

## *On Pedagogy of Difference: Revisiting Teaching Philosophy in the Context of Language Learning*

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### ABSTRACT

As a complex construct, identity is often used in social sciences as a misleading label affixed to the learner to visualize her background (e.g., Asian students) more easily. Being a frequent item of academic discourse, this term reflects more the attributed characteristics of an individual than it does the existent characteristics of the learner population (Canagarajah, 2006; Heller, 1987; Hirano, 2009; Joseph, 2004; MacPherson, 2005; Miller, 2003; Morita, 2004; Norton, 2005; Pavlenko, 2001, Ricento, 2005). What in behavioural sciences is perceived as an attributive constant, in the post-positivist applied linguistics is viewed as an ever-changing and ever evolving continuum. Is it possible to define the learner's identity solely relying on her ethnic, social and linguistic background? Does identity of the learner really exist? What do the TESOL teachers mean when they label the learners in their language classroom as immigrants, women, indigenous, Asian, Saudi, etc.? To discuss these controversies, this paper integrates 1) findings from earlier research and conceptualization of identity in post-positivist theory; 2) the critical principles of Derrida's *pedagogy of difference* and its connection to the target terms; and 3) research implications and benefits of applying the post-positivist constructs of identity in the language classroom and other academic environments in the multicultural context.

### INTRODUCTION

#### *A Case of Identity in TESOL: Does Identity Exist?*

I'm a product of everything I've been through.

Clark, (2007, p. 1)

As a language educator who has been working in multicultural academic settings for more than twenty years, I know how convenient for educators it can be to objectify student populations by putting them into categories—Saudi, Chinese, Slavic, Latin American, etc. Such collective labels for groups of students can serve the conventional purpose of approaching students of the same cultural background in a similar manner.

However, as a language learner since elementary school, I also know how inaccurate the teacher's perception of the students in her classroom can be if based solely on ascribing the collective affiliation of individuals to their appropriate groups of nationals. I also know how often we educators celebrate the collective attributes of the learners' identities while forgetting to celebrate the individuality of a student, who can

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be and not infrequently *is* very different from the group of people that the learner shares her first language with.

In this essay I offer a perspective on this issue using a “legendary” post-positivist’s concept of deconstruction, a stance not accepted as a mainstream teaching philosophy, but which in my view offers significant potential for application to classroom practice, especially in language learning, because of its inherent resistance and robust challenge to the natural, even provisionally necessary, pedagogic practice of classifying and labelling students.

In reviewing the main directions of TESOL development in the past 25 years, Canagarajah (2006) highlights four fundamental themes that call for further attention, namely the *learner, method, subject matter, and sociopolitical and geographical domains* of TESOL. Of those, *focus on the learner*, or to be more specific, the learner’s identity, might prove to be the most controversial and complicated, owing to the myriad possibilities of approaching the concept of identity in social studies, particularly the theories of language learning.

To a large extent, identity appears in academic literature as a label rather than a construct, and as an item of discussion rather than the distinctly attributed characteristic of an individual. There are linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities, religious and social identities, and national, regional, and aboriginal identities. There are also relational and contextual identities, viewed through the lenses of social, psychological, anthropological, ideological, and political perspectives. Moreover, the literature holds up identity as a reality that is separate from the act of identification, which would properly be viewed as classification, an inherently processual practice (Rummens, 1993). Therefore, the conceptualization of identity lacks a unified, all-encompassing understanding, adding to the complexity of its cross-disciplinary discourse, with all of its multiple and inevitable overlaps.

