

## Original Paper

# How Identity Affects Language Learning

Xi Zhu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> City University of Zhengzhou. Zhengzhou, China, 452370

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### Abstract

*This paper describes an adult ESL student learning English in Abram Friedman Occupational center, which locates in downtown Los Angeles. The contexts of the community, school, classroom, and main basic information of my case study student will be illustrated at beginning and the theoretical focus of this paper is: Identity. Based on different identities occur in various situations, student's motivation, investment, resistance, affective filter, BICS and CALP development towards English learning will be carefully analyzed. The evidence and data of this analysis paper are collected from weekly observation, case study student's class work, and interviews towards my case study student and her English teacher. Three sub claims with examples and evidence will be developed under the main concept: Identity, which will carefully explain how identity affects her second language development and progress. Finally, specific recommendations to student in order to extend and deepen the advantages and impede the disadvantages from her identities will be provided. Last but not least, personal reflection on this case study experience will be given.*

### Keywords

*identity, second language learning, motivation and investment, adult*

### 1. Introduction

Based on my fieldwork learning task, I have got the opportunity to a community college in downtown LA and choose a “mother” who is originally from Mexico and moves to LA as a new immigrant as my target student. I have overserved her upon her learning skills, learning habits, class performance, homework, and some other points through her learning process. Borrowing theoretical focuses of identity, motivation, investment, and resistance, I would like to find how different identities of this mother affect her second language learning. I would also refer to the knowledge acquired from Second Language Acquisition, especially the BICS and CALP, affective filter hypothesis to help my explanation on my topic. Plus, I will demonstrate my ideas on three main identities of Mary, a mother (housewife), a student in English class and a job hunter, and how they do impact on Mary's progress

and resistance of learning English. Hopefully, I truly find some useful information and illustrate them as follows, but there are also many limitations on my study, for instance, my observation time is not that long, my questionnaire question should be more specific and precise and maybe I need to go to Mary's home and do interview to her sons and husband. I wish I could dig into this topic deeper in the future.

### *1.1 Introduction: Target School and Student*

The target site for the case study is Abram Friedman Occupational Center (AFOC), which is in Los Angeles downtown, California. The community includes White: 49.8% (28.7% non-Hispanic). Native American: 0.7%. Two or more races: 4.6%. Hispanic or Latino of any race: 48.5%. The average per capital individual income is \$27,749. The educational background varied a lot, only around 7% residents have a four years' degree. (Los Angeles Demographic, 2018)

The school belongs to Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), more than 90% students in LAUSD are Hispanic and more than 30% of them are English learners. (LAUSD Website, 2018) AFOC has more than twenty programs and enrolls more than 8000 students every year, ranking top one in LAUSD. As for ESL program, courses are offered competency-based, from literacy to Advance. Besides some basic teaching of language knowledge, the school also offers interesting and helpful activities outside school, for example, introducing and visiting LA Public Library. The place which are not only for books, but also gives various kinds of helps, such as job hunting, interpretation, home teachers for children and other welfare. "We are committed in providing our diverse students population the academic, technical and life skills needed for personal growth and/or economic potential" (School website homepage, 2018).

The case study is studying in the Beginning High-A ESL coed classroom with 22-25 adult students. They are 100% Hispanic and most of them have family and job. The class is from 8: 00am to 12:15 pm, Monday to Friday regularly. "ESL classes give English learners opportunities to study and practice English language communication skills, including listening, reading, speaking, reading and critical thinking." (School ESL, website homepage, 2018) However, English proficiency is varied among one classroom students because of their ages, self-intelligence, and self-characteristics. The classroom-teaching has a clear course outline and lesson plan; moreover, teacher uses various kinds of approaches in order to extend the learning accomplishment, for example, scaffolding, pair work, feedback, differentiation is applied into classroom activities usually.

My case study student Mary is 35 years old woman. She is Hispanic and a new immigrant to the U.S. She has learned English in the AFOC for more than two years and now she is in the Beginning High A level. I choose her as my case study student under my host teacher's recommendation for the following reasons. First and foremost, Mary shares several identities. Mary has a family with two kids who participate in an English-speaking school, and they could speak fluent English. As an English learner, Mary attends class every day on time, however, her English proficiency is not outstanding. That means her learning outcome is limited. Moreover, she is very nervous and less confident when she interacts

with other peers. Therefore, it is obvious that her affective filter is high. Choosing Mary as my case study student is easy for me to do research on bilingual learner's identity characteristics. Mary's reading and listening are better than speaking and writing, due to the gap between her input and output. There are lots of stuffs worthy to concern with her several identities under social context, for instance, the motivation and investment are complicated and fluctuated with very specific situations happen on her. To sum up, Mary is a typical learner who could help me a lot on my analysis under the Identity instruction. I would typically illustrate her learning motivation, investment towards her class and other factors might affect in my following analysis.

