton, 1997, p. 410)

Nonetheless, using terms in somehow different senses can furnish the means of analyzing concepts in new ways by providing mental processes with the choice of different categorization. That is possibly why, as far as identity studies are concerned, contrasts in meanings is taken to render it much more effectual. In Karen (2002) words,

“All of these meanings- some of which are contradictory- are part of what identity means.

Moreover, these multiple and contradictory meanings are part of what make the concept so useful". (p. 17)

6. Does the language learner have a particular identity?

Now that we have specified and justified to some extent what is meant by the term identity, let's get back to the claim made above. The claim was that the language learner does not have a particular identity. And why is it so? That is because we do not have direct access to the learner, and our understanding of the ways in which he/she is learning a language is mediated depending upon the type of theory we rely on. In order to clarify the issue, let's put the learner within the framework of Competition Model. As might be expected under such circumstances what we come up with is that of perceiving the language learner as someone in possession of a language processing system of a sort which includes a direct mapping in the form of a connectionist network linking the *form* of an input sentence to the *meaning* and *function* of that form in context (see MacWhinney, 2002a).

In other words, in the domain of this theory, the learner is considered as someone relying on *cues* in the input stream that correlate with meanings of the word string in order to determine the function of a given input sentence. Meaning cues involve such characteristics as word order, semantic plausibility, and morphological agreement between words in a sentence. Furthermore, another point affecting our perception of the learner within the Competition Model is that the proponents of the model, as understood on the basis of (MacWhinney, 2002b), assume that the same mechanisms are involved in both first-language acquisition and second-language acquisition, as well as in the acquisition of numerous other cognitive skills. In this framework, the learning ability of the language learner, which has the main part in the educational context, is closely associated with the existence of connectionist network that updates *cue strength* according to how well each cue correlates with the appropriate interpretation of an input sentence, and networks in which a cue that is successful much of the time will receive positive reinforcement, while an unsuccessful cue will be negatively activated.

The way the language learner is seen in the Competition Model, therefore, contrasts sharply with that within Universal Grammar (UG). That is because the main argument of this latter view to language learning, as opposed to the former, is that of considering the input far too poor to justify the richness of the output (see Chomsky, 2000, 2006). To elaborate the contrasts in our perceptions of language learner in these two theories, the main issue seems to be that in the Competition Model the learner's potential for language processing is directly linked to cue detection and interpretation and the value of particular cues in input (the ones that are highest in reliability and availability) in order to guarantee certain output. Nevertheless, the case is quite different for UG since the learner here is furnished with an inseparable characteristic: a set of innate principles theoretically positioned within a black box to mediate input and output, and in order to account for the learner's productivity as well as his expertise in internalizing the language.

Of course, the suggested UG hypotheses were originally suggested for first language acquisition. Nevertheless, this can also be considered an issue highlighting even further the contrasts in learner identities due mainly to the mediation of different theories in our perceptions of the language learner. The point here is that we rely on theory to make a distinction between direct, indirect, and no access, and to understand the learner and perceive his/her learning characteristics accordingly. Furthermore, as far as this distinction is concerned, it is interesting to see how a different version of the same theory is shaping our perception of the language learner and furnishing him/her with learning characteristics quite different from those provided by other versions.

Direct Access, for example, assumes the language learner as someone provided with the type of innate principles normally activated in the acquisition of L1 and reactivated in the course of L2 acquisition. The L2 learners' knowledge of the first language and his other cognitive resources in this framework do not affect the reactivation of the language faculty, and learners can reset parameters and acquire the L2 quite similar to the way they did for their first language (see Galasso, 1999; White, 2003 for more on this). Now let's make a comparison between how the learner is seen here and that within Indirect Access where L1 parameter settings are believed to have an impact on the acquisition of the second language in that the learner takes the settings of the first language into consideration for the learning of the second. This brings us to the mediation of another theory for our grasp of the learning features assigned to the language learner since the indirect position is associated with Critical Period Hypothesis theory based on which, the initial mental state is not subjected to cerebral dominance at work according to (Lust, 2006) between age two and puberty. And another mediation in our perception of language learner follows since this latter

phenomenon is also associated with “Equipotentiality Hypothesis” according to which, “at the beginning of language development both hemispheres seem to be equally involved; the dominance phenomenon seem to come through a progressive decrease in involvement of the right hemisphere” (Lust, 2006, p.79).