Social studies research generally recognizes the unlimited number of identities (Rummens, 1993), which an individual may simultaneously employ in a social context. However, treatments of how the individuality of learners in the language classroom could be more profoundly explored and used to facilitate the development of their

linguistic/cultural identities vary in their stance and in the depth of their elaboration. A number of books and articles published over the last decades (Canagarajah, 2006; Heller, 1987; Hirano, 2009; Joseph, 2004; MacPherson, 2005; Miller, 2003; Morita, 2004; Norton, 2005; Pavlenko, 2001) consider identity in SLA and TESOL from different perspectives. While based on several theoretical frameworks, their collective definition of the learner's identity, if summarized, runs as follows: identity is not something that learners have, but something that they construct through their behavior and, more specifically, through their language (Butler, 1990; Weedon, 1997). This seems more valid than the obsolete approach to learner identity as a stereotyped, group-based, conventionally accepted category (Kubota, 1999; Ricento, 2005).

Despite this welcome shift of focus to the “effects of interactions between the learner and contexts of learning” (Ricento, 2005), there is still much inclination to essentialize L2 learners as members of an ethnic group (Liu, 1997; Rosaldo, 1993; Spack, 1997 cited in Ricento). The titles of articles in *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* consistently use group-related labels to identify target study populations; for example, “Sources of Coherence in the Life Stories of Cambodian American Women at the University” (Chuon, Kyratzis & Hudley, 2010). Although collective markers can seem quite reasonable in terms of helping readers to envision the study group better, they may also serve a negative purpose—to create a collective, generalized, and often stereotyped view of a group of individuals who *do* differ in many ways one. How trustworthy can a reader's visualization of a Cambodian American woman be? Does such a label accurately represent the real person behind the generalization? Does it allow one Cambodian American woman to be different from another Cambodian American woman? How could a group of individuals act as a single entity?

Such ethnic group labels reveal ongoing latent *othering*, or the essentialization of the certain features of a group or individual, thereby evoking in the reader's mind a superficial and largely inaccurate view of study populations which underestimates the individual characteristics of learners. To curtail the further *othering* of EAL learners, it is reasonable to deconstruct the fossilized labels and to apply a critical eye to conventional assumptions about *us* and the *other*. The resulting fresh understanding can

be summarized in the following concepts about learner identity: it is a complex, contradictory, flexible, ever-changing, and multifaceted notion; it develops continually across time and space; it is linked to social and economic relations; it is context - as well as classroom practice-dependent; it constructs the language to the same extent that language constructs it, and it is related to power and understood as the site of struggle.

While the learner's identity or concept of self is indeed sculpted through the community membership she perceives (Giles and Johnson, 1981), the insights listed above affirm that claiming such an affiliation remains a matter of complex pursuit.

Associating an individual with a group based on a single feature selected from many options lacks credibility and cannot be adopted as a trustworthy representation of the learner's identity. If group affiliation is defined by the shared language, for instance, error will arise out of placing both teachers and learners of the new language into the same group. If defined by geography, a general territorial name (Canadian/ American/ German, etc.) given to citizens in a multicultural country may not reflect their ethnic or religious backgrounds and would thus skew the identity of those groups. Indeed, when any one distinctive feature of community membership is isolated and chosen to fully represent the learner's identity—based on the premise that that is how she shares the relevant social context with other members of the same community—it will undoubtedly lead to a misdetermination of her identity, since identity is not a fixed construct but rather a membership that is constantly sought after, a process rather than a product. Thus, any view of identity as a determined constant—a shared membership fixed in time and space and bound to the learner's culture, age, gender, or religion—does not reflect the true status of identity or process of self-identification because both defy univocacy and as such are *impossible* to determine. Put simply, identity is a void, a more imagined than real construct which defies determination. Identity may rather be thought of as an accumulation of all past, present, and future experiences, a vector of the individual development trajectory.

