

Learner Identities and Transitions

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Welcome to the third issue of the *Learner Development Journal*. Let's start by looking at the words of the theme of this issue, **Learner Identities and Transitions**. First, “learner” may sound like some eternal journeying condition, never reaching the top of the slope, never reaching mastery—a life sentence, unless we give up first! For many of us language learners that may strike a chord. There is, though, another side to the coin, another identity, in fact: that of being a *user* of other languages, a social, professional, or academic language user who may be increasingly able to do more through these languages. Which brings us to “identities”, the plural form rather than the abstract uncountable or singular form, telling us both that this issue is largely concerned with people rather than concepts, and also that we may have more than one identity, whether at the same or different times. As for “transitions”, this reminds us that language learners' circumstances change, often drastically, and that these changes impact or change our identities.

Pinning down learner identity/identities—in some way that is one common challenge for each of the papers in this issue. More than that, the second half of title of the issue sets the bar higher; the word *transitions* reminds us that for many of the studies reported here the goal is not simply pinning identities down, like dead butterflies on a cork board but, rather, the observation and recording of the living identities of language learners and users as they and their circumstances change.

Reflecting on identities and transitions brings us to our own language learning stories, which are written below. These stories did not determine how we are as teachers, but they are a part of our current identities and they do continue to inform how we inhabit our roles as teachers, and how we relate to our learners, each with their identities, emotions, and motivations.

Christina's Language Learner Identity/Journey

I started learning English at the age of seven, in a private language school located in an extraordinarily beautiful house on the seaside of my hometown in Greece. I feel I owe a lot to my teachers from that school, for different reasons which I was not able to understand back then but greatly appreciated in later years and upon reflection. The school was not using any of the traditional English language teaching textbooks—the only exception being exam-oriented classes—but mainly short stories and comics suitable for each level of proficiency. The school teachers had compiled what would for many seem a quite unusual grammar book, which comprised important grammar rules without using metalanguage. In fact, I learned the metalanguage at a very much later stage, mainly during my university studies and through my own teaching experiences. The vocabulary book included drawings in black and white, which we learners would colour in and write the English word next to them. What was also

particularly nice about that school was that students could play in the beautiful garden during breaks and watch the sea!

I strongly feel that this early experience of learning English shaped my learner identity and the way I have since been viewing language learning, and further encouraged me to take French and Italian classes at university. Clearly the way French and Italian were taught to adults in my case differed considerably from the stress-free and creative English classes described above, but love for languages had already been cultivated in me prior to learning more foreign languages. Learning languages was a tough process, which required effort, persistence and a mindset of believing in oneself and in improving through hard work. Using English in the UK where I then moved for studies in the first instance was perhaps among the most valuable experiences obtained throughout the years of learning foreign languages, because all linguistic knowledge that was acquired had to be put into practice for the purposes of academic achievement and above all communication—and survival! My attempts to use English in an English-speaking country put me in a position of re-learning and re-studying aspects of the language but from a more ‘communicative’ perspective.

My early English language learning experience informed my transition from being a learner to becoming a teacher and now to convening university modules on language teacher education development. I still feel though that I am often oscillating between two identities, that of a language learner and that of a language teacher, with each identity informing the other!

Yoshi's Language Learner Identity/Journey

Looking back on my life of learning language, it seems that I have different meanings in each of the languages I have learned. The languages are English, German, Korean, and Chinese.

The first experience of learning a language is learning English at a small private English conversation class when I was at elementary school. I don't remember why I decided to go there, but surely remember that I was so excited by the English I listened to in front of me. Unfortunately, though, I didn't continue studying and don't remember why I quit after a few times, either. Almost of my memory of it has already gone, but it was still a great time for me.

I started learning English again at junior high school. I had been looking forward to learning English, and enjoyed learning about the grammatical structure of English and the sound of pronunciation—but it doesn't mean that I was good at them! English sounded smart and cool to me.

The second experience of learning a language was learning German as a “second foreign language” at university. I studied German for 2 years, but none of it has remained in me. It was still interesting, but just a school subject, not attractive in the way that English was. At the same time, I started getting tired of learning English, because reading was the main part of our English classes.

