

# **CLASSROOM IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING**

## **ABSTRACT**

Research on identity construction by second language learners has grown exponentially during recent decades. This important work has clear implications for a reconceptualisation and revalorisation of the use of literary texts in the language classroom, since literature is concerned par excellence with the construction and exploration of identities. In this paper, I examine the theoretical parameters underlying these hitherto disparate strands of applied linguistic investigation, and consider possible approaches to bringing them more closely together, to their mutual benefit.

## **1 TRAJECTORIES OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

It has long been realised that conceptualisations of SLA are highly metaphorical in character: language students and their teachers may see the learning process in terms of play, work, discovery, travel, consumption, construction, interaction, negotiation or many other things (apWilliams 1984). It is also a matter of common experience that instruction works best where learners' and teachers' metaphors are in harmony (Anderssen 2001): game-like practice activities are frequently resisted by students who conceptualise language learning as a matter of hard work, while conversely, students who feel that a language is learnt mainly through conversational interaction tend not to take kindly to the systematic study of language forms.

A recent study in this area (Carruthers et al. 2008) has looked at three different conceptual frameworks (CFs) which are prevalent in current theorising about instructed SLA, with a view to comparing their possible impact on learners' achievement. While such comparisons are notoriously resistant to quantitative treatment, they can none the less throw up interesting results which may suggest profitable directions for more rigorous further enquiry. The following is an informal outline account of the study; readers who would like detailed information are referred to Carruthers et al.'s paper.

Forty-eight lower-intermediate learners of English were divided into three groups on the basis of a preliminary questionnaire and interview, whose purpose was to ascertain whether their thinking about language learning tended to favour a dynamic-topological conceptual framework, a narrative-identity framework, or an integrated-constructional framework (see below). Each group was assigned to a team of teachers whose conceptualisation of language learning corresponded, broadly speaking, to that prevalent in the group. Groups were each given three two-hour orientation sessions whose purpose was to explore and elaborate the key ideas of the relevant CF, and to consolidate the group's positive stance vis-à-vis the framework. Students then received 24 hours of appropriately designed CF-congruent instruction, spread over six weeks. A control group was given 30 hours of conventional language lessons. Pre- and post-tests were administered; these were identical for all four groups.

### **CF1: dynamic-topological**

In this framework, learning is conceived of primarily as a dynamic progress along a constantly evolving complex of ecological trajectories (Brik and Tajin 2005). The context and process of learning (and indeed of all communication) are seen as being in a continual

state of flux, analogous to the circulation of liquids or gases in the physical world, but more appropriately modelled in an abstract phase space using concepts from sociological telemetry, topology, four-dimensional fluid dynamics, ballistics and other relevant disciplines (Wasserspeier and Gargolla 2007a, b). Learners in the CF1 group were encouraged throughout the study to conceptualise their 'journeys' through the semiotic fluid in visual terms, constructing maps of their trajectories first in two or three dimensions, and then later with the aid of möbius strips, klein bottles, nesting toroids and other dimensionally indeterminate matrices. Several students produced impressive work; one indeed gained a prize from a major art foundation for an Escher-like wallpaper pattern showing herself and her fellow-students trapped in an eddy under a morphosyntactic waterfall.

### **CF2: narrative-identity**

Scholars who espouse this framework concur in seeing the modern self as a conglomeration of mutually permeating and reinforcing narratives, in which centrifugal and centripetal discursive dynamics contribute to the formation of shifting multiple identities (Lametta, Spekulatorius and Glühwein 2006). The language-learning context necessarily requires the learner to confront, negotiate, situate and integrate further multiple identities which may be in conflict both with each other and with those rooted in earlier narratives (Carbonara 2008). Students in the CF2 group took part in a series of game-like activities in which they were given multiple ID cards (one or more for each sociolinguistic macrocontext) and required to act out scenarios designed to foster an ethnographic exploration of their individual and social language learning, seen primarily in terms of narrative-identity construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. The insights gained from this work are well exemplified in a comment made by one of the students towards the end of the study: "In the pub I am Chiquita and I can say 'give me kiss, darling', in Mr Gallbone's office I am Miss Carambo and I cannot say 'give me kiss, darling'." Problems were few, though the researchers report one case of identity theft which deprived the student in question of all but two of his personae, leaving him as 1) an Inuit shaman and 2) a shoplifter named Agnes, about whom little information could be gleaned beyond the fact that she had a pet crocodile.