Treating the concept of identity as a void that defies the assignation of distinctive characteristics quite obviously belongs to a postmodernist stance. The term *identity*, denoting a structuralist and mechanistic shelving of human experiences into a

predetermined system of consistently reproduced interrelations of its elements, seems marked, along with other modern and positivist notions, for obsolescence. Paradoxically, however, it is post-positivism, a specific stream of postmodernism, which at the same time offers a very *positive* answer to this dilemma. As odd as it may seem, a positive solution begins with deconstruction—that is, an affirmative post-positivist hypothesis about the impossibility of defining the identity of the subject while looking only at what is present. A post-positivist gaze upon identity, which focuses on what is absent—“what is wholly beyond the horizon of the same”—with an emphatic call for *inventing* the possible incoming identities of the subject (Biesta, 2009), seems to provide a more viable and just approach to the identity of the language learner. Consequently, this paper will focus on 1) the conceptualization of identity in post-positivist theory; 2) Derrida’s *pedagogy of difference* and its connection to the related terms; and 3) the benefits of applying post-positivist constructs of identity in the language classroom.

### **POSTPOSITIVIST CONCEPT OF IDENTITY: TOWARD THE CONSTRUCTIVE POWER OF DECONSTRUCTION.**

In its shortest and most general formula, the ethicopolitical horizon of deconstruction can be described as a concern for the other.

Biesta (2009, p. 15)

Deconstruction, a form of critical analysis applied in post-positivist theory, has not been judged kindly in its tendency to turn standard logic on its head and to change truth into falsehood or vice versa (Gabbay & Wansing, 1999). It has been characterized by its opponents as “a form of textualization with hyper-relativistic and nihilistic implications.

It is ethically void, politically impotent, and utterly dangerous” (Ferry & Reanaut, Habermas, Hoy cited in Biesta, 2010, p.15). Indeed, its decentralization of the subject, dissolving its coherence and identity, has been assessed as “fragmentation, ephemerality, indeterminacy” (Harvey cited in Kerderman, 1999), representing an act of empty protestation (Bernstein, 1992; Eagleton cited in Kerderman, 1999). The inclination of post-positivists to subvert traditionally established notions, including identity, make it suspect to many objectivists (Rorty, 2008; Searle, 1983). Indeed, it has been seen as an approach that not only undermines the established understanding of

certain terms but also defies epistemology as an appropriate pursuit: “something in its very nature undermines knowledge” (Spivak cited in Mohanty, 1998, p.12).

Are such complaints correct? Is deconstruction truly a threat to cogent arguments in favour of the rational authority of objective knowledge offered by epistemological foundationalism? In other words, how destructive is deconstruction? To properly investigate the term *deconstruction*, it is necessary to turn to the works of the most prolific and highly respected figure of post-positivist theory, Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher whose insights into literary and philosophical texts as well as into political institutions are recognized as the most saliently representative of this line of thought. Derrida’s works, pondering the concepts of identity and of the *other*, are replete with terms that offer surprisingly positive semantics: *impossibility*, *pedagogy of difference*, and *inventionalism*.

### ***On Impossibility***

The literature describing deconstruction is replete with references to Derrida’s characterization of human experience as “a relentless pursuit of reaching the impossible which means of things whose possibility is sustained by their impossibility, of things, which, instead of being wiped out by their impossibility, are actually nourished and fed by it” (Caputo, 1997, p. 32). For Derrida, human existence is the “experience of the impossible” (Derrida, 1994). Here, *impossible* seems to lose its literal meaning of being something never attainable nor happening, and to acquire instead—to actually strive toward—the semantics of *possible*: something that is not here yet but is progressing toward it.

According to Raffoul (2008), Derrida’s semantics of the experience of *impossible* appropriate Heidegger’s ethic of the possibility of the impossible, which pertains to the inherent ability of *being* to be open to the alternative scenario of any event. Such an appropriation also echoes the similar stance of the psychoanalytic perspective on the structure of being, with its view of the human psyche as a transient, fragmented, fluid entity, defying strict determination and instead gliding along the virtual boundaries of its life experience. This resonates remarkably with the experiences of language learners, who often feel “lost in translation” (Hoffman, 1989)

between the languages and cultures of their personal circumstances. Struggling to identify themselves in their new linguistic and social contexts, language learners may feel fragmented, incomplete, and detached from their challenging environments because of the multiple representations their personas have to take on.