Here it can be understood that although theories as well as hypotheses have been of great contributory role in the present status of affairs in our fields, it seems interesting to see how our understanding of the language learner and the way we perceive particular features associated with him/her undergo changes because of the mediation of first a theory (Universal Grammar), second a subtheory (Indirect Access), and later a hypothesis (Equipotentiality Hypothesis). Nevertheless, this should not be interpreted arguably as implying invalidity of theories but of course justifiably as contributing to the lack of a particular identity for the language learner. That is because of two interrelated issues: 1) We live in the post-method era in which there are abundance of theories to be practiced and practices to be theorized (see Kumaravadivelu 2001, 2003). 2) Each of these theories may allow for looking at the language learner from one perspective and each is likely to give a picture of the language learner different from and sometimes even in sharp contrast with those gained on the basis of other theories.

To clarify these issues even further, let's have a glance at the language learner within the framework of another theory by analyzing the learner in the domain of the theories advocating language awareness. As pointed out by Ying (2003), one of the approaches taken to define language awareness (LA) is psycholinguistic in which learner's internal mechanisms in accordance with processing language is the focus of consideration. The language learner here is associated with an information processing potentiality which cannot function without consciousness-raising of a sort. Focusing on the language learner in this sense, an important point is that learners themselves do not have the capacity to find out about language and how it is functioning. That is why the advocates of language awareness in instruction strive for motivating students to ask questions about language in order to gather their own data from the world outside school, and for them to develop an insight into the way language works to convey meaning.

Now look at the opposing pictures we can have of the learner in different theories and make a comparison between the handful of sentences the language learner requires within the Direct Access to UG and what he needs in order to succeed within the framework of language awareness ranging from an intuitive level of awareness paving the grounds for easy handling of communicative activities to a high level of meta-cognitive insight in which the learner possesses direct formal knowledge about the language. What is understood is that the way language learner is presented has undergone a complete shift. Nevertheless, this should not be interpreted to mean that the same level of opposition with UG is shared by all theories put under the category of language awareness. That is because, according to Schmidt (1990, 1993), there are two different levels associated with awareness: awareness at the level of noticing and awareness at the level of understanding. Noticing, as far as Schmidt is concerned, involves conscious registration of an event, whereas understanding is dealing with the recognition of a general principle, rule, or pattern. To look at this latter distinction (an issue also affecting our perception of language learner) in accordance with the omission of subject pronouns in Persian, we come to see that a FL learner about to learn Persian must notice that speakers of this language sometimes omit subject pronouns and some other times do not, but that they are not required to notice that Persian is a pro-drop language. That is because the latter involves awareness at the level of understanding in the sense suggested by Schmidt. However, within this view, once again, awareness at the level of noticing is also exerting effects upon our perception of the language learner since it is decisive for language acquisition. In other words, here if a learner is believed not to have conscious awareness of the linguistic input, it is understood that for him/her the input does not lead to intake and the restructuring of the inter-language (IL) system does not materialize.