### **CF3: integrated constructional**

The powerful analytical tools developed in connection with recent work on Construction Grammar are increasingly being extended beyond the lexico-syntactic domain to handle discursive-rhetorical dimensions of communication, enabling researchers for the first time to bring under one conceptual roof the structural features of both the linguistic and the non-linguistic constituents of interactive discourse. It was the ground-breaking realisation by von Muesli (2005) that a remark about the weather, a conversation about the weather, and the act of talking about the weather are *all* examples of constructions, and can be handled jointly by an integrated system of analytical categories, that effectively set the stage for current work in this area. The framework, though complex, is intuitively compelling, and corresponds well to the naive instinct of many learners and teachers that, as FitzRabitt (1974) put it many years ago, 'Actually, everything is pretty much the same'. Students in this group followed a programme in which they 1) interacted in simple communicative tasks, 2) worked in groups to reconstitute and transcribe their interactions, 3) identified and analysed the constructions used, and finally 4) examined the roles that these constructions play in a multi-dimensional functional-cognitive space, establishing how individual linguistic features can be construed as micro-systems embedded in larger discursal and interactive edifices in whose architecture the speakers themselves, and their ongoing interactions as they repeatedly co-construct their reciprocal positioning, are constitutive structural elements.

## Findings

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the post-test results were consistent with Kant's characterisation of the nature of scholarly activity in *Prolegomena* VI-2: 'Was man dreinsteckt, das zieht man natürlich wieder raus' (roughly: 'One gets out what one puts in'). The CF1 group did somewhat better than the others at diagramming information-flow and making origami representations of aspect- and time-relations. CF2 subjects scored particularly well on measures relating to story-telling and lying. The CF3 students showed impressive progress in social integration, which the researchers attribute to the fact that they spent a great deal of time in discussion trying to decide what a construction was. Overall, however, no significant difference was observed in the total scores of the three experimental groups. The control group, for reasons which are unclear, did substantially better on those components of the test which measured improvement in language knowledge and skills.

## 2 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

It follows from the findings outlined above that if language learning is an 'epiphenomenon of communicative interaction' (Smith & Halibut 2003: iv), then the nature of that interaction must necessarily play a central role in determining learning outcomes. One key parameter, widely discussed since Otto Gabalunzie's seminal paper (1984), is that of transparency. Broadly speaking, the more clearly specified and objectively interpretable the input to which learners are exposed, the more narrowly their possible responses are constrained. Conversely, the more the input lends itself to multiple interpretations, and the less learners are in a position to adjudicate between such interpretations, the broader their response-potential. In other words, input transparency is inversely proportional to communicative freedom, without which there is no scope for stretched output and consequent interlanguage restructuring (Gummiband & Carambo 1998). At one extreme, where the input consists primarily of the highly artificial and over-specified discourse samples found in the typical language coursebook, learner output 'may effectively be reduced to nothing more than repetitive crypto-regurgitation' (Frikadeller 2003: 19, 23, 26, 42, 89, 121, 342, 706). At the other end of the scale, well-chosen literary texts can provide precisely the level of input subjectivity which, by fostering maximally unconstrained output, offers optimal potential for interlanguage development.

Every poem is a dialogue to which the reader is invited to bring at least as much as the writer. When the poet says that the evening mist rising from the fields reminds him of lost love, the reader enriches the poem with a memory of city bus stops in April. When the poet describes his early deflowering in a Worcestershire cowshed, the reader, brought face to face with his unbearable failure to pay off his mortgage, goes and hangs himself. Truly, the artist bears a heavy responsibility. (Bunnahabhain 1993: 960)

Drama, with its multiple levels of discourse, is particularly rich in its provision of opportunities for individual interpretation, as Arapaho & Bejasus argue persuasively in their discussion of *Hamlet* (2001: 19).

The play's centre – its 'still turning point' – is the moment when Polonius asks 'What do you read, my Lord?' and Hamlet replies 'Words, words, words'. Here we have the clearest possible statement of the hyperdimensionality of drama: of the instantiation

of its *logos* at one and the same time in a representation of an action, the mimetic process which embodies that representation, the text which encodes that process, and the intersecting reflections and refractions of all three. There are indeed at this point no less than five superimposed discourses: Polonius' internalisation of his own utterance, Hamlet's internalisation of Polonius' utterance, Hamlet's internalisation of his reply, Polonius's internalisation of Hamlet's reply, and our, the eavesdroppers', distinct and separately valid internalisations of the verbal interaction. Now, with Polonius' multiply ambiguous response: 'What is the matter, my Lord?', ...

