

## EVERYDAY TALK: The Construction of Student Identities

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### ABSTRACT

This brief article discusses the notion of Identity Construction through everyday talk among interlocutors. In particular, this article discusses how I construct and co-construct my identities as a graduate student as I communicate with others. The research data used in this article was analysed through the framework of *expert-novice constitution*, *co-construction*, and *legitimate peripheral participation*. The data show their relevance to the notions of expert-novice, co-construction, and legitimate peripheral participation where the interlocutors are actively negotiating their identities as they try to claim their right to speak.

**Keywords:** *identity construction; expert-novice constitution; co-construction; legitimate peripheral participation*

### INTRODUCTION

It is my understanding that when people interact with each other they consciously or unconsciously construct their multiple aspects of identities either through verbal or nonverbal language. As a small example of identity construction by spoken language, I decided to examine my own daily interactions with peers in order to look at the way I constructed my identities. In this article, nonetheless, I will focus more on the construction of my identities as a graduate student and will include other aspects of identities in the discussion where I see fit.

Since the word *identity* is rich in meaning, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theorists have defined this word rather differently. According to Bailey (2001), the

word *identity* is derived from a Latin word, *idem*, which means “the same”; “identities are constituted by socially counting as “the same” as others or counting as “different” from others” (p. 191). In other words, we need others to be “the same” or “different” to claim an “identity”.

As she argues that SLA theorists need to develop a larger concept of identity in language learning, Norton (2000) asserts that the term identity refers to “how 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.5). As someone might change his or her understanding, identity, as Norton implies, is not fixed and will tend to change depending on the situations. In relation to this, Tracy (2002) points out that identity is “best thought of as stable features of persons that exist prior to any particular situation, *and* are dynamic and situated accomplishments, enacted through talk, changing from one occasion to the next” (p.17).

Influenced by West (1992, as cited in Norton, 1997; 2000), Norton (2000) claims that identity refers to someone’s desires –“the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety” (p.8). In relation to this, West (1992) argues that “such desires cannot be separated from the distribution of material resources in society” (as cited in Norton, 2000, p.8). Someone who has access to these resources will have wider access to power and privileges, and the power and those privileges will shape the way he or she understands his or her relationship with the world. Norton (1997) then asserts that the question “Who am I?” cannot be understood merely by itself but we need to relate to the question “What can I do?” In addition, according to Norton (1997), West (1992) claims that “it is people’s access to material resources that will define the terms on which they will articulate their desires” (p. 410). In addition, shifting from one identity to another will enable people to claim their right to speak as they interact with their interlocutors.

As many would believe, a language has connections to the identities of its speakers. In her book, *Language and Culture*, Kramsch (1998) mentions that someone’s cultural identity is most likely related to the language he or she is speaking.

Nonetheless, Kramsch acknowledges that the relationship between language and cultural identity is complex; she then writes “although there is no one-to-one relationship between anyone’s language and his or her cultural identity, the language is *the* most sensitive indicator of relationship between an individual and a given social groups” (p. 77).

Identity is also constructed through actions; similar to what Richard (2006) has pointed out that identity is not only assumed or assigned as labels but it is also constructed or built through actions. In other words, identity is produced through situated social actions among interlocutors. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) particularly write that “identity inheres in actions, not in people ... identities may shift and recombine to meet new circumstances” (p. 376). As has been said earlier that identities are constructed rather differently depending on times, spaces, or current needs, I will likely develop and construct different identities every time I face different situations. For instance, the way I constructed my identity, as a graduate student, was different from the way I constructed it when I was serving as an English teacher. Perhaps, I would tend to construct my graduate student identity who is in the U.S and has “more knowing” than my past identity did.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Due to the fact that many different theories of identity have been introduced by the SLA experts, I decided to incorporate and draw some of the theories of identity to be the framework of this study. It is my intention that this framework will shape the way I analyze the data in a more directed way. Some of the theories are Jacoby & Gonzales’ (1991) expert-novice constitution, Jacoby & Ochs’ (1995) co-construction, and Lave & Wenger’s legitimate peripheral participation. A brief discussion of these theories will be presented in this section.

In a study of a university research group, Jacoby & Gonzales (1991) examine how the conceptualization of “expert” and “novice” is dynamic and socially constituted in interactions. They claim that the relationship between “novice” and “expert” in an interaction is not necessarily determined by mere social categories, e.g. hierarchical statuses, genders, ages, and etc. Rather, the novice-expert relationship is more dynamic and complicated as it changes from time to time. As Jacoby and

Gonzalez (1991) further explain that status of “expert” or “novice” can be changed and negotiated as the interlocutors continue to interact; for instance, a seemingly “expert”, who identifies his or herself as the more knowing person at the earlier time of interaction, will possibly construct his or her “novice” status where he or she sees it fits at a later time of interaction. This status is established and constructed by both interlocutors. Regarding this process, Jacoby & Gonzales assert that this kind of interaction is an active learning where learning is seen “not as mental event internal to an individual but as social achievement within complex framework of community, goals, tools, and activities” (p. 150).