### *1.2 Introduction: Study Purpose*

The purpose of this case study paper is to analyze how different identities under language socialization play the positive or negative roles in a second language learning. Following the varied identities appear in different learning situations, student's motivation, investment, resistance, the development of BICS and CALP will fluctuate a lot. First, I will go over the context of the community, school, classroom that the student participates in everyday, also, the student's personal context will be followed. Then, the theories' support for the identity influence; student's high or low motivation and investment underpinning different identities; beginners' BICS and CALP development, and Krashen's affective filter hypothesis will be elaborated. Finally, the recommendation for student further progress and self-reflection for the case study experience will as the ending.

## **2. Analysis**

This paper will analyze the target student upon the following three main and representative identities of her. They are "a mother", "a student" and "a job hunter" and I will carefully analyze them separately using the concepts of affecter filter, BICS and CALP and other second language acquisition theoretical ideas.

### *2.1 High Motivation as a Mother*

The first sub claim of this analysis aims to illustrate how Mary's high motivation does positive effect on her English learning when she is regarded as a "mother". Through the causal chat with her, I know she has family and both her two sons' study in an English-speaking primary school so that both of them could speak good English as least in BICS. Mary is a new immigrant in the U.S, however her sons have already learned English systematically in school for more than four years. Two sons prefer speaking and interacting with each other in English. Mary is struggling to participate in their home activities, and she is even harder to join in the school activities with them.

During my interview, I know the strongest reason for her to learn English is that she is longing to help her sons in life and study and play a positive "mother role" in their fast-growing stage. Therefore, it could easily find that her motivation of learning English is high as being a mother. Also, during the interview with her host teacher, I get some information that she often finishes class work in prior under her sons' instruction and she enjoys learning English together with them. It could also prove that when

she acts as a “mother”, her affective filter is low, and her learning outcome is extended. Through observing her performance in class, for example Mary is nervous and feels difficult to make a complete English sentence when teacher asks her to answer questions, even though the question is very easy, and she actually knows the answer. On the contrary, when I chat with her causally, she could express her idea with a few words. I find although her spoken English is limited, her BICS is more fluent than CALP obviously, due to the after-school practice with her sons. Because she tells me people around her speak Spanish and she could only practice English with her sons. The investment is also high as Mary is positioned properly at home and provided lots of help. She shows few resistant behaviors and highly motivated as a “mother”. According to Kumaravadivelu (2003) and Norton (2010) identity and investment are strong related with students learning success. Mary’s motivation and investment help her study progress.

## *2.2 Low Investment as a Student*

The second sub claim of this analysis focuses on the low investment in class when Mary is looked as “a struggling English learner” and “a shy woman”. When I observe in the class, I find Mary always sits alone in the right corner of the classroom and no other students sit with her. After more observation upon her interaction with peers and her interaction with the teacher, I conclude that because of her less confidence, limited listening, and strong accent, both the teacher and other classmates are inclined to see her as a limited English learner. One evidence is that when they do pair work, teacher assigns Linda to work with her. It is a take-turn conversation practice: one asks and the other one answers, and they need to change roles. Linda gets the meaning quickly, however, Mary is less understanding, so she is keeping asking and does not allow Linda to ask. Linda tries to explain, but Mary is stick on her performing way. Then, Linda feels upset and impatient, asking teacher to figure out this problem. After teacher’s mediation, Mary feels so embarrassed, her voice gets lower and feels much more unconfident. Mary is positioned as a limited learner by her partner and does not receive enough and careful help which lead her investment in class low. “Students can be highly motivated but feel removed or uninvested” (Norton, 2010).

Another strong evidence shows that, exercises and quizzes are taken often in class. I suppose the reason why Mary’s test performance is not stable is her limited investment. For example, there are two similar questions testing the same grammar, and Mary could choose the right answer of the first one knowing the grammar knowledge clearly but feels hesitated with the other one. However, with the specific instruction, she can correct quickly. The point is that there are around twenty students in the classroom, it is hard for teacher to give self-instruction for her every time. Without the specific investment, Mary may still feel unclear with the testing grammar next time, Moreover, she does not ask others about the right answer that truly aligns with Norton, “Teachers should identify whether students are showing resistant behavior because they are not motivated or because they are not invested.” (Norton, 2010) Last but not least, when students communicate with teacher in English during the break together, Mary is always shy and nervous to interact with them. Consequently, Mary’s class investment is limited and

her CALP develop slowly under this circumstance.

