

## Book Review

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Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity, and educational change*. Essex, England: Longman.

Language learning is a complex endeavor that depends on both universal cognitive processes and social context. Research on second language acquisition (SLA) has traditionally focused on the former, utilizing quantitative studies of linguistic products. These include the order in which second language (L2) morphemes are acquired, learners' errors, and the stages of inter-language development. This perspective may be akin to measuring the growth patterns of plants under different conditions of light, water, and soil. Early investigations of nonlinguistic variables included Gardner and Lambert's (1974) attempts to quantify an individual's commitment to learning a second language using the concept of motivation. It seems intuitively obvious that the more a learner "wants" to learn a second language, the more successful she will ultimately be in doing so. But if motivation is viewed as something learners either have or do not have enough of, we run the risk of placing the blame for mediocre language learning completely on the learner and ignoring the fact that an individual's motivation is rooted in his social surroundings. Similarly, one would be mistaken to blame an oak tree for not being "motivated" enough to thrive inside of a 10-foot cage.

A growing body of research in English as a second language (ESL), including Norton Peirce (1995), Willett (1995), and McKay and Wong (1996), has used ethnographic approaches to analyze the processes of second language learning. These researchers emphasize that a second language is not simply a skill set acquired through persistence and practice. It involves complex social interactions and power differentials that engage the identities of language learners in ways that have received little attention from SLA researchers (Norton Peirce, 1995). These authors shed light on the 10-foot cages and other impediments to language development experienced by both adult and child language learners, particularly those in an immigrant context.

Bonny Norton's longitudinal case study, *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change* (2000), makes a valuable contribution to the field of adult immigrant education, but her insights should not be overlooked by K-12 educators. Through her two-year involvement in the lives of five adult immigrant women in Canada and her use of interviews, written diaries, and participant observations, Norton paints detailed individual portraits of the ways in which opportunities to practice speaking English were socially structured for them. She demonstrates that learners are not always free to interact with whom they chose, since they are often constrained by power imbalances and shifting notions of identity. In other words, "naturalistic" language learning is not always a linguistic utopia in which learners are surrounded by fluent native speakers who enthusiastically provide input and negotiate meaning in an egalitarian and supportive atmosphere. For many immigrants, the linguistic environment represents inequitable relations of power and even hostility, with native speakers "more likely to avoid [learners] than negotiate meaning with them" (p. 113).

The five women in the study provide interesting points of contrast in exploring these issues. There was a twenty-something unmarried restaurant worker, originally from Poland; a married, twenty-something garment worker from Vietnam, whose brother's family lived nearby; a thirty-something biology teacher from Poland, married with one child, who worked at a series of jobs ranging from kitchen help to attendant at a senior home; a thirty-something professional surveyor from the former Czechoslovakia, with a husband and three children, working as cook help and then as a cashier; and a forty-something homemaker from Peru with a professional husband and three children. Their different conditions of employment, family, and experiences in their former countries proved to be significant in shaping their experiences with English once living in Canada. The main questions posed by Norton included the following: What opportunities were available to these women to interact with English speakers? What happened when native speakers avoided interaction with them? Under what conditions were they introverted or sensitive to rejection? When would they take more language risks, and why?

Norton explains the actions and reactions of these women through the concept of investment, which explores the socially constructed relationships that learners have with the target language. It conceives of the learner as having a complex history and multiple desires. When people speak, they are not just exchanging information; they are constantly reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Therefore, when people speak a language, they are investing in an identity as speakers of that language. Additionally learners who invest in a second language do so in the hopes of gaining access to resources such as education, friendship, and money. They hope to have a "good return" on their investment. A learner's investment can

seem at times contradictory, changing over time and space depending on the momentary conditions of identity and power, two concepts central to the book.

Norton uses the term identity to refer to how a person understands her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed over time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future. At its core are basic human needs for recognition, affiliation, and safety, which often produce multiple and contradictory desires. Identity is therefore a site of struggle. Individuals' identities must be understood with reference to the larger social structure in which they live, because societies (and classrooms) not only give us strong messages about whom we can be and to what we can aspire; they can actually forbid or curtail our participation in given social networks.

A person's identity construction cannot be separated from the distribution of resources in society, because it is a person's access to resources that defines the terms on which her desires and their realization will be articulated. "Power" refers to the socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions, and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed, and validated. It is a relationship that is constantly renegotiated, but in general, those who have power control access to material goods that others want. According to McKay & Wong (1996), those in power may marginalize a student in a certain context, but the student may resist that positioning or even set up a counter-discourse that places her in a more powerful position. In their study, for example, one boy who derived enough satisfaction from his identity as socially and athletically competent did not feel the need to develop his academic writing skills, despite the pressure of his teachers and parents. However, the teachers ultimately controlled his placement in ESL classes.

A few of Norton's examples will serve to illustrate how investment, identity, and power had profound effects on these women's language experiences. Katarina insisted on Polish in the home and sent her daughter to Polish Saturday classes, fearing that English threatened their bond. However, she needed English in order to regain the professional status she had enjoyed in Poland. This investment in social class caused her to bitterly resist being positioned by immigrant officials or educational personnel as unskilled and uneducated. She was not interested in menial labor or English classes that emphasized "definitions for a test" or speaking skills. She wanted to learn enough English to complete a computer course, work autonomously, and gain respect from the educated professionals with whom she identified.

