

Identity investment in the pedagogy of identity texts: A critical review

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Introduction

Identity texts are bilingual texts that can be “written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form” (Cummins & Early 2011: 3).¹ The term emerged from collaborative research conducted by Cummins and Early (2011) between 2002 and 2006 with teachers who work with English as a Second Language (ESL) learners from marginalized backgrounds (i.e. immigrant and indigeneous communities) in the Toronto and Vancouver areas in Canada. In their research, the authors reconceptualized literacy to include multimodal literacy; “the ability to understand the combined potential of various modes for meaning making” (Royce as cited in Hauck 2007: 213), and the multilingual literacy practices in linguistically diverse communities (Cummins & Early 2011). By acknowledging the home languages of marginalized ESL learners as “intellectual and cultural resources” for literacy development, identity texts were introduced as a pedagogical option that potentially helps second/foreign (L2/FL) learners in marginalized groups challenge the societal relations of power that devalue their identities (Cummins & Early 11: 4) and attain their legitimacy as competent members of their community.

This review identifies some critical practices in existing identity text research as limitations to identifying investment and negotiation of societal relations of power in the communities L2/FL learners identify with. By highlighting the issues of authority in instruction, non-participation, and identity negotiation in intercultural reflection, I argue that identity texts may in fact be failing to meaningfully engage learners in cycles of identity investment as well as critical multimodal literacy practices.

¹ Examples of identity texts in K-12 educational contexts are available on Thornwood Public School’s dual language showcase project (2001) and the multiliteracy project (n.d) websites.

1 Literature Review

1.1 Affordances of Identity Texts

Since the emergence of identity texts, research has explored how they support identity investment through developing language learners' multimodal skills, encouraging critical reflection on their hybrid identities (e.g. Corcoran 2017), their language learning practices over time (e.g. García-Pastor 2018), and developing intercultural competence (e.g. Krulatz et al. 2018). With the use of various digital tools, students create their identity texts, individually or in groups. Upon completion, students share their final texts with multiple audiences (e.g., peers and teachers, sister class partners, and social media platforms). By doing so, it is argued that students are "likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences" (Cummins & Early 2011: 3).

By engaging in linguistic and semiotic practices such as using voice-overs or creating videos, learners are able to narrate their story and introduce themselves as knowledgeable and experienced members of their community (García-Pastor 2017). Similarly, learners develop their metalinguistic awareness and become meaning-makers, or "semiotic sign-makers" (García-Pastor 2018: 58) in digital spaces, taking authorial agency over their language learning and affirming their legitimacy as members of the wider dominant language community (Darvin & Norton 2014). Thus, the identity text creation process is argued to be a sociological process that enables learners to claim power by appropriating language and reframing relations with members whom they perceive as gatekeepers in the dominant language community (Cummins et al. 2015).

1.2 Identity Investment: A Theoretical Framework

The model of investment (Darvin & Norton 2015) extends Norton's (2013) foundational work on identity and investment in language learning to examine the intersection between *identity*, *ideology*, and *capital*. Identity is "the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton 2013: 45). Ideology refers to "the power to impose and to inculcate principles of construction of reality" (Bourdieu as cited in Darvin & Norton 2015: 43). Capital, especially *symbolic capital*, is the set of knowledge and skills that are recognized as valued and legitimate resources by the

dominant ideologies in a certain community that allow learners to operate as competent members of their community (Darvin & Norton 2015). These invisible power structures, also present in multimodal spaces, make earning legitimacy in the desired community a struggle of navigating power relations (Darvin & Norton 2014). With the increasing use of technology and multimodal tools, language learners can find themselves in “deterritorialized and unbounded” (Darvin & Norton 2015: 36) spaces, where their identities can be devalued or degraded, rather than affirmed and celebrated (O’Dowd & Ritter 2006). Thus, investing in identities that would allow for membership legitimacy is crucially dependent on L2/FL learners’ ability to acknowledge and navigate the various discourses of power more successfully (Darvin & Norton 2014: 57).

As much as research has praised identity texts for their affordances in supporting identity investment by challenging coercive power relations inside and outside the classroom, the limitations of the pedagogy in promoting identity investment has, to the best of the author’s knowledge, not been explored. The model of investment informs an understanding of the invisible mechanisms of power that impact identity investment and literacy practices, at the micro and macro levels. Thus, the model is employed in this critical review to examine the extent to which these activities provide language learners with the competence to negotiate societal relations of power and position themselves as legitimate speakers in the communities they identify with.

2 The Study

With the model of investment (Darvin & Norton 2014) in mind, this study aims to explore the following review question: What are some pedagogical pitfalls of identity texts that can limit identity investment for L2/FL learners?