A learner's desire to develop adequate linguistic competence in an English-speaking professional or academic setting may conflict with her wish to preserve her previously acquired connections with the ethnic or religious group she associates herself with. For example, Clark (2007) describes the features of socialization within a group of young female refugees from Bosnia residing in the US, observing that those who chose to socialize primarily within a peer group of other Bosnian refugee youth evinced their cultural self-identification as Bosnian, which was reflected in frequent visits to Bosnia, a wish to marry a Bosnian man, and a desire to observe Muslim religious practices. At the same time, "students whose social and academic realms at school included few Bosnians were much more likely to have constructed cultural identities in which being American or international was primary and a Bosnian cultural heritage was secondary" (Clark, 2007, para. 2). For both cohorts—those who chose to preserve their cultural heritage and those who had a tendency to disregard it—the process of self-identification transpired in moving back and forth between their prior and their developing cultural affiliations.

Members of the first group continued to perceive themselves as Bosnians, while the members of the second perceived themselves as Americans; all, however, might experience difficulty in any attempt to call themselves unequivocally either Bosnian or American. Their process of developing "identity" can be described as incomplete, transient, and thus, virtually "*im-possible*": that is, possible largely in the manifestations of a continuously self-altering and self-adjusting mode of *becoming*, but not in actually *being*.

### ***On Différence / Pedagogy of Difference***

Even cautious gazers upon post-positivism, for whom its vantage points are as elusive as they are disengaging from serious critical discourse, cannot but admit the validity of its most appealing notion, the notion of *différence*---a neographism, as its author puts it, which

is “neither a word nor a concept” (Derrida cited in Biesta, 2009). Brought to life in the essay “Différance” (1982), the term was used by Derrida in polemics referring to the philosophical principles of textual meaning. Its premise is that the distinguishing features found in text can play a double-faced role: while it is the difference in linguistic signs that makes their separate meanings clear, it is also the case that these signs can never fully represent the multiple nuances of difference in meaning. Derrida further posits that while any meaning can be best understood through differences, it is differences of absence rather than of presence: the impossible is not reached but *invented*, rooted in the very essence of subjective experience.

Obviously, the terms *impossibility* and *difference* are closely connected. According to Derrida, the play of difference acknowledges the transcendental signification of meaning, a signification arising from eloquent absence more than from superficially identifiable presence. Experience and its meaning are therefore regarded from the perspective of the unlimited, wide-ranging, and intersecting choices of multiple existential planes, never fully determined and never fully controlled by being. As Derrida (cited in Caputo, 1997) explains, “Experience means running up against the limits of what can never be present, passing to the limits of the unrepresentable and unrepresentable, which is what we mostly desire, namely, the impossible” (p. 33).

As philosophical and abstract as it may seem, a model of difference is not restricted solely to language learning. Deconstruction, particularly the ethics of difference, functions phenomenally well in education as a whole. The experience of the *other* in a pedagogy of difference opens the door to a new horizon of perceiving the *other*: no longer as a code, “a cipher, ...an instrument of the discourses of power” (Mohanty, 1998), but rather as an entity that emerges in all the complexity of its “impossible” experience. The pedagogy of difference reveals—most markedly and saliently in language learning—a striking contrast between the predetermined, “identified” classroom population and the unstable, heterogeneous, quasi-identities behind the very facade of that class. Indeed, class populations are “not identical with themselves...[and they] do not close over and form a seamless web of selfsame” (Derrida cited in Caputo, 1997, p.107).



Instead of discerning the multiple representations of student populations and labelling them according to a few, superficially “re-presentable” but often misleading features, post-positivism proclaims the legitimacy of identity polymorphism. When its emancipatory lens is applied to the conventional pedagogy of *identitarianism*, as Derrida terms it, which sets boundaries to exclude the different, the pedagogy of difference arrives with its antipodal aim to *include* the different, despite the resultant confusion of “hybridity and movement” (Morley, 1996). The educational objective is to let the innumerable, unpredictable acts of teacher/learner dialogue happen. In this respect, the pedagogy of difference strongly supports the post-positivist undertaking known as the *invention of the other*.