After graduating from university, the *akogare*, the appeal or attraction, of English was still inside me, so I quit my job and, getting prepared to go to Australia for a working holiday. I went to English conversation classes. In Australia, I was happy to use English and to stay in this English-speaking environment. I didn't study hard but I went to language schools there to improve my English. I felt cool, speaking English and making connections with a new world I hadn't belonged to before.

Job hunting after coming back to Japan, I happened to hear about the job of Japanese language teacher. My life as a language teacher started then. As I worked with young students, mostly from other Asian countries, who wanted to go to university in Japan, I saw many of the problems in the context of Japanese as Second Language (JSL). To understand it better and to be able to change the situation, I entered graduate school and conducted research to get close to these learners' experiences of living in Japan, to get some insights about how to make JSL better. At

that time, I was trying to support learners in Japan, to help them enter university and to participate in Japanese society. I thought myself not as a teacher but as a supporter close to them.

While teaching Japanese at a language school, I studied Korean and Chinese because I wanted to understand what our students were talking about in front of me. I built up my knowledge of the two languages by asking the students what they were talking about. After a few years, I became close to a friend from China and we still have a good relationship. I wasn't so interested in learning Chinese at that time, but as our families became very close, I started learning and using Chinese to talk with his family and friends in China. For me, even now, Chinese has been not an object of learning but a language deeply related to my life. Meanwhile, as I was opening up with them to face up to the reality of their life in Japan through research using narrative approach, I found my own reason to be a language teacher.

Dialogue with learners and moreover with my Chinese friend's family led me to reflect on myself and to rethink the language environment in which I have been brought up. I am a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) who grew up experiencing the two cultures of the deaf and the hearing and integrated into these two cultures. I realized I had tried to participate in Japanese society as an alien from the parallel society of those people who communicate in a strange way. Unconsciously, I blanketed my experience of life with a mask hiding our family's language situation. However, finally it was revealed to me that this is the reason why I want to be involved in languages, and why I have been a language teacher aiming to support foreigners in the same position in Japan. After realizing this, my beliefs regarding language and language teaching have become clear and changed dramatically. Now I describe myself as a citizen in Japanese society who is translanguaging (learning and using) Japanese, sign language, a bit of Chinese and English to live my own life. My identity as learner and user has been constructed through interaction with the people around me.

Jim's Language Learner Identity/Journey

Since the age of about eight or nine, French language proficiency has remained an important part of my identity. Around that time, on a family trip to France, I recall being challenged by French friends to say the French word for "squirrel", *écureuil*, along with an elder brother and sister—and being the one who could do and sound French. With no shadow of critical age interpretation to temper my pride in this ability, it confirmed to me that I was naturally good at French. The youngest member of the French family we were friends with was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen and I fell in love with her on the spot—*coup de foudre*, as it's expressed in French. I decided, despite being shy and six months younger than her, that one day we would be married and living in France. A couple of summers later, when visiting this family again, I saw that she was reading a novel by Maupassant called *Bel-Ami*, perhaps as a summer assignment. I might have been too shy to talk to her much, but if I could read the same book as her, it would somehow bring us closer. Back in England, I went to my school library and found the book, in French, and read all 300 or so pages. I can't have understood the whole book, but I did understand enough to get through it, and to realize that I could now read books in French. And so I kept reading French books.

This near daily contact with French through reading, together with my very personal motivation, meant that at school French was very easy for me, and I was good at it. A holiday in France with three school friends at seventeen confirmed this. While my friends were also good at French in class, they were nervous about actually using it and would push me to be the speaker for our group.

One decade later, coming to Japan, I focused on living in Japan, learning Japanese, and learning to teach English. France, French, and my childhood French dreams, were far away.

After two or three years in Japan, on a trip back to England I had a couple of days in France and found, with a shock, that I couldn't speak French anymore, that I couldn't easily find the words I needed for even a short conversation.

Returning to Japan, I started to try to reclaim the French ability that I had lost. I found some French books and reading in French once again became part of my life. I also placed an invitation in a local English-language magazine for French speakers to meet in a local café once or twice a month. Each time, about five or six of us, French, north African, and Japanese speakers of French, would get together and just chat for a couple of hours. These gatherings continued for about a year and, together with the French reading, restored my ability to communicate easily in French.