In responding to literary texts, the language learner in fact enjoys a unique advantage (Vachercher 2000). Unconstrained by built-in linguistic preconceptions, a non-native reader is open to interpretations which pass the native speaker by, and which can enhance the intrinsic opacity of a text in rich and unpredictable ways. Some striking examples are reported by Pinbottom (2003) in his account of an action research project carried out with a class of Samoyedic bus conductors, during which his 15 intermediate learners worked through a range of English classics. One of Pinbottom's subjects, for instance, perceived the 'two vast and trunkless legs' of Shelley's Ozymandias as belonging to an obese traveller named Stone who had lost his luggage. (How much more productive this response is, as a platform for task-based discussion or creative writing, than the standard 'Booking a hotel room' or 'At the lost property office' scenario.) Another student, confusing Ophelia with Othello, produced a novel and gripping interpretation of Hamlet which was further enhanced by her belief that her tutor's mention of the hero's 'tragic flaw' referred to the flagstones in the Elsinore chapel.

The linguistic creativity often manifested in literary texts also serves to liberate learners from the notion that there are fixed 'norms' on which their own production must converge. As corpus research is making increasingly clear (Petersilie *et al* 2005), the dividing line between formulaic and constructed language is neither clearly defined nor static, and strategic phraseological competence can be greatly enhanced by appropriate consciousness-raising activities. Shadrach and his colleagues (2007) report interesting results from a study in this area, in which they took Shakespeare's creative imagery as a platform for metaphor-generation by advanced non-native-speaking accountancy students. Some of their subjects' more valuable contributions to the English phraseological lexicon included the expressions *to nail one's trousers to the mast, as happy as a yoghurt pot, to jump off the rainbow, wind-surfing in the bath* and *she sneezed like a trooper*.

Although there is general agreement on the value of having a significant opacity quotient in input material, opinions on the question of total incomprehensibility are somewhat divided. While texts which cannot be understood at all offer maximum scope for individualised personal response, the exclusive study of such material is seen by some scholars as having certain disadvantages, well summarised by Zippo (2000). One is the fact that learners' processing of the input may move them towards the development of idiosyncratic and impenetrable 'litlects' (Pif 1998; see also Swan & Walter 1982 for a similar problem arising in other circumstances). On the other hand, as Angst & LaTrouille point out (2004), the 'referential white-out' characteristic of incomprehensible texts renders them ideal as vehicles for exploring aspects of morphosyntax. Dylan Thomas's work, for instance, can usefully be mined for instances of adverb formation:

Altarwise by owl light in the halfway house  
the gentleman lay graveward with his furies

or *-ing* forms:

On field and sand  
The twelve triangles of the cherub wind  
Engraving going.

Article use, too, can be profitably studied in maximally opaque texts. Consider for example the following well-known lines from Eliot's *Burnt Norton*:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud  
clot the bedded axle tree.  
The trilling wire in the blood  
sings below inveterate scars  
appeasing long-forgotten wars.

Here the poet uses the definite article – the grammatical signal that interlocutors are on common referential ground – as a way of counterfeiting shared experience, subliminally fooling the reader into believing that he or she knows just what mud and axle-tree, which trilling wire and whose blood are under discussion. Language learners, of course, are chronically in the position of having to pretend that they are on common ground with their speech partners, when in fact they may have no idea at all of what is being talked about. To discover that one of the most eminent of twentieth century poets operates on precisely the same lines as they do (and furthermore, to identify at last a practical use for the definite article) is enormously empowering.

Conventional approaches to teaching can easily give learners a negative view of the gap between their own private, intramental language worlds, and the social, intermental interpretations and uses sanctioned by native speakers. All too often they are told that they have 'misunderstood' what they hear or read, or are made to feel inferior because their own utterances are interpreted in varied and contradictory ways by their interlocutors. Literature-based language work can help learners to see the communicative nexus in a different and altogether more positive light. Through study of this kind they come to realise that they are in principle in exactly the same position as other language users, from the supermarket shelf stacker to the greatest names in the history of literature. They belong by right, that is to say, to a vast linguistic and cultural community, no two members of which understand, or are understood, in the same way, to the extent indeed that they understand anything at all. Literature, as one of Shadrach *et al*'s subjects might have put it, is a level golf course.

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