### 2.3 “Unfavorable Job Hunter”

The third identity Mary has and makes influence on her language learning is “unfavorable job hunter”. Mary wants to find a part time job near Los Angeles downtown, and it is also a good opportunity for her to practice English. However, her personal characteristics and identity hinder her motivation and investment in job finding, even leading some resistant behaviors. On the one hand, she is unconfident with her society identity as a job hunter because of the language proficiency and time limitation. One piece of evidence is that the school has provided job positions and training class for students, however, she seldom asks for the relevant information nor takes part in the class which trains abilities for job hunting. Her less confidence makes her investment low and the resistance for learning new stuff. She never gives herself an opportunity to have a try, even if she tells me, it is important for her to make some money for family during our chat. On the other hand, she has a subordinate identity in the community because of her lack of language proficiency, and her age, ethnic identity can also be the reasons. I assume her resistance caused by these and also allow her to ignore on other abilities she has. During the chat towards the teacher, I know there are lots of students spending time in job practice and lots of various programs are offered in school as well, for example, accounting, computer, and technology. However, Mary shows less interests when teacher mentions such information in class and leaves quickly when the classes finish. According to Norton (2010) there is an imagined community in learners’ aspiration, teacher should “bridge the language practice they bring with them and the imagined community.” (Norton, 2010) Mary does not build the bridge between each other, so her investment and motivation are lacking.

## 3. Conclusions

To sum up, this analysis concentrates on the complicated effects have been brought about by student’s different identities and her motivation, investment and resistance in language learning underlie these identities. Mary’s motivation and investment go up and down with the change of identities she has in sociocultural context. Her development of BICS and CALP and social practice also related with her identity. As for the program, from the school introduction, ESL program provides English learners with the needed language acquisition skills to “Communicate in English; Find and improve employment; Assist children with homework; Succeed in college and career training programs; Become United States citizens; Participate more fully in their communities.” (School website, 2018) My case study student’s motivation and investment are varied in acquisition of these aspects. Based on her specific condition, there are several recommendations.

### 3.1 Recommendations

First and foremost, more assistances from her sons and more opportunities for home learning will largely increase her motivation. As we mentioned before, Mary shows sense of accomplishment and learning outcomes under her sons’ instruction is eye-watching as she learns with the exercises in

textbook before class with her sons' help, which the accuracy is higher than those doing in the classroom. She has high enthusiasm learning with her sons because she gets a feeling of approval as a "mother". So, teacher may encourage her to learn more from her sons, for example, daily conversation practice after school in order to fix her pronunciation; allow her sons to check grammar exercise doing in class aiming to double check the answer with details. The home investment is available and high. Teacher could even design some parents-kids' activity, for instance, Mary shows great interests in a forum which refers that Los Angeles public library could freely provide tutors for children's class work. Mary carefully takes notes and learning English during that process.

Secondly, creating rapport classroom students' agency will increase class investment for Mary and make her highly invested. As we all know, class environment is so important that students could learn more when they feel involved and properly positioned. Mary learns individually in classroom, and seldom interacts with others which cause her low investment. Teacher should create more cooperative-learning opportunities. "Cooperative learning led not only to dramatically improve academic achievement-especially for lowest achieving students (Johnson, Maruyama Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981; Slavin 1983)- but also to improvements in race relations (Kagan, Zahn, Widaman, Schwarzwald, & Tyrerell, 1985; Sharan et al., 1985); attitude towards and achievement of include students with learning, and physical disabilities; and social relations, social skills, and self-esteem among students." (Kagan, 1995, p. 106)

Thirdly, a tutor for Mary to help her study and other community issues is also a specific good way to improve her investment and reduce her resistant behavior. Mary is with no confidence towards the job hunting, even gives up some chances which seem suitable for her and feels reluctant to receive the job-related help. If there is a tutor who could chat with her regularly and bridge identity and inspiration with the community, for instance, solving some specific psychological obstacles both in learning and job finding in order to lower her affective filter. I believe that will do a lot in increasing her investment and improving her acceptive outcomes.

In a nutshell, different identities would truly affect our language learning, especially for the learners who bear several social roles, and it is hard for them to spend all their time and energy into language learning, even in a short run. Because the learner's self-characteristic performed in class, his or her talents in learning, age, ethnic identity, cultural background, religion, loads of work besides all matter the learning efficiency, outcome, motivation, investment, affective filter and so on. Different situations of the learners have need educational works provide specific solving method. As for my case student Mary, I suggest her to enhance her home language receiving, as both of her sons speak English at home, and I hope her to try to open herself and move toward to have a job which should be in an English-speaking environment. I also wish the teacher could create a rapport student agency, giving specific instruction and attention, so that her motivation and investment will rise, and resist will decline.

### 3.2 Reflection

During my study process, I have been truly situated in an authentic adult ESL condition. I sit with the case study student, observe her performance in classroom and chat with her in order to get some background information. I deeply believe that each student has their own background and context, thinking all the class as linear is not reasonable and scientific. Plus, applying theory into practice is also important for us to exactly know how different perspectives play roles in specific individuals. The change of identity could bring about very complicated outcomes because students' motivation and investment are differentiated. The community and classroom's influence on each person are sophisticated as well. There are several aspects needing improvement, such as limited observing time; the comprehensiveness of this analysis; some vague interview questions and so on. It is my first time to do demographic study and I am touched a lot with it. I need to grab more pedagogical approaches, theoretical support and collect as much data as I could for the future study.

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