

Negotiating Identity as a Beginning Foreign Language Learner

Erin Kearney

University of Pennsylvania

This paper discusses an exploratory study of adult language learner identity in a beginning-level French class at an American university. Through the collection of ethnographic field notes and interviews over the course of one semester, a rich picture emerges of adult learners at the start of the language learning process, supporting recent claims in second language acquisition (SLA) research that learners must be seen as individuals, at once exposed to the regularity of language and to its dynamic and social potential. This work seeks to identify some of the salient facets of identity for a specific group of adults in the hope of contributing to a broader and more detailed account of foreign language learner identity.

Introduction

By 1993 adult students accounted for 41% of undergraduate enrollment in universities in America (Kasworm 1993: 164), and this does not even include those adults who already hold undergraduate degrees and return to take courses for other reasons. The adult student population, generally defined as those students aged 25 or older, is increasingly important to American university life, and while some research has been conducted concerning the ways adults learn (Graham 1998; Freilino & Hummel 1985; Richardson & King 1998; Shoukat & Shoukat 1996), adult learners' experiences with learning foreign languages in a classroom setting have not been extensively studied in a way that highlights language learning as social practice.

In this paper, identity is taken up as a complex individual factor in order to illuminate how adult learners engage with the process of language learning in an introductory French course. While individual factors such as age, previous language learning experience, attitude and many others have been studied in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), identity as an overarching factor brings together numerous issues and may offer a more accurate picture of how individuals deal with learning a second language. If understanding differential learning

outcomes is a central focus of SLA research, we must broaden our investigations to recognize the very social nature of language learning and begin to look at learner identity as a complex individual factor.

Through the presentation of three language learner identity narratives this paper hopes to identify some salient facets of identity for a particular group of adult learners and to begin to illustrate the complex ways that learner identity is perceived and enacted by individual students. I begin with a discussion of theories of identity and language that are relevant to the classroom language-learning context. With this framework in place, I turn to methodological issues and to interpretation of the data collected for the study. Finally, I offer some reflections on the implications of this work and avenues for further inquiry into language learner identity.

Theories of Language and Identity

This study began with broad, exploratory research questions:

1. What evidence is there that adult students are forming a second language learner identity in a beginning level French class?
2. What are the resources that learners draw upon in navigating both the social and academic aspects of the language classroom?

To begin to address these questions, though, we must have an understanding of what precisely is meant by identity and the ways that it is enacted.

SLA and Social Constructivism

When speaking about second language acquisition, we may consider both the stable, regular elements of language and the creative and dynamic potential that language offers to users. Many believe that because the field grew out of psycholinguistics and because researchers wanted to maintain a certain level of "objectivity," research in SLA has tended to follow more traditional and "scientific" methodologies and analyses (Lantolf 1996). In recent years, however, the field of second language acquisition has increasingly adopted more qualitative methods and new frames of analysis, in large part because of the ascendance of social constructivism and socio-cultural approaches to the study of language learning. So instead of speaking of a generalized set of processes and constructs – like input, output, interaction and negotiation of meaning – that are believed to influence every language learner, or of discrete entities which account for differential learner outcomes – like motivation, age, and previous language learning experiences – there has been heightened attention to the socially-constructed nature of language learning and to the effects on individual learners.

To illustrate this point a bit further, consider the following metaphor

that Atkinson (2002: 525) offers to describe the learner's place in mainstream SLA research:

Like the solitary cactus, the learner in mainstream SLA research seems to sit in the middle of a lonely scene, and, like the cactus, the learner seems to wait there for life-giving sustenance (or at least its triggering mechanism) – input – to come pouring in. At that point the real action begins, and we watch the learner miraculously grow and change.

While this view of language acquisition may still be present in mainstream SLA research, many other approaches have emerged which employ less quantitative or conventionally "scientific" methods, replacing them with a more nuanced account of how individual learners engage with both the academic and social aspects of language learning. Research on identity as an individual factor can achieve this kind of account because while identity may include any number of factors which have previously been studied as discrete variables, it expands our view of learners by closely analyzing the way they socially construct facets of identity and define and redefine themselves over time. The way that learners position themselves in the language classroom and the resources they rely on in doing so can be examined then in a broader way than is possible when focusing on any single pre-determined and static variable. Looking at any single factor for a learner does not adequately describe his or her engagement with learning a new language and many researchers stress that inquiry into the more social aspects of language learning can complement the great volume of work that already focuses on the more systematic and stable elements of language acquisition (Atkinson 2002; Lantolf 1996; McGroarty 1998; Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000).¹

This shift in the field of SLA will, according to McGroarty (1998), bring out the "subjective aspects of the language learning experience" (598). One of the major issues is then learner identity since, as McGroarty writes, constructivist approaches "are marked by heightened attention to agency and subjectivity, to the generation and interpretation of meaning, and to the constant interplay between individual and group activity" (591). As we will see in the present study, a focus on language learning as a social practice provides a complex view of the language learner.