### ***On Inventionism***

Where then are we? Where do we find ourselves? With whom can we still identify an order to affirm our own identity and to tell ourselves our own history?...One would have to construct oneself, one would have to be able to invent oneself without a model and without an assured addressee. Derrida (1998, p. 55)

The term *inventionism* in many ways stems from the post-positivist response to the concept of the subject. Indeed, the question of the subject and the legitimization of the learner’s subjectivity seems to have become a central question for modern education (Biesta, 2009). The old utilitarian and positivist notion of learning as the act of the transmission of knowledge from the authority figure teacher to the student who, as the voiceless passive subject, is simply a vessel to be filled with information has been steadily replaced by a more humanitarian paradigm of education. Now, the learner gets attention as a subject who has, in addition to her brain, able to absorb the mechanistically transferred information, a voice to express her selfhood. “The factory model” of schooling, with its “standardization, hierarchical management, competition, and treating young people as a ‘resource’ and their learning as a ‘product’” (Miller, 2005) has given way to education as a pursuit of social change in neoliberal societies.

At the same time, Friere’s (2006) famous but reactive binary model of the teacher as oppressor and the learner as the oppressed, as introduced in his *pedagogy of the oppressed*, devalues the role of the educator, who is an equal human being also holding rights, not just responsibilities. Instead, the teacher is converted from the old figure of oppression and bearer of cultural capital to the extreme opposite—a shapeless,

genderless, globalized, homogenized prototype of the informed, ever optimistic witness of how the identity and subjectivity of the learner evolve. In fact, neither model truly reflects the original polymorphic mode of the external connection between the teacher and the student, let alone the patterns of internal, non-verbal connection between figures either imagined or subjectively perceived by both participants of the teaching/learning dialogue.

What is true is that both parties are constantly evolving. As Moya (2000) explains, “Because subjects exist only in relation to ever-evolving webs of signification and because they constantly differ from themselves as the time passes and meanings change, the self—as a unified, stable, and knowable entity—existing prior to or outside language—is merely a fiction of language, an effect of discourse” (p. 6). As such figures of discourse, the teacher/learner identities are hardly described. Instead, they can be only chronologically, temporally, spatially, and relationally translated into the context of any specific discourse. To exemplify, Butler, in her book *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006), deconstructs traditionally procreated categories of gender and sexuality. She argues against the idea that gender roles are inherently existing biological characteristics. Rather, gender roles are strictly imposed on individuality by social standards and function not like ontologically predisposed norms, but as *performative* categories. If gender is framed as a set of fixed simplified characteristics, Butler opines, its function is inevitably reduced to a certain required code, like a dress code, for example, or a sequence of repetitive acts, rituals, and stylistic preferences.

Furthermore, gender becomes woefully reflected in a flow of regulative discourses, outlining the codes of presupposed behaviour and, what is worse, presupposed mode of thinking. For that reason, “gender trouble” (Butler, 2006) pertains solely to power relations rather than any quest for ontological objectivity.

In juxtaposing Butler’s and Derrida’s views, gender roles function not as normative but as performative categories, in which differences reflect nothing more than the positivist rhetoric of regulative discourse. In contrast, a post-positivist idea of the *invention of the other* holds that “concepts suppose an anticipation, a horizon,

within which alterity is amortized as soon as it is announced precisely because it has let itself be foreseen” (Derrida cited in Biesta, 2009, p. 29). Positivist educators who declare the identity of the learner claim to foresee the learner and thereby disavow her alterity. In so doing, the educator refuses to give the learner the chance to be *anOther*, somebody whose qualities or behavioural patterns have not been yet predicted. Derrida (1978) calls this act of refusal a *transcendental violence* and even a political act of injustice.

