Identity and Language Learning: Extending the Conversation
(2nd ed.)
Bonny Norton
Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2013, x + 216 pages

In this second edition of her influential book, Bonny Norton provides an extensive new introduction (pp. 1–39) that is designed to update the scholarly background—with additional sources as recent as 2013—and thus to contextualize the following seven original chapters against the backdrop of her "post-2000 research journey" (p. ix). Those core chapters follow the same argument as in the first edition: looking at fact and fiction in narratives of language learning, models of research into language learning identity, adult immigrant language learners, young adult language learners, immigrant mothers as language learners, possible models for language acquisition theory, and opportunities for language use inside and outside the classroom. The book closes with a new afterword by Claire Kramsch. As Kramsch observes, without constant reaffirmation and support, the exciting hopes and possibilities for English language learners initially depicted in the first edition may risk becoming a prospect "not of dreams come true but of dreams shattered" (p. 199). At bottom, as Norton comments in her own concluding remarks, old-fashioned and constraining "essentialist notions of language learners" remain as "untenable" as ever, so that "it is only by acknowledging the complexity of identity that we can gain insight into the myriad challenges and possibilities of language learning and … teaching in the new millennium" (p. 191).

Thus, in common with Kramsch, Norton notes the way in which many of the identity-related themes suggested in the first edition of the book (*Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*, 2000) have over time become central to the work of scholars and classroom practitioners in the field of subsequent language learning. Among such enduring themes, she singles out especially the concepts of "investment, imagined communities, and imagined identities" (pp. 25–26). Consequently, those concepts recommend themselves as foci for examining the new edition. Although a number of perspectives might be adopted, we will concentrate on the pedagogical implications of the three motifs because Norton's message itself is so action-oriented.

The construct of *investment* is identified in the first chapter as evoking the complex overall environment in which the narrower element of learner motivation can be seen to operate; from the outset, this crucial context was defined as including values and aspirations that underpin "investment in the learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space" (p. 51). Such a comprehensive view of the language-learning enterprise is important for language teachers because of its ability to make

sense not only of such short-term and concrete language-learning goals as preparation for a job interview in a week's time, but also of such far more expansive and elusive ambitions as fostering comfortable and rewarding membership in a still-to-be-clarified social, professional, or national culture. Only by perceiving learners' evolution within this broad framework can teachers understand the otherwise mystifying reality that a student may experience an "ambivalent desire to learn and practice" the target language, such that the individual may at the same time "be a highly motivated language learner" and yet "have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community" (pp. 6, 3).

Plainly, a student's immediate motivation to master the language can do much to contribute to effective progress, but the persistence and success that every teacher hopes to observe are unlikely to be attainable without attention to issues of individual identity and investment as well. Arguably, Self-Determination Theory (see, e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2009)—not specifically mentioned by Norton—is the model of motivation that seems most nearly to accommodate the factor of investment, thanks to its recognition of the human need for relatedness alongside competence and autonomy, but, even so, it must be conceded that Self-Determination Theory lacks the explicitly "sociological" pointer to organizational and political action that the concept of investment promotes through its emphasis on the drive to realize individual identity (p. 6).

From this background arise the two related concepts of *imagined communities* and *imagined identities*. The theory of *imagined communities* highlights the potential that "the target language community may be, to some extent, a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships, but also a community of the imagination … that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future" (p. 3). And the importance of *imagined identities* relates the manner in which identity can be theorized as "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" (p. 4). While insight into language learners' empowering capacity to construct self-identification through imagined identities in fact rose to prominence as a broadly recognized scholarly construct after 2000, it is clearly consistent with a number of perceptions that were already apparent in Norton's first edition. Likewise, although emerging as an influential research concept later than the publication of the first edition, the key element of language learners' aspiration to membership in imagined communities was also clearly delineated in that earlier work, as the 2013 introduction illuminates. By tracing the progression of multiple scholars' interrelated reflections on such central themes, the introduction not only brings the original study into contact with current thinking but also, through its interweaving of diverse perspectives, vividly exemplifies the way in which applied linguistics can be practiced—as

Widdowson (2000) has noted—as a rich and revealing "multilateral process which, of its nature, has to relate and reconcile different representations of reality" (p. 5).

In her introduction, Norton states that her thinking around the ideas of imagined identities and communities originated with "the stories of resistance shared with me by the language learners discussed in the first edition of this book" (p. 8). For example, she specifically alludes to the way in which Mai's story (e.g., Chapter 4) illustrates how an ESL teacher's engagement with learners can focus too much on "the students' historical past" and too little on "the present and the future" (p. 9), as if their identity were rigidly predetermined and immune to reinvention; thus, the new introduction underlines a facet of Mai's story that was present in the first edition but perhaps less pointedly emphasized than it might have been. It is also noticeable, for instance, that the story of Felicia (Chapter 4)—whose "fear of being marginalized as an immigrant was greater than her desire to practice English in the public world" (p. 159)—illustrated how newcomers may feel "accepted" only as long as their "histories and lived experiences" are validated (p. 179). Similarly, the introduction draws attention to Mai's "imagined identity … [as] that of the office worker who dressed smartly and was not lost in the anonymity of the factory floor" (p. 9), explaining that this goal made her "a highly motivated language learner" despite the fact that "she had little investment in the language practices of her classroom" (p. 9). Repeatedly, then, we see the instructional value of exploring "how learners' affiliation with … [imagined] communities might affect their learning trajectories" (p. 8).

In Chapter 7, "Claiming the Right to Speak in Classrooms and Communities," the focus is explicitly on pedagogy; here, Norton gives particular consideration to the instructional implications of investment and identity, although in many respects—as noted—their connections with current theory and practice are identified more explicitly in the new introduction to the second edition. Especially when contextualized in that manner, the core concepts of investment, imagined identities, and imagined communities stand out as a valuable "complement" to "the psychological construct of motivation" (p. 3) with which English language instructors no doubt are already familiar, but which in itself may be inadequate to predict the full range of pedagogical conditions required for maximal learning and teaching success. As Norton stipulates, the ultimate goal is of course to "structure classroom activities and develop classroom materials that will help learners claim the right to speak in the wider community" (p. 190). For that key outcome, not only powerful motivation but also a strong sense of investment are required.

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