Finally, let's have a look at the language learner within the framework of Multi-competence Theory and analyze the features assigned to him/her here. According to Cook (1999, 2001, & 2003), seeing the language learner along the lines of an idealized monolingual native speaker is so far-fetched as to be equated with studying human respiratory conditions by looking at the people breathing only with a single lung. The notion behind this claim is the view that people are in possession of a multiple rather than a homogenized competence as part of their mental system. This is an issue which can once again lead to opposing views of language learner. That is because here the idea is that the architecture of the human mind involves not one but two or more languages, and that because of this, by depending upon linguistic theory, what we are doing is to falsify the whole issue and to destroy the actual substance under study (language knowledge). In other words, the point suggested is that the homogeneity of language knowledge, which is one of the theoretical pillars of the Chomskian perspective, is a misconception and it should be replaced with a perspective drawing upon heterogeneity of language knowledge.

Thus, as an important issue exerting impacts upon our perception of language learner, the argument here is that the ability to know more than one language is a natural characteristic for every human being. This is to say that although we have a large number of monolinguals, this is so since such people did not have the opportunity to encounter more than one language, and they were unable to realize their multilingual potential because speaking a language is dependent upon hearing it first which is considered a prerequisite for the activation of the potential. The intended point here, which seems quite relevant to our perception of learner identity, involves at least two interrelated issues: 1) Every human being has this multilingual, heterogeneous potential, and that is why Universal Grammar is required to draw upon multilingualism as the norm not the exception for the human mind. 2) It is true that the **norm** (the ability to learn multiple languages) has been hindered by accidental environmental features, but this does not justify destroying the **substance** (the heterogeneous mind in possession of that ability) under investigation.

Seeing the identity of language learner along such lines and perceiving the goals of the learner in the light, divides the learning goals into two broad categories: external and internal goals. External goals involve how the learner favors to use the language outside the classroom, and internal goals are concerned with the learner's mental development as an individual such as the teaching of cultural, racial, and ethnic sensitivity. Both types of goals are oriented towards and addressing the learning as well as the communicative needs of the learner rather than native speakers (see Cook, 2003). This, as far as our perception of the language learner is concerned, is taking account of the necessity that the communicative need of language learners is not the same as that of native speakers and is in keeping with the grounds on which needs analyses have been advocated in language learning.

7. Concluding remarks

As people concerned with language education, teachers' responsibility lies with practice which is both explicitly and implicitly mediated by theories. Each theory, as elaborated above, allows for looking at the learner from one perspective and depending upon a particular theory, no matter what authoritarian status it enjoys, only partial understanding of the learner is within reach. As a result, since the limited understanding of the language learner gained on the basis of a particular theory can also be different from and sometimes even the opposite of that formed on the basis of another theory, and because in the postmethod era practice in general and moment by moment instances of practice in particular are quite likely to be subjected to opposing theories, it is reasonable to believe that the learner does not have a particular identity.

In order to reduce the negative consequences of this phenomenon, what is required, it seems, is a validation process sharing features with construct validity in the sense proposed by (Bachman, 1990), polished by (Bachman and Palmer, 1996), and implied by (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007). The approach here, however, is different in a number of ways. More specifically, the focus of consideration for validity in the sense suggested by Bachman was language learning while the validity in the sense suggested here is concerned with the language learner. Validity in the sense there was mainly relying on test scores, but that here relies on both test scores as well as other relevant issues such as the way students feel about test scores. The former involves logical analysis and empirical investigation. The latter, however, involves logical analysis, empirical investigation as well as small scale qualitative exploration.

Under such circumstances language classrooms change into locally-oriented problem-solving research situations similar to that strived for by Burns (2005, p.19) who advocates classroom inquiries on the basis of the following cycle:

- Identify a focus area of practice that presents a 'puzzle', problem or question.
- Collect information systematically on this focus area.
- Reflect on the data collected and analyze what the data reveal about practice.
- Act as necessary to change or improve the practice.

Over here, however, contrary to Burns who attaches the utmost importance to qualitative information, both qualitative as well as quantitative data might be relevant due to the situational demands of students, particular objectives they might have, and the types of resources available in order to fulfill the objectives. Such a framework can be considered action research, if action research is not limited to qualitative information and under the condition that it does not claim universal relevance.

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