Social constructivism presents identity as multi-faceted, dynamic and interactionally produced and negotiated. The basic premise of a constructivist stance is that language and thought are inextricably linked and

¹Metaphors for language learning abound in SLA and Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) describe a participation metaphor (PM) and an acquisition metaphor (AM) for language learning, highlighting the tendency for SLA researchers to focus on the AM and not the PM (155-6). They call for a shift in SLA "from language structure to language use in context, and to the issues of affiliation and belonging" (2000: 156) and claim that "AM focuses on the individual mind and the internalization of knowledge, which is crucial for the study of the what in SLA, while PM stresses contextualization and engagement with others in its attempts to investigate the how" (2000: 156).

when we use words, we are reflecting our private selves and we assess others through our own language frames. In this way language and identity are mutually constitutive or reciprocally related in that language supplies the means for expressing identity and identity, in turn, "guide[s] ways in which individuals use linguistic resources to index their identities and to evaluate the use of linguistic resources by others" (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004: 14). Pomerantz (2001), who studied university-level learners of Spanish, describes how language (form) and identity (meaning) are related in the instant of interaction and over longer stretches of time:

...[T]he meaning of a particular linguistic form does not reside within the form itself, but rather emerges over the course of a verbal encounter. People know what utterances mean because over time they come to associate certain situational or indexical meaning with certain linguistic forms. (276)

To give a simple example, if a student were to take on teacher-type talk by instructing, correcting and evaluating when interacting with other students, that student might become positioned over time as helpful or annoying depending on the norms of the particular classroom.

The notion that there exists a certain set of individual factors that will lead to success in language learning obscures the reality that language learners are successful or unsuccessful for many diverse reasons. While it may be generally true that age, previous language study or attitude are related to acquisition outcomes, learners exist as some combination of myriad individual factors and treating them as such may yield a more clear view of them. Pomerantz's (2001) work demonstrates very clearly that in considering language learners we must go beyond the limited view that there are such things as "good" or "bad" language learners and specific individual factors attached to these labels.

Positioning, Negotiating and Narratives

Within this broad framework of social constructivism and identity, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) offer some further clarification of how identity is enacted. They recognize positioning as an important factor in the negotiation of identities. Negotiation of identities as they see it is "an interplay between reflective positioning, i.e. self-representation, and interactive positioning, whereby others attempt to position or reposition particular individuals or groups" (20). In the present study, both types of positioning are evident. Furthermore, Pavlenko and Blackledge believe that poststructuralist philosophy has moved the study of identity beyond a simple focus on one aspect of identity such as race, gender or social class to a more complex view of identity. Essential to their argument is the notion of narrative because it "gives our perspective a diachronic

dimension" (18). Instead of identities existing as a set of "discourse options" they are narratives that exist in the past, present and future (19). So while we may speak of identity in terms of its situated and more enduring forms, the situation is actually more complex, "with individuals continuously involved in the production of selves, positioning of others, revision of identity narratives, and creation of new ones which valorize new modes of being and belonging" (19).

In her longitudinal work, Kinginger (2004) demonstrates how a reconceptualization of language learner identity as multi-faceted, socially constructed and negotiated can enhance our understanding of the language learning process and of language learners themselves. Her work traces the experiences of Alice, a student of French whose identity is continuously transformed while studying the language at her home university in the U.S. and in Canada and France while participating in a study abroad program. Drawing on diary entries and interviews, Kinginger (2004) describes four years of Alice's language learning story, emphasizing that Alice's desire for access to new social networks was one integral piece of defining her identity both as a language learner and a person:

Her story helps to elucidate the importance of personal history, imagination, and desire in the organization of lived experience related to foreign language learning. The story also brings into focus the significance of access to social networks, or of marginality within such networks, in the process of negotiating and (re)constructing a coherent and satisfying identity. (219-220)

While Alice faced many challenges and hardships in the pursuit of a more satisfying identity, she emerged from the experience as a transformed individual. Kinginger (2004) points out that for Alice, and for many other language learners, the functional approach to language learning that is adopted by many institutions does not necessarily match up with the goals of learners to access new social worlds. Most importantly, Kinginger writes,

[Alice's story] proposes that the categories emerging from research on language learning as social practice are relevant to the foreign language field. Foreign language learners are people too; people whose history, dispositions toward learning, access to sociocultural worlds, participation, and imagination together shape the qualities of their achievements. (241)

It is in the close analysis of identity that we are able to understand how learners engage with the process of language learning and we may be able to evaluate how current approaches to teaching language may be improved in taking up such investigations of learner identity.

In her study of adult immigrant language learners in Canada, Norton (2000) has also taken up investigation of adult language learner identity. Her work centers on identity narratives and makes important contributions to our understanding of language learner identity by advancing "investment" as an essential element of language learning. She writes:

If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. [...] The notion of investment [...] conceives of the language learner as having a complex social history and multiple desires. The notion presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Thus an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space. (10-11)

Access to resources, both material and symbolic, is presented as the "return" on investment in language learning. But there is no reason to exclude in our discussions of learner identity the resources that learners have at their disposal at the start of the language learning process. It is in fact the shaping and reshaping of both pre-existing and novel resources that characterize the identity building process that Norton describes.

The work of Pomerantz (2001), Kinginger (2004), Norton (2000) and others represents a movement in the field of SLA toward a transformed view of the language learner. Learner identity narratives allow us to consider learners as whole people and offer insight into the complex ways that learners construct and reshape their identities over time. The data presented below are meant to contribute to this transformed view, specifically for adult learners at the start of the language learning process.