Apart from French and Japanese, to me, my language learner identity is largely as someone who has failed to learn much of the half dozen other languages I have studied, formally or informally. To my students, however, I am seen as a polyglot, a successful learner of foreign languages, since I can at least greet them in each of their respective second foreign languages: French, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, or German.

The learner identity I try to project for my students is perhaps closest to my experience of French: I think of myself not as a learner of the language but as a user, whether reading for pleasure, talking in French for the enjoyment of it, or looking for opportunities to use French. These are within their reach, too, for English, and possibly for other languages. In this respect, my identity with regard to my students may be as senpai: someone who has already gone through what they are facing.

Christina was keen to get involved in co-editing this issue because learner identities are so closely intertwined with emotions, which is her main area of research specialisation, that it is difficult (if at all possible) to understand one without the other. In addition, Christina herself has gone through multiple transitions of her learner (and teacher) identities; she therefore viewed this issue as a unique opportunity to read about colleagues' and their learners' identity-related experiences. One reason Yoshi was happy to co-edit this issue of the *Learner Development Journal* is that to be a journal editor using his English sounded so challenging, as if he were asked to do so by his PhD adviser (and co-founder of the LD-SIG) Naoko Aoki. The other meaningful reason is that as he considers why he got involved in teaching Japanese as a second language, research on L2 identity is core to these ongoing reflections on his own identity. Two opposing feelings attracted Jim to be involved in this project: growing acceptance that learner identities are of fundamental importance to language learners and their teachers together with awareness of his ignorance about issues relating to language learner identity/ies.

Overview

This issue starts, following this Introduction, with an investigation by Ryo Moriya and Ami Ishizuka of how the self-esteem of language learners changes. Daniel Hooper, Jo Mynard, Ross Sampson and Phillip Taw focus on the changing identities of the users of a Japanese university's English-using social learning space. Caroline Hutchinson addresses learner identities of students as they live through their first year of English at university, with expectations and opportunities very different from those in high school. Next, reporting on a Japanese language course in Australia, Takuya Kojima and Chihiro Thomson tell how a solitary student challenged their beliefs regarding the validity of aiming to create a community of practice. Paula Kalaja and Maria Ruohotie-Lyhty highlight the value of narratives both to understand and to help develop learner identities, while Masuko Miyahara's focus is on the impact on both language learners and researchers of reflections on identities. Andy Barfield

uses narratives, poems, and visual representations to investigate culturally or linguistically complex learner identities, a reminder that much of our multifaceted language learner identities may be in opposition to some kind of oppressive, othering normal: a monolingual, monocultural, standard language speaking norm. Noriko Iwasaki, too, uses language portraits to help learners record changes in national or linguistic identities as they experience the challenges of studying abroad. Kie Yamamoto focuses on one Japanese learner's experience of studying abroad and the confusing and liberating challenges to her identity brought through this experience. Finally, Ana Mari Ferreira Barcelos draws everything together through the lenses of language learner beliefs and emotions.

Editor Bios

Yoshio Nakai is Assistant Professor at Doshisha University and promotes collaborative learning in his teaching in order to help learners of Japanese as a second language to be more autonomous and more reflective on their learning and themselves. For his PhD research, he analyzed learners' motivation using a modified grounded theory approach and illustrated the process of construction of motivation schematically. Now he researches autonomy and identity of language learners and users through qualitative narrative approach. Moreover, he tries to discover issues in a Japanese society through reflective dialogue with linguistic minorities. E-mail: uminchufunto@gmail.com

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Jim Ronald is one of many professors in the Department of English at Hiroshima Shudo University. He holds a PhD in Vocabulary Acquisition from Swansea University. His goal in his teaching, at all levels, is to apply awareness of learner development and pragmatics for the benefit of the language learners in his care. He is currently working on a collection of pragmatics activities for the classroom, *Pragmatics Undercover*, due out in early 2020, co-edited with Gerald Talandis, Jr and Donna Fujimoto. E-mail: jmronald@gmail.com

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