

A Critical Review of 'Learning Difficulty and Learner Identity: A Symbiotic Relationship' by Eliana Hirano (2009)

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Abstract

In order to develop effective teaching methods and techniques, foreign language teachers have paid great attention to the individual differences of language learners. As Oxford and Ehrman (1992:188) suggest, to provide the most helpful instruction, teachers of the second language should identify and comprehend learners' significant individual differences. During this process, every time language learners learn or use the second language, they are engaged in the construction of their learner identity (Norton and Toohey 2001). Learners' identity has been considered as an important factor since it can produce magnificent effects on both the teachers' teaching practice and the students' outcomes (Maftoon, Sarem and Hamidi, 2012:1161). Research related to the construction of language learners' identity has covered a wide range of aspects such as foreign language aptitude (Skehan 1998), cognitive and learning style (Keefe and Perrell 1990) as well as motivation and self-motivation (Clement and Gardner, 2001). However, it is important to remember that once a learner's identity is formed, it is not invariable throughout his/her learning process. Actually, language learners' identity is multiple and subject to change. (Maftoon, Sarem and Hamidi 2012:1161). Although much research related to the factors that affect learner identity has been carried out and many relevant arguments have been presented, there is still much to be explored in respect of the construction, transformation and function of learner identity. To further the investigation on this issue, the article Learning Difficulty and Learner Identity: a Symbiotic Relationship, written by Eliana Hirano (2009), focuses on a case study concerning learner identity and aims to find evidence to observe the potential relationship between learner identity and learning difficulty.

Keywords

Critical review, Learner identity, Learning difficulty, Individual differences.

1. Introduction

In the article Learning Difficulty and Learner Identity: a Symbiotic Relationship, Hirano (2009) conducted a case study with an adult English learner to provide evidence for her standpoint: there is a symbiotic relationship between learning difficulty and learner identity. Furthermore, Hirano (2009) attempted to offer teachers some optimistic and effective teaching tips based on her teaching experience and her student's feedback.

In this article, Hirano (2009) proposes that a learner's learning difficulty could be affected by how he/she perceives himself/herself. In turn, the learner's identity could be easily influenced by learning difficulty. Be different from the concepts of individual differences that see the difference as innate to the individual, the concept Hirano (2009) referred to in the article attempts to emphasize the importance of the relationship between the individual and the context. According to Duff and Uchida, identity is 'co-constructed, negotiated, and transformed on an ongoing basis by means of language' (1997: 452). Also, drawing on the work of Williams

and Burden (1997:7), Hirano (2009) argues that teachers could help every learner to be capable of learning a foreign language.

In order to support her standpoint, Hirano (2009) carried out a longitudinal case study in which she worked as both a researcher and a teacher simultaneously. The only participant in the case study is her student, Junior, who has learned English for 12 years but still perceives himself as not good at learning English. According to Hirano (2009), Junior began to see himself as a poor language learner since sixth Grade when his main objective of learning English was to produce high grades in the exam, which is a situation he resented from that time. As a result, Junior's perception of himself as a poor English learner seemed to have led to the formation of his negative learner identity which in turn affected his behaviour in the classroom and the confidence in learning English. In the case study, Hirano (2009) collected data by three means: interactions in classroom, planned and unplanned interviews with the participant and learner and teacher diaries. The process of data collection spanned one year.

Before the study began, Hirano (2009) and her student had already been working together for a year during which Hirano's (2009) mainly focus was on the student's individual characteristics. In that year, Hirano (2009) tried several means to improve Junior's English, such as teaching materials related to his hobbies and repeating the same teaching activity, but all failed in the end. Therefore, Hirano (2009) reached a conclusion that it is important to use a proper pedagogical method to help Junior become aware of his progress and be confident in English so that he could change his learner identity. Therefore, in the case study, Hirano (2009) makes the interviews more frequent to record Junior's learning status constantly. On the other hand, to help Junior cultivate his awareness of his learning, a brief oral interaction is added in each class. Furthermore, Hirano (2009) shifts her methodological intervention and teaching key point in the class to help Junior cultivate his confidence in learning English. With these approaches, gradually, the student started to develop his confidence in learning English and gradually started to consider English as an easy language to learn. As the study progressed, he tended to regard himself as a person who could use English to deal with some problems in his daily life.

The findings of Hirano's (2009) study can be categorized into three aspects: (1) a student's experience of learning English can produce effects on the construction of his/her identity; (2) a student's identity and his/her learning difficulty can affect each other; (3) appropriate teaching methods can boost the transformation of one's learner identity.