Methods

Identity so far has been considered theoretically, but uncovering something as complex and ever-changing as identity requires detailed and systematic methods. Hansen and Liu (1997) write that "because social identity is a dynamic phenomenon, it should be studied with a methodology that is dynamic both in philosophy and in practice" (573). They also assert that "social identity is context dependant" (574). For the present study ethnographic methods of data collection seemed to offer the kind of detail that is necessary to capture context as it changes over time and offered the in-depth and reflexive stance that Hansen and Liu support. The main sources of ethnographic data for this study are 17 sets

of field notes, nine interviews, examples of student work, documents related to the course and two questionnaires.² The interviews³ were conducted for the last half of the semester to elicit learner perspectives and attitudes concerning their experiences with learning French in this class.

Whether tangible or intangible, learners' efforts to engage with the language learning process seemed to fall into a larger category of resources and these resources served as the analytical framework for examining positioning and identity. Resources are those tools, strategies or traits, material or symbolic, that learners drew upon to manage their language learning and their roles as language learners. The resources cited in the present study can largely be characterized as pre-existing; that is, students relied on resources they brought with them to the classroom in managing their language learning. This is a logical result of the context under consideration. Because learners were at the start of the language learning process and because they were not living in the target-language culture as Norton's subjects were, students did not gain cultural capital in the larger French-speaking world through use of their new linguistic abilities. Rather, the return on their investment in language learning lays in the transformations that occurred in their identities as they sought to find their place in a particular classroom environment. Resources are related to identity formation and transformation in that they allow learners to position themselves and others in particular ways. Reliance on a resource is reflected in the way learners speak and act and over time, consistent reliance on a resource serves to position a learner in relation to the other students in the class, the instructor and the language learning process itself. However, even though particular learners may be discussed below as performing certain aspects of identity at certain times or as adopting particular stances consistently over time, their identities would be more fully understood as narratives that encompass several temporal dimensions and that are constantly undergoing change. Resources then serve as an inroad in investigating positioning and by extension, identity.

² Two questionnaires were distributed for this study. One was distributed at the beginning of the semester and sought to elicit basic information about students and their attitudes concerning language learning (See Appendix A) and the other was circulated to adult participants after the semester had ended to elicit their perspectives on participating in the study.

³ Briggs (1986) has pointed out that the research interview itself has not yet been adequately examined and is not seen as a communicative event in its own right with properties all its own. Under current practice, Briggs writes, "What is said is seen as a reflection of what is 'out there' rather than as an interpretation which is jointly produced by interviewer and respondent" (3). A close discourse analysis of any of the nine interviews conducted for this study would likely provide much more information on the interactionally-constructed identities of these learners.

Participants and Context

The way that language learning is treated by the university undoubtedly has some influence over what happens in individual language classrooms. The university has a language requirement for students earning degrees in most fields and most students must take four semesters of language courses. Language teaching in the French department is described as "taught in an interactive format" and "proficiency based", although the department is undergoing curricular development and no longer administers proficiency exams. Furthermore, the department asserts on its website that

On the most basic level, the activity of foreign language study in our department is articulated around the essential skills of communication. The discipline of learning how to communicate in a foreign language makes the student not only able to interact with other cultures, but because of the comparative and contrastive exercise that language learning entails, sharpens his or her English communication skills as well. (University website)

In general, a communicative approach is adopted in the department and instructors are encouraged to be creative in presenting material. As the instructor, I too may have had a hand in setting up a certain orientation to language learning. For example, a classroom policies handout distributed at the start of the semester states:

If you have taken a language class before, you are most likely acquainted with the nervousness or stress that often accompanies beginning language learning. I feel that a large part of my job is to lower this stress for you and to create an environment that is comfortable and relaxed for everyone. Do not be afraid to make mistakes or to mispronounce in class participation. You will invariably make mistakes, but it is in practice and in actually using the language that you will improve.

It is very important that you make an effort to work well with your classmates. You can learn a lot while working with other students even though they have the same limited knowledge of French that you do. Group activity is central to the work we will do in class, so please be courteous and respectful with each other. (personal document)

Out of a total of 19 students in class, 10 were adults and 9 were younger students. This approximately 50/50 split is not atypical since younger students are permitted to register for CGS⁴ courses as long as they are not already filled by CGS students by the start of classes. At least one older student was surprised at the make-up of the class: "I was

⁴ CGS is the College of General Studies at the university which caters to returning students whether they are seeking undergraduate degrees or simply taking courses for their own reasons.

shocked that the class was as mixed as it was. I didn't think that there would be undergraduates in the class." (Joan, December 12, 2003⁵).

Beyond the obvious fact that adult learners are older than their more "traditional" counterparts, adult students are also characterized by their diverse interests and motivations for enrolling in courses. Some take university courses to earn a degree or for other reasons. This is not surprising on many levels. First, age ranged among these particular adults from 25 to 61. When asked on a beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire for their reason for taking the class, answers ranged from the more utilitarian and practical ("language requirement", "language exam for PhD", "because with a career in international relations any language skills are beneficial") to the more recreational ("because I love French culture", "genuine interest in the language and culture", "desire to be able to speak and read French well", "to be fluid in conversation"). Interests and experiences also ranged widely. Some students had traveled extensively and had studied other languages, while others had not. (See Appendix B for responses to selected questions from this questionnaire). What became abundantly clear was that adult students are a very diverse group.

The combination of these three levels (the university, the department and the classroom) provide the context in which language learning was occurring in this introductory-level French class.