To delimit the scope of the review, the research employed inclusion criteria for the selection of articles. The research focused on studies conducted with L2/FL learners in marginalized areas in Canada and other countries. However, the review included other studies that highlighted identity investment as an element of inquiry. Since identity texts are multimodal in nature, the research focused on studies that employed a variety of digital formats in creating and sharing the texts (some studies allowed learners to use more than one digital format). To maintain consistency and relevance of findings among educational settings, the review included studies of L2/FL learning in secondary and postsecondary contexts only. Because L2/FL learners are expected to negotiate their hybrid identities by

sharing their texts with multiple audiences, the research included studies that involved sharing the identity texts in a variety of platforms. Due to the scope of this paper, though 23 articles were identified using the criteria described above, a representative subset of 11 are included for further analysis and discussion. Table 1 illustrates relevant characteristics of the selected articles.

Table 1: Inclusion Criteria with Article Count

Research Context	Postsecondary education	3
	Secondary education	8
Research Participants	Indigenous learners	1
	Immigrant students and newcomers	5
	Underserved rural communities	1
	Other ESL/EFL learners	4
Audience(s)	Art exhibitions	2
	Sister-class/virtual exchange	1
	Shared in the school and/or wider community (e.g. facilitated seminars)	3
	Publication of student volumes	1
	Online public posting/forums	4
Primary Digital Format of Texts	Films/documentaries	1
	Digitized literary texts (e.g. poems, stories)	6
	Visual texts (e.g. animated art/drawing)	2
	Videos	3

3 Findings and Discussion

3.1 Teacher Authority vs. Learner Agency in Identity Text Creation

As argued by Darvin and Norton (2015: 44), structured ideologies are “reproduced by institutional conditions and recursive hegemonic practices”. Leading identity text projects as another formal school activity may maintain the *legitimized authority* of the instructor, whose judgement of what valuable communicative and literacy practices are can impose specific investment practices in identity text creation.

Most identity text projects, for instance, are situated as classroom assignments that get graded as class work after receiving instructor comments at different stages of the creation process (e.g., Corcoran 2017; Early & Yeung 2011; Meredith 2011). Although instructor feedback is valuable for language development and reflection on identity, the fact that the project is assigned for teacher evaluation has a potential to intimidate and impact the semiotic and linguistic choices learners make when producing their identity texts. Utterances such as “I GOT A FREAKING A!” and the grade “exceeds expectations in all categories” (Meredith 2011: 113) reveal that the motive for some learners to complete their identity text is to meet the instructor’s expectations and earn high grades. Being under the control of the instructor’s judgment, L2/FL learners might feel forced to make decisions to censor themselves or make some identity qualities invisible, devalued, or delegitimized (Pavlenko & Norton 2007).

More importantly, feedback on performance in identity text creation should incorporate guiding comments that encourage critical reflection on elements such as the multimodal choices learners make to construct their identity, reflections on the dominant or target culture and their own, and how they position themselves and others in the communities they identify with. Yet, the highlighted teacher researcher feedback in the examined studies is mostly linguistic in nature. This does not mean that feedback on identity formation was not originally provided by instructors. However, with the current limited exposure to how this type of feedback is shared and utilized by learners during the creation process, research can fail to create an optimized understanding of the “space for teacher-student dialogue” (Kourtis-Kazoullis et al. 2011: 91) this feedback creates and the role it plays in framing alternative approaches to assessing learning about the complex topic of identity.

3.2 Non-participation in Identity Texts

As Weinger (1998) argues, both the practices we engage and do not engage in identify who we are. Thus silence, or *non-participation* (Norton 2001), is a valid choice that individuals make about their belonging in the classroom and is likely to provide unique insights on rejection mechanisms to enforced classroom practices. Non-participation can take different forms such as not listening to peers, rejecting to work with learners who speak the same first language, and low engagement due to anxiety, confusion, or misunderstanding of activity instructions (Norton 2013). More importantly, Higgins (2015) suggests that “the

imposition of heritage identities” (379), rather than integrating a preference of identifying with other or even global identities instead, can negatively influence learners’ engagement with their imagined identity, the ideal self they aspire to become in their future (Norton 2001).

In the beginning of the identity text process in Mirza (2011), for instance, when an Afghani boy mumbled that he cannot remember any stories from his first home culture because he thought that “they weren’t good anyways” (116), the teacher researcher decided to deal with the situation by narrating stories from various cultural backgrounds she believed were representative of the students’ heritage. Although these stories might have motivated other L2/FL learners to bring their heritage culture to the creation and discussion of identity texts, it cannot be denied that the teacher’s approach to facilitating the issue potentially excluded those who might have wanted to shift away to a more imagined identity, where their heritage culture plays a minor role of who they want to become (Higgins 2015). Struggles of L2/FL learners in the journey of self-exploration and belonging are worthy of examination; yet choosing to mostly highlight active participation during the identity text projects constructs participation in identity text creation as neat and orderly. Unlike detailed descriptions of learners’ positive experiences in the process, the examined studies do not address participation challenges sufficiently, why they occurred, or how they were efficiently facilitated. With limited knowledge on silence and non-participation in identity text projects, assumptions about learners’ positive engagement and full participation in the activity should be revisited.