As an alternative, the pedagogy of difference offered by post-positivism suggests the following: Difference, containing all, including all the genders, all the places, [acts] not as a universal container mothering, nursing, or “holding” all, but, more paradoxically, as an open-ended and porous receptacle of the uncountable, of innumerable, and incalculable effects, ... that suppresses nothing, releasing the innumerable, the unforeseeable, “the invention of the other.” (Caputo, 1997, p. 105)

Hence, education does not comprise the teacher inventing the learner, the *other*, but rather the educator being open to the invention of “the in-coming of the other” from the outside. Although this may sound impractical, it is just. The post-positivist educational dialogue can eliminate “the tyranny of the education as an event”, when the teacher uses her authority to transfer her subjectified message to the learner population instead of stimulating the audience to produce its own message (Biesta, 2009; Ulmer, 1985). The main advantage of the pedagogy of difference lies in its venturing to look further into the essence of education, thereby shifting the pedagogy of description aimed at *prescription* to the mindset ready to establish “the third space” as proposed by Homi Bhabha (1990), which is related to the continuous “co- construction and reinterpretation of the meaning in communication” (Buettner, 2010, p. 12). Thus, the educational act happens as the outcome of the *im*-possible from both parties in the dialogue, a teacher and a learner, who create a dialogue that embodies the vectors of many routes to which their informed choices lead them.

## CONCLUSION

### *Benefits of applying a post-positivist stance on identity in language learning*

Language acquisition and use have a [trans]formative role in the learner's sense of self and a concomitant impact on the learner's socialization. Thus, McKay and Wong (1996) state that successful pedagogy cannot accomplish its humanistic goals without "paying a scrupulous attention to the social context of language learning, and without radically *redefining* [emphasis added] the language learner" (p. 578). From a post-positivist perspective, *redefining* the language learner implies that an educator keeps her vision open to see the learner's developing capacities and treats the learner's subjective experience as "something that intervenes, that comes from the outside, that comes in and breaks through our expectations and conceptions" (Biesta, 2009, p. 104).

The stance suggested by post-positivist theory, thus fosters language learning because it empowers the learner enormously. For example, the learner's preconceived self-image may contribute not only to her chronic disbelief in her ability to succeed within the language classroom but worse, to her deep conviction that she cannot succeed academically at all or even in attaining adequate competence in the new language outside the classroom. Hirano (2009) states that the positive outcome of language learning depends directly on the establishment of a positive attitude, engendering a positive learner identity, where identity operates as an attitudinal parameter that can be modified and enhanced by the teacher's encouragement. The learner, positively affected by the educator's appropriate, culture-sensitive curriculum choices, empathetic teaching style, and various reflective activities aimed at a better understanding of the multiple roles the learner takes on in the language classroom, grows in confidence to more effectively assert herself-identification in the new environment. Success begins with the teacher's pedagogical philosophy, which reduces classroom anxiety: the more openly the teacher perceives the learner, the more open is her dialogue with the learner, and the more confident the learner becomes.

The benefits of a post-positivist approach to identity in education are especially evident as socialization changes in an ever more globalized world and demands on the extended capacities of human agency increase. An exponential development of the pedagogy of difference is called for. In *Five Minds for the Future*, Gardner (2007)

develops a model of five dispositions judged to be essential for success in our globalized and cyber-engendered world, of which the *respectful* mind would seem to have the highest priority. The *respectful* mind is one that is aware of and appreciates the differences among human beings and human groups (Gardner, 2007). Educators, especially language teachers in multicultural classroom settings, have the same honourable task of cultivating the ethics of the *other* by “crossing disciplinary boundaries and going beyond ‘one-box’ solutions” (Fusaro, 2009, para. 9), choosing to rely on the pedagogy of difference, one of the most valuable and constructive philosophies they could hope to employ.

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