Resources and Performances of Identity

In analyzing field notes, interviews and other documents I searched for signs of resources that adult learners were drawing on. What emerges in considering the particular resources that learners drew on is what Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) call "identity narratives" (18). Interestingly, one participant explicitly referred to a kind of narrative she has in her head of herself as a "bad language learner" (Linda, October 31, 2003). The fact that this participant is a graduate student of literature may explain her use of the term "narrative," but the actions and comments of all of the other participants taken together also build identity narratives, even if they do not use the word "narrative" itself. The following vignettes represent the beginning piece of language learner identity narratives for three adult language learners in the class. In the interest of space only three of the ten adult students are discussed.

Joan

Joan, who at age 61 was the oldest student in the class, was also one of the most motivated and successful. A lawyer by profession, Joan brought a wealth of resources and life experiences to the class. Over the course of the semester, she positioned herself as a cultured and confident

⁵ Interviews are referred to throughout this paper by the participant's pseudonym and the date on which the interview was conducted.

woman who was interested not only in her own progress with learning French but also with helping other students to succeed. One of the most salient resources for all adult students in this class was reliance on other students. While Joan attested to learning from other students and relying on them as a resource in our interview, it was also of paramount importance for Joan to be the kind of student that others could rely on. In her desire to help others Joan very often took on a leadership role and attributed her behavior in class to a certain maternalism. These two resources – a desire to be nurturing and a tendency to act as a leader – were among the most salient resources for Joan in constructing her classroom identity.

When asked if she remembered anything from the first night of class, Joan revealed her feelings toward some of her classmates:

Uh, yes, I remember looking around thinking if there were any other non-traditional students in the class and I learned that there were. Um, I remember, I think the first dialogue situation, group situation, I was with Betty, and who's the English graduate student, Joe? Alright Betty, Joe and is it Linda and they were just sweethearts really, um, they were very easy and I think I probably interact best with Betty. We just happened to sit next to one another. And is it Greg, the one from the Air Force? (Oh, no Dean). Dean, Dean. He's just really a dear. (Joan, December 12, 2003)

Joan was acutely aware of her interactions with other students and in our interview together she attributed some of her behaviors to a tendency to be "maternalistic":

I feel a little, let's see what's the word, maternalistic towards some of the students, I mean I can see that they're struggling. (Joan, December 12, 2003)

Even in the first interview excerpt cited above, we see some manifestations of this maternalism in Joan's use of the terms "sweethearts" and "dear" to describe other students. Adopting this maternalistic role in the class was one resource for Joan as she engaged with her classmates, although it was tempered by her belief that individuals learn best from their own experiences as opposed to being told directly how to act. For example, in describing her own orientation to the classroom atmosphere, Joan begins to talk about a student who spoke very quietly and volunteered rarely in class:

...I think I held back a little bit in the beginning, because given the nature of what I do, I'm in a courtroom all the time and I'm in fifth gear and I have to be really very aggressive and assertive...and I sort of deliberately hung back because I didn't want to speak up too much. I would have a tendency to do that. But now I see that there's a real good flow. I

was a little, again this is maternalistic, I was a little concerned about Vanessa, who was either very shy, or feels uh maybe a little insecure about the language, and in the little groups I've been in with her, she's obviously doing the work and paying attention, but yet she doesn't speak up enough in class. And she sits in back of me and...it's like I've even moved sometimes to see if she would sit up front, but she just hovers in the back.... I kind of wanted to say to her, "You're doing fine", but then that, certainly that's, again that's maternalistic, it's not my, she's just doing that, let her come to that herself. (Joan, December 12, 2003)

In the last sentence of this excerpt, we see Joan's hesitation between a desire to help Vanessa through encouragement and a belief that Vanessa should be left to decide for herself how she will participate in the class. It appears that Joan was going to say, "It's not my place" to tell Vanessa how to participate. Joan's positioning then is one marked by her concern for the success of other students, yet she identifies limits in this excerpt to how far she will allow her maternalism to go.

The previous excerpt began with a reference to Joan's job as a lawyer. Joan's professional life was indexed numerous times in our interview and had an effect on how she conducted herself in class. Joan mentions that she attempted to suppress her professional assertiveness in class in order to avoid dominating too much. Once she realized that there was a "good flow" in the class, her natural skills as a leader and organizer became a strong resource in building her classroom identity. The following excerpt illustrates several facets of Joan's role as a leader and underscores that, in a leadership capacity, Joan was intent on being inclusive:

Students break into pairs or small groups to do an exercise from the textbook. Joan, Betty and Dean group together in a huddle in the first row. When they pull their chairs together, Joan says "OK, um..." seemingly getting ready to organize the exercise. As I walk by the group, I hear Joan correcting Dean, "because the verb is se lever, so je me leve". After the exercise, Joan says, "Nous avons une question" and then asks in English if 21h is said 'vingt et un heures' or 'vingt et une heures'. After I explain which is right, Joan looks at Betty and acknowledges that Betty had been right. (November 24, 2003)

Once the group was settled, Joan's move to begin working is apparent as she speaks first and signals that she is ready with an "OK". The organizer or leader role comes into play in the class more for organizational purposes than for dominating discussion. This is partly a result of the types of activities (which are mostly back-and-forth questioning or simple information activities) and perhaps also a result of the fairly limited French abilities of the students at this level. When I begin to walk around the room I hear Joan correcting Dean. This was material that was presented directly before the exercise, so it is not surprising that Dean would

make a mistake in using it, but it is interesting that Joan felt comfortable enough with it herself or compelled enough to correct another student's mistake. Correcting fellow students' grammar mistakes is very common throughout the set of field notes and is something that every interview respondent said he or she was comfortable doing as long as the student thought he or she knew the correct way of saying something. A particularly telling moment in this interaction is when Joan says, "*Nous avons une question.*" (*We have a question.*). Immediately following exercises, students are generally asked if they have any questions stemming from the group work, but in this case alone does a student explicitly put the question forth as one of the group as opposed to one from an individual. When I had answered the group's question Joan then turns back to one of her group members to tell her she had been correct. This is also a particularly revealing moment because here the L2 (second language) is used to effect a new positioning. Joan was capable enough with the language to use it as a resource in building solidarity with her group members.