In addition, Jacoby & Gonzales point out that an expert is not constituted as “all knowing” but rather momentarily “more knowing”, while a novice can be constituted as the one who is “less knowing” rather than “not-knowing” (p. 152). In relation to this notion, even if I construct my identity as a graduate student, who knows more about certain topics, it does not mean that I have “all the knowing” rather I temporarily know more because interlocutors I am speaking with have “less knowing” than I do.

Similarly, Jacoby & Ochs’ (1995) concept of co-construction also shows that both interlocutors play role in establishing meanings or their social identities. Despite the claim that *co-construction* is meant “to cover a range of interactional processes” (p. 171), Jacoby & Ochs (1995) also, however, argue that co-construction will not always be in the same goal. The Notion of “co-construction does not necessarily entail *affiliative* or *supportive* interactions” (p. 171). A disagreement between two parties, according to the authors, can be a form of co-construction. Jacoby & Ochs (1995) further explain that “everything is co-constructed through interactions ... to affirm that participants to interaction are not passive robots living out pre-programmed linguistic “rules”, discourse “conventions, or cultural prescriptions for social identity” (pp. 177-178). In other words, everyone involving in an interaction will likely have to participate actively in order to attain a “shared” understanding.

According to Norton (2001), Lave and Wenger (1991) pay attention to “the relationship between learning and the social situation in which it occurs” (p. 160). Lave and Wenger call this relationship as “situated learning”. Norton further explains

that the notion of *legitimate peripheral participation* describes a situation where “newcomers interact with old-timers in a given community setting, become increasingly experienced in the practices that characterize that community, and gradually move toward fuller participation in that community” (p. 160).

As the case of Jacoby & Gonzalez’s (1991) notion of expert-novice relationship where the “novice” can change the relationship to “expert-expert” because she or he has access to what the supposedly “truly expert” has, a newcomer (in *legitimate peripheral participation*) will gradually change his or her identity (as a newcomer) as he or she gets more access to the ongoing activities that they old-timers are enjoying. In regard to this, Lave and Wenger particularly write that “to become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community, and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation” (as cited in Norton, 2001, p. 161).

## Participants

Because this study aims to examine my interactions with others and looks the way I construct my student identity, I became the main subject in this study. However, I invited ten other participants who agreed to participate in this project. Three of the participants were First Language (L1) speakers of English and the other seven participants were Second Language (L2) speakers of English. All of the participants were graduate students at English Department, Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I chose them to be my participants for this project because I know them and they are all fluent English speakers.

## Methods

The data I used for this paper was initially used for a final project in the Second Language Acquisition class. The data I collected was in the form of audio recording and an audio recorder was the device for collecting the data. In collecting the data, once the participants signed the consent form, I recorded every possible conversation I had with my participants for about four weeks.

The participants were neither interviewed nor asked to do anything but I simply recorded the conversations I had with them. I randomly recorded my conver-

sations with the participants so that the conversations, I hope, would be more natural. In addition, I also tried to hide my recorder from my participants and I used a small microphone so that they could not see it physically. It was my understanding that, at some points, it would be difficult for me to speak naturally, but after a few times of recording everything ran naturally.

I managed to collect 4 hours of audio data. Realizing that it would take much time to transcribe all the data, I, then, decided to choose four conversations and transcribe about 15 minutes of each of the chosen conversations. To help me choose the conversation, I decided to transcribe the conversations in which I participated more. Then, I analysed the transcribed conversation to see the patterns that possibly show my identity construction. I used a computer program called *Express Scribe* to help me transcribe the data faster. Then, in order to make the transcription easier to read, I adapted some of transcription symbols introduced by Ochs (1979) and Du Bois et al (1993). Some of these transcription symbols are provided in the appendix 1.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I know that what I say during an interaction tells something about me and this will show multiple aspects of my identity. Bearing this nature inside my mind, I decided to contextualize those aspects (in the transcriptions) and chose to only look at my identity as graduate student. I then focused my attention to the aspects of my student identity when I analysed and coded the transcriptions.

From the data, I found that my interactions with other interlocutors seem to show the construction of my student identity. Particularly, the way I constructed, negotiated, and maintained this aspect of identity shows relevancy to the notions of “expert-novice”, co-construction, and legitimate peripheral participation. Due to the space limitation of this paper, only some of the examples of these constructs will be briefly provided and discussed below.