From the above study, Hirano (2009) further concluded that learning difficulty is just 'the tip of an iceberg'. It would be unsuccessful and fruitless if teachers 'try to alter just the tip'. However, by focusing on transforming the learner identity, 'the massive submerged part of the iceberg', by providing methodological practices which could cultivate learners' sense of competence, it would be possible to reconstruct learners' identity.

2. Evaluation

There is much that is good in this article. The main advantage of this article lies in that it proposes a clear argument which is further explained by some useful theories and proved by a specified case study in a well-organized way. Every constituent part in the article is linked coherently and the separate content in each part is presented in a logical way. To begin with, to clarify and explain the thesis statement of the article, the theories related to learning difficulty and learner identity that the writer selects are closely related to the main topic. On the other hand, in different phases of the case study, different aims and procedures have been explained in specific details. In this way, the purpose as well as the process of the case study become very clear to the readers. Also, the case study is conducted under a very specific circumstance with only one participant. Under such circumstance, the improvement of the learner's learning

difficulty and the transformation of the learner's identity are studied and examined at great length, which adds more persuasion to the case study and the writer's standpoint.

However, it is when one comes to look in detail at the content of this article that some possible drawbacks begin to creep in. According to Allwright and Bailey (1991: 45), 'in any discipline, concerns for quality control are characteristics of an emerging or established sense of professionalism'. However, the validity and professionalism of Hirano's (2009) study might be doubted considering the design limitations of the case study. Firstly, to guarantee that the conclusion drawn from a study is objective and impersonal, the researcher in the study should be an examiner and supervisor during the process of the research. Nevertheless, Hirano (2009) herself participated in this study as both a teacher and a researcher. Under this condition, the procedure and the result drawn by her may not be so objective and stable. Secondly, since the case study is heavily dependent on only one participant and the particular teaching and learning environment, it may be possible that the results would be different if she conducted the study with other participants in other contexts.

Another potential flaw of this article lies in the methods of data collection employed in the case study. The concern for consistency is of great importance throughout the research process (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 46). It is true that in the case study several instruments have been used to collect the data such as interactions in classroom and learner and teacher diaries. However, a kind of teaching and learning activity as classroom interaction is, its aim is to arouse and motivate students during the lesson. Based on this feature, the process and content of the classroom interaction is difficult to control or record. In this way, the consistency and stability of the data that the writer collected from the classroom interaction could hardly be guaranteed. Additionally, what matters significantly in the process of data collection is the reliability of the process (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 46). As planned and impromptu interviews are employed as instruments to collect the data, there should be a clear and detailed elaboration about the content of the interview such as the questions that has been asked, the participant's answers as well as their feedback to the interviews. However, there is no detailed explanation about what each interview is about and what problems have been put forward or solved during and after the interview. In this case, readers will be confused or even doubtful about the content and reliability of this data collection method.

The last potential reservation in this article lies in its lack of credibility and generalizability. Norton (1997) considers the influence that learners' identity exert on their learning psychology and learning outcomes different from person to person. Despite the fact that the complex relationship between a student's difficulty in learning English and his identity as a learner is analysed in detail in the case study. Still only one participant's experience is not strong and persuasive enough to demonstrate that the relationship between these two factors is necessary or inevitable. Also, the potential relationship between learner identity and learning difficulty could not be explained deeply enough by the findings of Hirano's (2009) study. As learners bring individual learning habits and characteristics to the learning process (Williams and Burden 1997:88), which is impossible to be copied or regulated. The particular example and the conclusion drawn from it in this article cannot be generalised or applied to other situations (Allwright and Bailey 1991:48). Under such circumstance, the findings of this study may be inapplicable in other contexts, which perhaps suggests the lack of generalizability of the case study in Hirano's (2009) article.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, this review summarized and evaluated Eliana Hirano's (2009) article Learning Difficulty and Learner Identity: a Symbiotic Relationship. In the article, a comprehensible evidence concerning learner difficulty and individual differences of language learners is

provided. Also, the potential relationship between learner identity and learning difficulty is stated and explained clearly in detail. However, in the article, the author does not completely succeed in providing a persuasive and reliable enough interpretation about the potentially symbiotic relationship between learning difficulty and learner identity. The design of the case study is not comprehensive and deep enough in terms of the role the writer plays in the study and the number of participants. Also, the content and process of the data collection is occasionally incomplete and shaky. Furthermore, there are some possible flaws in terms of the credibility and generalizability of the study. But, despite the above possible weak points, Hirano's (2009) study remains instrumental in the further exploration of the construction, transformation and function of learner identity, particularly when it comes to the relationship between learning difficulty and individual differences of language learner.

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