Martina wanted to learn the spoken English necessary to deal with landlords and appliance vendors in order to take over such tasks from her children and to secure a better life for her family. Since her limited knowledge

of Canadian cultural practices made it unlikely for her to find a job as a surveyor, she worked as kitchen help in a fast food restaurant. However, her teenage coworkers marginalized her from contact with anglophones by not allowing her to interact with customers and by sending her off to sweep the floor while they chatted. She once challenged the girls: "I said no. The girl . . . is younger than my son"—which Norton interpreted as Martina's investment in a caretaker identity powerful enough to overcome the anxiety caused by her coworkers' attempts to silence her. That is, her identity as a mother "structured her relationship to both the private and the public world and had a marked impact on the ways she created opportunities to practice English and interact in the workplace" (p. 100). Unfortunately, she often felt "stupid" due to her lack of English fluency, which was exacerbated by her experiences of marginalization in Canada including landlords who exploited her, appliance dealers who deceived her, employers and co-workers who ignored her, and management that terminated her husband's employment (2000, p. 101).

Felicia and her husband had permanently relocated to Canada, but she defined herself as a "foreigner person who lives here by accident" rather than an immigrant. When her identity as a wealthy Peruvian was validated among coworkers and others who knew her history, she felt comfortable speaking English. If not, she felt silenced. She preferred not to speak among strangers on an elevator rather than risk the possibility of being positioned as an immigrant. Norton noted that since Felicia's family did not depend on her English skills for a better life. English held less value for her than for Martina. Similarly, when Eva (like Martina) was given menial jobs that carried little status in the workplace, she felt she could not claim the right to speak to her coworkers: "How can I talk to them? I hear they don't care about me and I don't feel to go and smile and talk to them." All five women had difficulties speaking English under such conditions of marginalization. Her struggles were ultimately successful when her coworkers learned that she had useful allies outside the workplace. Once her identity shifted to include status and respect, she felt more confident speaking to them.

Through Norton's portrayal of these women, it becomes clear that job competence can provide the symbolic capital necessary to claim the right to speak in the workplace; this may also be true for younger learners by way of their successful identities as students, athletes, or popular friends. It also convinces the reader that a learner's past history, gender, age, and positions within the family can influence how they understand their relationship to their new society and how they create, respond to, and resist opportunities to speak English. This perspective is crucial in SLA because instead of considering learners as isolated individuals, it emphasizes the analysis of their histories and local communities.

In chapter six, Norton argues for the incorporation of her findings into SLA theory, particularly the fact that one cannot assume egalitarian relationships between learners and natives. She delineates how Spolsky's "natural language learning," Schumann's "accultuation model," and Krashen's "affective filter" do not adequately conceptualize the relationship between immigrant language learners and the target language community. Given that most theories of SLA recognize the need for learners to actually produce the language, it is crucial to understand that a learner's motivation to speak is mediated by other investments that may conflict with the desire to speak: "investments that are intimately connected to the ongoing production of the learners' identities and their desires for the future" (Norton, 2000, p. 120) and which are often bound to inequitable power relations and gender politics. Bilingual educators who embrace an emphasis on access to social interaction for language acquisition, (such as Faltis & Hudelson, 1998) as well as those like Cummins (1986) who claims that power relationships affect both school achievement and classroom language practices will find a kindred spirit in Norton.

The exciting implications of this book for teachers are found in the idea that learner's attitudes and motivations are prime areas for educational intervention. In chapter seven, Norton discusses "the diary study as a pedagogy of possibility" through which teachers can bridge the gap between classroom learning and opportunities to practice the language in the community. By encouraging learners to articulate and reflect critically upon their interactions with native speakers, teachers can empower them to position themselves as researchers rather than immigrants and also to reframe their relationships in order to construct powerful identities for themselves. This chapter also describes hurtful mistakes made by these women's teachers, providing valuable lessons through negative example.

One of the book's great strengths is that it presents the women's own voices through abundant quotes, which render the text highly readable and lend credibility to the author's interpretations (imperative in any ethnographic undertaking). The narrative also details the contradictions in the women's behavior, highlighting the truth that humans are complex beings whose linguistic practices cannot be reduced to our motivation. The author reiterates that all five women were indeed motivated to learn English, evidenced by their participation in extra courses and in the diary study, and in their stated desires to have more contact with anglophones. What got in the way was their discomfort talking to people in whom they had a particular investment, someone who had the power to challenge the visions of themselves that they wanted to live.

The theory and practice suggested in this book are relevant not only for teachers of adults. Although immigrant children in the United States usually have greater access to English (in school and through peer culture) than the women in Norton's study, they may have similar experiences of marginalization,

particularly older children whose weak English may actually limit their opportunities to practice it and those immigrant groups that experience intense discrimination. Children of any age undoubtedly have competing identity agendas (McKay & Wong, 1996), and some may actually find very limited opportunities to practice English (Carger, 1996). We need more ethnographic studies of learners' experiences in the United States to determine the impact of social factors, identity, and power on their opportunities to practice English. Norton encourages teachers to conduct such work through the use of diaries and critical pedagogy. Although readers may have benefited from learning more about how the author's biases may have affected her interpretations, this book provides an excellent standard for qualitative researchers.

Given the rapid change in the U.S. educational system, with many immigrant students coming from areas that have been or continue to be in positions of subordination to the United States (McKay & Wong, 1996), conflicts revolving around their academic performance and language learning can become frustrating. Norton calls upon us to shed light on students' investments and empower their agency so that they might grow and extend their branches beyond the cages that would otherwise restrain their linguistic and social development.

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