3.3 Identity Negotiation in Intercultural Reflection

In addition to supporting students’ literacy engagement through identity affirmation, identity texts are perceived as multimodal cultural products, which promote intercultural competence and students’ curiosity about other cultures and critical thinking abilities (e.g., Krulatz et al. 2018; Stille & Prasad 2015). As argued by Byram (1997: 34), willingness and readiness to relativise one’s own values and beliefs, accept other perspectives, and suspend belief about one’s own culture are complex dimensions in intercultural competence. Dervin (2011) proposes a similar understanding of the complexity of intercultural learning, arguing that language teachers should go beyond the *solid* approach to culture, which views learner identities as static based on their national groups or

languages, to a *liquid* approach, which fosters critical intercultural learning in intercultural encounter and seeking understanding with others.

However, these critical intercultural interactions, especially within multimodal spaces, are not exempt from tension and stereotypical attitudes, which reinforce feelings of indifference and marginalization (Ware 2005). That being said, developing intercultural mediation can be seen as valued symbolic capital, which enables ESL learners to navigate the complex discourses of power, superiority, and legitimacy when negotiating their identity texts with others. Assumptions about developing mediation ability when participating in identity text projects, however, should be supported by transparent discussions about learners' intercultural mediation practices and facilitation of critical moments during self-reflection and dialogue with other community members. Yet, what is noticeable in most reviewed studies is the missed opportunities for critical intercultural reflection when sharing their texts with others. For instance, many studies reflect a solid understanding of intercultural learning by facilitating basic learner discussions of *elements of surface culture* (Hinkel as cited in Gómez-Rodríguez 2018: 155) introduced in their identity texts such as food, festivals, and geography (e.g. Krulatz et al. 2018; Ng 2011), without conducting or encouraging critical interpretation or comparisons between each of these events in light of the other (Byram 1997).

Even when opportunities for deeper dialogue occurred, they were not well-seized as critical moments for learners to analyze, relate, and interpret shared documents and events to move to a more dynamic liquid intercultural learning practice. For example, when students in Canada encountered unfamiliar historical and political terms introduced in some of the identity texts of their peers in Hong Kong (Ng 2011), the “teachable moment” (121) was limited to asking students to look up the meanings of each term and write them on a printed handout prepared by the teacher. Alternatively, teachers could have created a space for learners in both classrooms to negotiate meaning-making and reflect on these terms and how they relevantly shape their understanding of certain sociopolitical issues in both contexts.

Similarly, whenever research highlighted that the dialogue participants established with members in the school community (e.g., Kourtis-Kazoullis et al. 2011) or art exhibit visitors (e.g., Montero et al. 2013) was key for their identity investment, there is limited discussion on how these encounters with members in the wider community facilitated learners' investment in symbolic resources or developed their mediation skills to negotiate their hybrid identities more successfully. Among the reviewed studies, however, two

studies provide a reliable example of integrating critical dialogue as a tool to challenge new immigrant learners to reflect on the invisible traits of their identity and how they are socially constructed. Employing student ethnography (Masats & Unamuno 2011: 108-109) and intercultural multimodal resources (Fránquiz 2012) to establish critical discussions on the validity of monolithic identity construction seemed to help learners navigate power relations in the wider L2 speaking community. This experience of deep intercultural learning moved ESL immigrant learners in both studies from a static understanding of intercultural learning to a more dynamic and liquid practice of identity investment in those spaces.

Conclusion

The argument presented in this paper to rethink reliance on identity texts as a pedagogy of identity investment is not intended to discourage practitioners from applying it in the L2/FL classroom. On the contrary, it promotes a need for more sophisticated tools when examining the critical relationship between identity investment and critical literacy practices in both online and offline, both local and global spaces learners navigate today. Rapid technological change is reshaping discourses of mobility and making “systematic patterns of control more invisible” (Darvin & Norton 2015: 36). Some under-examined elements in the identity text creation process include assessment practices, understanding identity investment choices of L2/FL learners, and establishing meaning making in critical intercultural reflection and dialogue with community members. Drawing upon comprehensive models that address the evolving issues of identity investment practices is key when reflecting on the potential of identity texts and similar critical literacy pedagogies when navigating power relation in a variety of spaces and globalizing its impact from a graded school activity to an opportunity for lifelong learning.

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