Joan's professional life may have contributed to her self-positioning as a leader, but her job as a lawyer came up in our interview again as something separate from her involvement in the class. When describing why she had chosen to enroll in French at this particular time, she said:

[F]or me, this is in a way, I don't know if you can really understand this, a way of recreation. And it enables me to, it's very relaxing for me to do this. I have a very high-pressure job and after all these years I've decided to make a space within my life to pursue or do something that's got a beginning and an end that I really want to do. It's nothing to do with what I do for a living. (Joan, December 12, 2003)

So while Joan's profession provided her with resources that allowed her to take on a leadership role, it was also in an attempt to take a break from the demands of her professional life that she enrolled in the class in the first place. This is a poignant illustration of the fact that resources are not necessarily positive or negative. For Joan, the resource of work-related experiences furnished her with the confidence and skills to act as a leader, but at the same time, her professional life led her to see her involvement in the class as something wholly separate from her job. Joan spoke in our interview and at several points throughout the semester of plans that she and her husband were making to live in France for at least part of the year when they both retire. So learning French had immediate and important implications for Joan, and her strong motivation to learn can be attributed partially to these personal goals. Learning French, then, is part of a new identity, one which marks a transition from her professional life, but one which also is influenced by her past work experiences.

Joan showed great dedication in our class to her own progress and to

others' success and has continued her commitment to learning French since the end of the study. Joan's identity narrative is one that provides clear evidence that individual learners draw on the resources available to them in order to position themselves and others in a new learning environment. While Joan drew on many resources in order to manage her involvement with the class, acting as a leader and at the same time being nurturing were the most salient resources she drew upon to enact a satisfying identity.

Dean

Dean's language learning story is quite different from Joan's. Dean was a 28 year-old full-time student at the time of the study, pursuing an undergraduate degree. Dean's narrative highlights resources that led him to become positioned as a strong personality in the class; however, there are currents of struggle and doubt that run through his narrative, and in the end, Dean's learner identity narrative was cut short when he decided to leave the university.

Early in the semester, Dean came to see me during office hours and the following conversation ensued:

While I was sitting in the café holding office hours and reading, Dean came up to me and we had a friendly conversation. He told me that he had studied Russian and that the teacher had been "generous" with his grade. He called his second Russian teacher "Mother Russia" and said he had a "headache" after the first class. He took Russian because he had a girlfriend whose family was Russian. He took Italian and also French before. He also showed a good deal of curiosity about language learning. He asked me how long it takes to stop translating from English when speaking French. I told him it took a long time and then told him about what a weird experience it was when I first dreamt in French. He said, "I never thought of that, it must be like you're on drugs." (September 17, 2003)

I was immediately struck by Dean's interest in the language learning process and by the numerous languages he had already attempted to learn. Although Dean was very intrigued by language learning, he wrote on his beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire: "I am horrible when it comes to languages but I will try!" (See Appendix B). This element of doubt concerning his ability to learn another language was not salient in the beginning of the semester; however, this pre-existing doubt may have contributed to the turn in Dean's language learner identity toward the end of the semester.

Dean's curiosity was mostly manifested through asking questions at virtually any time and on any subject. In some cases his questions resembled those that many other students would ask in order to clarify a

point or check their understanding, but in several instances Dean's questions, in combination with his sense of humor, led to very lively classroom interactions. The following field note demonstrates how Dean drew on these two resources – his curiosity and sense of humor – in class interactions and also shows how other students positioned themselves in response to his remarks:

The conversation seemed to be coming to an end, and then Dean said, "Just out of curiosity, what is the big deal with this tower?" I was a little surprised at the question and I think others thought it was strange. I asked, "La tour Eiffel? What's the big deal with it!?" There was a big reaction to this. A lot of students laughed loudly at my surprise and tone. Joan particularly laughed pretty heartily. Paul tries to respond to Dean in saying, "As an architectural..." I too try to respond. Dean continues, "I mean, I've seen it. It just doesn't impress me that much." I ask, "Well have you been there?" Dean says no and I say "You'd probably be impressed by it." Dean said, "Do you think so?" and I replied "Yes, there's a nice aerial view of Paris". And Dean said, "Alright so, it's just to go up there and look at Paris. It's not like seeing the Pyramids or anything." There is quite a buzz now in the class. Marianne jumps in at this point and says, "It's kind of like saying what's the big deal about Mount Rushmore". Dean says, "Exactly" and many people erupt in laughter especially Marianne. Joan then decides to respond to Dean and says, "It was almost like the World Trade towers of the 19th century..." Dean seems to accept this and says, "Alright." I start to talk about the land underneath Paris and how unstable it is. I mention that it is the reason that there are not a lot of huge skyscrapers in Paris. Dean says, "I didn't know. When was it built?". I tell him when. I then start talking about something else, why Charles de Gaulle-Etoile has its name, but Dean comes back to the tower. He says, "I'm impressed with Stone Henge", and I reply, "So you like old things." (October 22, 2003)