When I interact with my fellow students, I tend to construct identity as a student who has the same position with my peers. Interestingly, I, both consciously or unconsciously, expressed and shared the same feeling with him or her. For instance,

when my fellow student experienced difficulties with his or her project, I tended to pay attention to him or her and it seemed that I tried to tell them that I felt the same way as I was also a student. Please look at the following excerpt as an example of this construction.

Excerpt 1:

- 36 F: And I don't know (X X) uhmm we have to have fun (X X)  
when I first saw this morning
- 37 I mean this afternoon, what happened? She's she's freak-  
ing out
- 38 K: (Giggles) really (laughs)
- 39 F: Like ... no, I can see that you you're .. worrying something
- 40 K: Uhm I wasn't at first but I realized that the students  
they said they would do it didn't
- 41 come
- 42 F: Uh uh (noises) I know I know which is like me yesterday
- 43 K: I only get frustrated over something that I have no con-  
trol over
- 44 F: Ok, yeah you don't have control over it
- 45 K: No, I I don't have control [over]

As we can see, in line 36 F (this letter refers to me in the discussion of the findings) expresses his concern because his friend who seems to be worried about something. His friend (K) seems to be surprised that F captures her worries and she explains why she was worried (line 40); she was worried because the persons whom she was going to interview for her research did not show up and this can give difficulties for her research plan. Seemingly, F shows his understanding and indicates that the experience normally happens by saying *I know I know which like me yesterday*. F tells K that he was also worried when the person whom he wanted to interview did not come. I think this excerpt shows how F is trying to construct his identity as a fellow student who is trying to build intimate relationship. This construct is not solely done by F alone but K agrees to this construct since she let F know why she was worried. In other words, K is helping F constructs his identity as a caring fellow student. In this case, Ochs (1993) asserts that "the relation of language to social identity is not direct but rather *mediated* by interlocutors' understandings of conventions for doing particular social acts and stances ... (p. 289).

There are also times when F and his fellow students construct themselves as "experts" who seemingly have "more knowing" than others. Apparently, this construct among them creates some sorts of "competition" where both F and his inter-

locutors negotiate their “expertise”. The following excerpt shows this kind of construct.

Excerpt 2:

- 70 F: Right, hey why? Oh my goodness it's a lot  
 71 B: That's that's why I don't wanna give you this is too much  
 [same]  
 72 F: [Two papers?]  
 73 B: same thick  
 74 F: Same  
 75 B: Yeah, that's why I don't wanna give you  
 76 F: What? (with surprised intonation) this one is not an arti-  
 cle this is a book  
 77 B: It's an article  
 78 F: Book  
 79 B: It's an article in Applied Linguistic something in Lan-  
 guage and Society  
 80 F: From 145 to 204  
 81 B: Yeah, that's why I don't wanna give it to you  
 82 F: Which is 80 pages  
 83 K: (Laughs)  
 84 B: Yeah (laughs)  
 85 F: An article  
 86 B: (Giggles) so I decided not to give it to you  
 87 F: Hey let me see something  
 88 B: No, you cannot  
 89 F: why?  
 90 B: Because it's related to your SLA as well  
 91 F: But I'm doing it for the  
 92 B: You don't know you don't know [anything]  
 93 F: [for 6] 644  
 94 B: As you read you will relate it to the to the SLA [so]  
 95 F: [So] you don't you won't give me then. I'll find I'll find  
 it online te=ll tell me the title  
 96 B: No (giggles)

From line 70 to 75, F's interlocutor (B) is constructing himself as a student who “knows more”; F sees that B is holding an article and F wants to read it. But, B does not want to give it because he thinks it will be too much for F to read. In this construct, B is clearly constructing himself as a student who knows more about the article. Realizing that the article is very thick, F tries to challenge B by saying that it is a book. B, on other hand, insists that it is a thick article and because its thickness B refuses to let F reads it. In line 79, B shows his “expertise” when he indicates that he knows where the article is from. F, however, does not want to easily accept B's construction; he shows that he knows more by quoting the pages of the article (line 80-82) though he might not be correct. Interestingly, even B agrees to accept this construction (line 81), he does continue to tell F that it is not good for F to read the arti-



cle since it is related to F's another project (He said this because F was collecting data for his project in SLA class). Still showing his insistence, F assures B that he is going to use it for another class, not SLA (look at line 91-93). Because he knows that his friend is not going to give him the article, F shows his confidence that he can find a copy of the article online.