After a few students make brief comments, Dean begins to speak again:

Coming back to the discussion of the unstable ground underneath Paris, Dean says, "So are they like having a competition with, uh, Italy to see whose falls first, the Leaning tower of Pisa or the Eiffel Tower?" I laugh and go on to set up the next activity, but I can hear that Dean kept talking about this and joking about the tower with another student. (October 22, 2003)

Dean sets in motion a series of events by directing a provocative question at me. Three different adults jump into the discussion along with me to try to explain the importance of the Eiffel Tower. These are all moves that I've qualified as "taking on the teacher role," part of the "using other students as resources" category. All three students rely on their cultural

knowledge to respond to Dean and they are also showing their level of interest in France and French culture. Yet Dean remains unconvinced and draws on his sense of humor to call into question the importance of another monument, Mount Rushmore, and to draw a comparison between the Eiffel Tower and the Leaning Tower of Pisa. While some students may have been surprised by his comments, there was never a negative feeling during this discussion, and there was a lot of laughter. Whether Dean ultimately accepted any of our attempts to set him straight about the Eiffel Tower, this exchange and others like it reflect Dean's reliance on humor and curiosity in interacting with class members and myself. Several students commented in interviews that they found Dean's humor endearing, but, as we will see, Dean did not necessarily feel accepted by his fellow students.

In our interview together he expressed frustration with the younger students who, no matter how much effort he put forth, never seemed to see him as a peer:

It, I mean I try to not let it bother me but it's, I try hard to talk to the students you know... and it's uh they made me feel, well I was considering transferring to you know [another university] when I got in, you know I was trying, I was wondering if it was me or if it was the school or but yeah I do feel more comfortable in my evening classes but at the same time I wanna take the day classes too... (Dean, November 5, 2003)

After our interview we continued to talk and I composed the following fieldnote from our conversation:

After the interview, Dean and I were walking to Williams Hall where I was going to have office hours. Dean told me about his experiences at [the university] – how nighttime classes were not good when they were for his major, how he should have gone to another school, how he even thought of transferring two years ago, how the students here are not that nice. You could sit and talk for a while and the younger student never asks your name. He has to do "everything" in the conversation. I tell him that maybe it has something to do with life experiences. The younger students have a different perspective and maybe don't understand his point of view. (November 5, 2003)

It was during our interview and in talking afterwards that I first began to see the difficulty Dean was having fitting in to his new environment. Much later in the semester as Dean and I walked out of class one night, he told me that financial concerns might keep him from continuing his studies. At the very end of the semester, Dean did not show up for the final exam, and, when I contacted him to schedule a make-up exam it was clear that Dean felt helpless in the face of very high tuition bills and a university community where he felt like an outsider. In the end, Dean

decided to leave the university. Obviously, what was occurring in Dean's life outside of our French class had effects on his performance as a language learner. While Dean began the class as a gregarious and witty student who had an intense interest in languages, his reliance on these resources seemed to wane, and, as the semester progressed, Dean showed less and less confidence in his abilities to ever learn French.

Dean's narrative ends much less positively than Joan's, yet it demonstrates that positioning changes over time and for various reasons. It was perhaps when fewer resources (such as money, time and emotional support) became available to Dean that he began to see himself as a less successful learner. In field notes and interviews, the adults in this class show strong reliance on other students as a resource, but this was clearly not the case for Dean who had feelings of being an outsider at the university. Regardless of the resources Dean had at his disposal, in the end his energy needed to be devoted to reconsidering his future plans and the development of a language learner identity took a backseat to more pressing concerns. When we last saw each other months after the study had ended, Dean spoke of plans of joining the Peace Corps for a few years. Hopefully; while living in a target language culture, Dean's language learner identity can move in a more positive direction.

Marianne

At 27 Marianne was one of the youngest adult students in the class, yet she tended to identify more with the other adult students since she was, like most of them, working a full-time job during the day. When asked in our interview if age made a difference in our class, Marianne responded:

I feel like the younger kids in our class, are very, much more serious about it. They're, you can tell they're more relaxed than they are in like Econ, but they're more serious about it. Like they feel like it's a job. And the older people that are in class, most of them are in because they want to do it, they enjoy it, like 'I'm in it because I want to do it'. So we have a different attitude when we're learning because we're doing it for fun. Whereas they're doing it as 'I gotta get a good grade' so they're more serious about it. And that's the way they are in other classes so... (Marianne, October 29, 2003)

When probed for more information, she continued:

I think [age] probably makes a difference in how much you learn and that most people that are in there that are older are doing it for fun and they want to go there and be able to speak. And that makes a big difference when you're learning. If you're doing it for enjoyment, you learn so much more and you're willing to go out of your way to learn something. Whereas the younger you are, you're just doing it because you

have to. So you don't tend to go out of your way as much... (Marianne, October 29, 2003)

Marianne's remarks echo comments that Joan made in our interview regarding the fact that adults make a different kind of commitment than younger students when they decide to enroll in a course. As Marianne says, adults usually have other kinds of motivation than simply getting a good grade or fulfilling a requirement. Marianne's comments also illustrate a resource that was salient for most students in the class: burgeoning theories of language learning. Marianne here describes her belief that one learns better when "doing it for enjoyment," and that there is a difference in motivation between adult learners and their younger counterparts who "don't tend to go out of their way as much." When I asked Marianne about what she thinks about when she's going to participate, she advanced another theory of learning more specific to language and described to me how she thinks lexical items are stored in her brain:

I discovered like a rolodex in my head like I have this vocabulary, they're all written on cards in my head, and if I need like a vegetable, I have to go to that area in my brain and be like ok that's a vegetable and that's the way it's translated and now I can say it. Or, so it takes a lot for me to speak because I'm always flipping my words around and translating them. Yeah, I start out in English and then I have to translate to French and then I can say it and it just takes time. But I always think English first. (Marianne October 29, 2003)

Surprisingly, another student used the exact same metaphor to describe how vocabulary is stored. Linda said that words were almost like "flash-cards in my head" (10/31/03). Many of the adult students in this class were forming their own organic theories of language learning as the class was going on, and this resource certainly could serve as a way to position oneself as a certain kind of learner depending on the particular theories one espoused. Marianne's theory of the rolodex might position her as a persistent learner. Even though it may take a long time to put together sentences or phrases in French, Marianne has a theory to explain what's going on during that time and consequently is not discouraged. Another example of how theories of language learning might position learners is the belief among adults in this class that making mistakes is an integral part of learning a language. This kind of stance, one which nearly every adult expressed, allows learners to position themselves as successful even as they make mistakes. (See Appendix B for responses to the question: What do you think makes a good language learner?)

Marianne noted on her beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire that she was considering French as a minor and maybe even a major. When I asked in our interview if she felt like there was anything different about

her because she was learning French, Marianne spoke positively about her progress, perhaps encouraging her to maintain her goals of advanced French study. She does, however, hesitate to say that she has undergone some kind of radical change as a result of taking the class, perhaps because of the limited amount of time and contexts within which she can practice her new skills:

I feel like once I leave I'm definitely a different person because I have nobody else to talk to. And I can do these, I can do French in class, but it's kind of like my only time when I do it so I feel like it is a different me because I can't go home and speak to somebody. So it's almost like a turn-off, turn-on kind of a... I, I don't know if excited is the right word. But I enjoy it more I mean than just everyday things. Like I actually enjoy it so it's not something I have to study and learn. I want to know it. So I think that that's what different. I actually want to know it... I can see that. I can feel it, but I don't really have it yet. Like I understand I'm a different, that it defines me in a different way, but I'm not really there yet. (Marianne, October 29, 2003)

While Marianne may not be able to exactly put her finger on what is different about her as a result of her taking a French class, she does attest to some kind of change. Especially because learners in this class are studying in the United States as opposed to a French-speaking country and only for a limited amount of time each week, we shouldn't expect that monumental shifts in identity should occur. For Marianne, as for Joan and Dean, however, it is evident that some changes are occurring and each of them drew on the resources available to them to effect these changes.

Conclusion and Implications

I began this project wanting to find out if there were signs of identity formation at the start of the language learning process, and, if there were, I wanted to know what kinds of resources learners drew upon to realize these identities. The three vignettes discussed above present evidence that from the very start of the language learning process learners are shaping and reshaping their identities. Each vignette presents a different language learner profile, but it is precisely the individuality of each learner that is being insisted upon in this study. The vignettes illustrate particular resources, but more importantly, they show how, for any one language learner, resources will vary and they will be enacted in a unique way by the individual learner as he or she deals with the activity of "being a French learner." For Joan, work experiences and a feeling of maternalism were salient resources in positioning herself as a supportive, confident and knowledgeable student. Dean tended to rely more on his curiosity and sense of humor to construct his classroom identity, but was

in the end overwhelmed by factors external to the class and a general dissatisfaction with his place in the wider university community. Marianne drew on her developing theories of language learning as a resource in positioning herself as a hardworking and persistent student.

The resources that individual adult learners draw on in constructing their identities are clearly not generalizable to other learners. Even among the three learners discussed above there are great differences in the kinds of resources that allowed them to enact identity. One of the advantages of adopting identity as a way of studying language learners, though, is precisely that we see learners for the complex individuals that they are. Research on identity also advances our knowledge of the process of language learning. While some studies in SLA focus on outcomes as they are related to a single variable, like age, motivation or attitude, identity more adequately captures the complexity of a learner's engagement with language learning and allows us to reconsider what constitutes success and who gets to decide what success is in language learning. Studies on identity allow us to recognize the agency of individual learners in defining their own goals and in attempting to realize them. In short, research on identity revalorizes the language learner and illuminates the ways in which learners navigate the process of language learning.

One of the major issues emerging from research on identity is how it can be useful to instructors. If findings are not generalizable, then what suggestions can we offer to practitioners? Acknowledgement that there is no magic set of traits or strategies that ensure success in language learning would already make a difference in how instructors view their students, but there are also more concrete changes that may come about as a result of research on identity. Kinginger (2004) has already suggested through her work that understanding an individual learner's identity may reveal that teaching methods are not meeting learner needs. In addition, an awareness of the resources students draw upon in attempting to learn a new language allows instructors to draw on those resources in helping to construct a classroom experience that is satisfying to students, by drawing on students' strengths and interests in creating and using classroom activities, but also by developing better ways to relate to students about the language learning process.

Erin Kearney is a Ph.D. student in educational linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include second language acquisition, instruction of French at the university level, and adult language learners.

E-mail: erin3@dolphin.upenn.edu

References

- Atkinson, D. (2002). Toward a sociocognitive approach to second language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(4), 525-545.
- Briggs, C. (1986). *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freilino, M., & Hummel, R. (1985). Achievement and identity in college-age vs. adult women students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 14(1), 1-10.
- Graham, S. (1998). Adult growth in college: The effects of age and educational ethos. *Journal of College Student Development*, 39(3), 239-250.
- Hansen, J.G., & Liu, J. (1997). Social identity and language: Theoretical and methodological issues. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 567-576.
- Kasworm, C. (1993). An alternative perspective on empowerment of adult undergraduates. *Contemporary Education*, 64(3), 162-5.
- Kinginger, C. (2004). Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning and identity reconstruction. In A. Pavlenko, & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 219-242). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Lantolf, J. P. (1996). SLA theory building: "Letting all the flowers bloom!" *Language Learning*, 46(4), 713-749.
- McGroarty, M. (1998). Constructive and constructivist challenges for applied linguistics. *Language Learning*, 48(4), 591-622.
- Norton, B. (2000) *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Pavlenko, A., & Blackledge, A. (2004). Introduction: New theoretical approaches to the study of negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts. In A. Pavlenko and A. Blackledge, (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 1-33). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Pavlenko, A., & Lantolf, J.P. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re)construction of selves. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 155-177). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pomerantz, A. (2001). *Beyond the good language learner: Ideology, identity and investment in classroom foreign language learning*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Richardson, J., & King, E. (1998). Adult students in higher education: Burden or boon? *Journal of Higher Education*, 69(1), 65-88.
- Shoukat, M. & Shoukat, M. (1996). Making an educational difference based on adult life goals and ego identity status. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 20(2), 41-68.

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Questions:

1. Why are you taking French (language requirement is an acceptable answer)?
2. Do you speak any other languages besides English? Which ones and for how long? Have you traveled to French-speaking countries? If so, where and for how long? Have you traveled to countries where English was not the main language?
4. What do you think makes a good language learner?
6. Is there anything else about you that you would like me to know?

Pseudonym and Age	Question 1	Question 2	Question 4	Question 6
Dean, 28	Language requirement of course, but more so because with an international career, any language skills are beneficial. Plus French is easier than Russian.	Not fluent in anything but English and I have not traveled to any French-speaking countries.	Daily practice, repetition. I am horrible when it comes to learning foreign languages, but I will try!	
Joe, no age given	For the language requirement, but also because I love French culture and would like to watch French films without reading the subtitles and read Flaubert, Stendhal, etc. in the original.	I have retained some of the Spanish that I learned in high school. I vacationed in Paris for two weeks a couple of years ago.	Williingness to work through one's embarrassment.	I'm Francophile and not ashamed!
Thomas, 27	To learn French.	Italian (very rusty), 5 years, studied in Italy in 1997. Yes Paris, surrounding areas (2 weeks total), Quebec (1 week). Yes.	Someone who desires to learn the language and is capable and openminded.	I enjoy the sound of French. Like French poetry.
Maggie, 25	Language requirement and genuine interest in the language and culture.	No others. I visited Paris for ten days in 1992. I have traveled briefly in Central America.	The same qualities as for the teacher which were patience and shyness about learning a new language, as well as confidence and willingness to make mistakes in front of others.	As you say you expect, I feel very shy about learning a new language.
Sarah, 27	In anticipation of full-time graduate study in anthropology, proficiency in two languages is required.	I speak, read and write Italian moderately well. I have advanced level 4 Italian in college and also high school. I have traveled to Belgium as well as Ireland, Germany and Holland and Rome, Italy (study abroad program).	The desire and openness to learn something new.	That I will be doing my very best not to pronounce French words with an Italian accent.
Linda, 28	1. Language exam for PhD 2. Desire to be able to speak and read French well. Also, my sister-in-law is French.	Yes, Spanish. I studied 6 years. Yes, Paris, Nice, Alps (outside Annecy) once, Geneva - for weeks at most. Yes, Italy.	Patience, practice, willingness to make mistakes.	N/A
Paul, 46	To refresh my memory of the language so as to be able, as soon as possible, to read scholarly articles in French. Also, I needed a third course to qualify for the Penn health plan.	I've traveled to France (Chamonix) and Switzerland, both briefly. I've also traveled to Germany, Italy, the former Yugoslavia, Italy, Austria, Liechtenstein and Mexico. I have studied at various times German, Spanish and French. I'm best with Spanish.	Patience, a sense of humor and tenacity. Love of subject can come later.	Regardless of what French I may end up taking, I need to know how to learn best how to read a lot in the language.
Marianne, 27	I am considering French as a minor and possibly a major.	No. No. No. I had some French in high school, but do not speak French.	A student that is willing to try even if they are wrong, one that studies and is prepared and participates in class.	N/A
Joan, 61	To be fluid in conversation and to begin to be able to read in French for purposes of pleasure and business.	I've traveled to France, Martinique, Haiti, St. Martin, Quebec, and St. Bart's intermittently. At the most, spending 3 weeks in France.	Qualities would include: good listening skills, attentiveness, ability to focus, willingness to take a risk and dedication.	I studied French 36 years ago, but I need the structure of a class to attempt to become fluid in speaking and reading.

*No sheet for Betty, age 33, because she joined the class late.