It is very interesting to look at the ways both interlocutors construct their identity as students. They both indicate a sense of "competition" to be the one who "knows more". Both interlocutors show their "expertise" by mentioning the characteristics of the article and relate them to their classes. One of the patterns we can draw from the interaction is both interlocutors actively participate and negotiate their identity as a student who knows more and this construct changes as they continue to interact. In regard to this changing construction, Jacoby and Gonzalez (1991) claim that "any relationship or interaction of individuals thus necessarily involves multiple asymmetries of knowing, which may be invoked in or relevant to a particular situated context (p. 152). In other words, both F and B in the above interaction display their knowing in regard to each other knowledge, or as Schegloff (1989) points out that expertise distribution in an ongoing interaction "has been seen as a jointly constructed achievement between participants" (as cited in Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991, p. 152).

When two or more interlocutors interact, they do not have to agree with each other's construction. This construction is also shown in the data where F has been telling about his final project but his friend T does not seem to be supportive to his construction. Instead, T shifts the topic to his own project. Please pay attention to the following excerpt,

Excerpt 3:

99 F: So, for one month starting yesterday starting from yesterday until sometime in April  
 100 T: Hu uh  
 101 F: Which is ... quite a while  
 102 T: Yeah  
 103 B: Only a month  
 104 F: And the thing is I don't know what I'm doing yet  
 105 T: Oh  
 106 F: So, just just record collect the data and put in the computer and that's it. We don't even  
 107 we don't even listen to it

108 B: No, we cannot listen to that  
 109 T: I can't understand the article Basic Variety uhm  
 110 F: You don't understand [basic variety?]  
 111 T: [Laughs] I cannot understand  
 112 B: Hold on  
 113 F: Hey hey.. you can do  
 114 B: Is it possible to find other books  
 115 T: Yeah  
 116 B: That talking about Basic Variety?  
 117 T: I found something  
 118 B: Ok  
 119 F: Or you can you can search from the databases

From lines 99 to 108, F and B are eagerly discussing and talking about their final project to T, and imply to T that their research project is somewhat difficult to carry out because it needs a lot of work and time. During this construction, T does not respond enthusiastically and he simply nods or gives some filler such as *hu uh* and *yeah*. When T suddenly gets his chance to speak, he shifts the topic of the conversation to his own research (line 109) where he mentions his research topic (the Basic Variety) is also difficult to understand. Upon hearing this, both F and B shift to the topic. However, F and B still show that they know how to handle with T problems. They suggest T to look for other additional sources. In line 114, B is suggesting that T find other books and F, on the other hand, suggests even more specific thing to do (search from the databases). Even all interlocutors sometimes show their divergence to each other and try to construct their "more knowing", they successfully construct their identity as students who know how to do research. It seems that this construction is in accordance with Jacoby & Ochs' (1995) assertion that the co-construction of an identity "does not necessarily entail *affiliative* or supportive interaction" (p. 171). The interlocutors may agree or disagree with one another's construction. In this case, Jacoby and Gonzales (1991) also imply that someone's identities as "expert" and "novice" are constructed in relation to his or her interlocutors.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the above interactions show their relevance to the notions of "expert-novice", co-construction, and legitimate peripheral participation where the interlocutors are actively negotiating their identities as they try to claim their right to speak. As Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that in order to get fully involved in a

community of practice, interlocutors need to gain wider access to an on-going activities so that they can easily get acknowledgement from the “old-timers” of the community.

As the case of “expert-novice” interaction, F and his other interlocutors know how to get chance to talk and claim their “expertise”; this, of course, is enabled by the contributions of others. In this case, Jacoby and Gonzales (1991) write that “whether and utterance is understood to momentarily constitute a recipient as novice or as complementary expert may thus depend on the relevance of particular interaction contexts and particular combinations of participants” (p. 154).

For the context of language learning and teaching, the concept of identity is becoming even more complex nowadays. Digital technologies, for example, can influence a language learner’s identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Students may construct their “more knowing” identity if they believe that they can get more or updated information from online resources than their teachers and peers do. Likewise, the student can resist from participating in teaching-learning activities if he or she sees those activities jeopardize or threaten his or her very identity. Therefore, language teachers need to be aware of multiple identities that students may have in order to help them participate in any teaching-learning activities that will eventually develop their language proficiency.

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## APPENDIX

### Transcription Symbols

Some of the transcription symbols I present below were used when I transcribed the audio data. These transcription symbols were derived from Ochs (1979) and Du Bois et al. (1993).

- Letter “B”, “D”, etc are pseudonyms to people involving in the interaction
- Double brackets [ ] identify overlaps
- Angle brackets with letter X, <X X> suggests the uncertain quantity
- Three dots (...) refer to long pauses
- Two dots (..) refer to short pauses.