

## Exploring and supporting second language identity development among adult ESL learners

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*Summary: The three primary goals of this article are to explore the research in adult ESL learner populations relating to L2 identities; to center the adult ESL learners' L2 identity development through conferencing and reflection journals; and to recommend practical tools to facilitate the conversation among advanced adult ESL learners in their L2 identity development.*

*Keywords: adult ESL learner, L2 identities, identity development*

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### Introduction

Second language (L2) identity development among adult ESL populations currently has a narrow body of research in the TESOL field (Norton, 1995; Pavlenko, 2001). Research on L2 identity development among adult ESL learners from the past 25 years is limited to case studies and ethnographic studies following college and K-12 students' experiences inside and outside the classroom (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 2000; Kim, 2009). As prior research focuses on higher education contexts with college and K-12 students, the literature in the adult education context is lacking. As a result, adult learners of ESL in basic skills programs are often a neglected population. Hence, there is a need to further investigate L2 identity development among adult ESL learners. The needs, goals, and motivations of L2 identity development of this population will be explored in further detail.

Action research was used to meet the goals of this study as this type of research empowers and emancipates participants through cycles of reform based on reflection and action (McDonough, 2006). As a scholar-practitioner, I found that L2 identities are being formed in my adult ESL class and the confusion about my students' perceptions of themselves through a second language motivated me to research this topic more, particularly through descriptive-qualitative research. In class, there is often great confusion about what students should "sound like" when they are expressing themselves in English. The research gap in this project addresses L2 adult ESL identity development by conveying the need to incorporate L2 identity development in second language classroom curricula among adult ESL learners progressing from intermediate to advanced integrated ESL classes. The interview research data from a graduating class of six adult ESL learners in a basic skills ESL program in the greater

Seattle Area illustrates the English language learners' needs, goals, and motivations for taking an ESL class. This paper aims

- to explore the research in adult ESL learner populations relating to L2 identities;
- to center the adult ESL learners' L2 identity development through conferencing and reflections; and
- to recommend practical tools to facilitate the conversation among advanced adult ESL learners in their L2 identity development through action research.

### L2 identity and literacy

In one of her most notable studies on identity development, Norton (2000) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). Norton (2010) further expanded identity with literacy, as language learners' "identities and investments structure their engagement with texts, whether these be written, oral, or multimodal" (p. 358) and asserted the importance of emerging research on literacy practices extended outside the classroom. This is in line with literacy practices theorized by Street (1984) concerning how they integrate people's views on education through reading and writing within society in particularly situated practices. In a study conducted among L2 ESL graduate students, Her (2005) elaborated the concept of literacy practices structuring social relations and stressed that literacy practices are inherently political and ideological. The research literature is largely still focused on a higher education context as demonstrated by the fact that international students learning in their non-native languages are a common learner population

studied in L2 identity research (Schwartz, 2012; Xiao & Zhao, 2022) as well as teacher education contexts focusing on how teachers develop their identities as language educators (Kalaja & Ruohotie-Lyty, 2019; Karimi & Modifi, 2019). As previously mentioned, there is a large gap in the research literature on L2 identity and adult learner populations. In order to address this gap, an ESL instructor who teaches adult learners may feel the need to consider what kind of activities and assignments they can employ through texts, whether it is through critical journal reflections, conferencing, portfolios, or a hybrid approach with any combination of the aforementioned activities. These activities, particularly the hybrid approach, provide students the opportunity to further the development of their L2 identities in the second language classroom, especially in the adult education context. Norton (2010) asserted that if teachers reflect on their pedagogy especially with regard to language and identity, students' identity development will be positively affected.

## Method

This study employs a descriptive-explorative design, as this allows for the exploration of the participant's identity over time through a natural setting (Creswell, 2009).

### *The context of the study*

The current study was conducted during the summer of 2022 in a basic skills program for adult learners of ESL in the Greater Seattle Area in which materials from a transitional ESL program in another basic skills program from a different institution in the same area were incorporated.

### *Participants*

All six participants were second language learners of English from diverse parts of the world: two from China, one from Russia, one from Venezuela, and one from Cuba. They were enrolled in an eight-week intensive writing ESL course titled "College and Career Readiness." I was the instructor for the course which covered several topics, such as feminism, the conventions of writing, summarizing and analyzing arguments, as well as personal narratives focusing on a recent problem and writing solutions..

### *Data collection*

Prior to data collection, the participants were asked to sign an informed consent document which included the request for access to their homework and written notes from class as this study elicited data from multiple sources, such as critical reflection journals, conferencing, and a reflective portfolio, which were coded in order to generate themes for data analysis. What follows is a brief description of the data.

- **Critical Reflection Journals:** Each weekly critical reflection journal had different prompts related to the course material. In these journals, the students exhibited growth by reflecting on what they had learned from the written papers assigned throughout the course.

- **Conferences/One-on-one interview:** The students participated in an "end of the school term" conference that focused on their takeaways from the program. The interviews varied in length, and they were open-ended questions about how they identified before starting and after completing the course.
- **Portfolios:** The students wrote three papers of varying lengths throughout the school term and completed reflections about their experiences and writing process in a reflective portfolio. The first paper was a narrative problem description assignment: students wrote about themselves to introduce their current life situations, as well as a current problem they were experiencing. The second paper was a solution-evaluation assignment, which allowed students to think of three creative ways to solve the problem that they had previously described in their narrative problem description assignment. The last paper was a summary-response assignment, which required students to write a very short summary of an article of their choice that we read in class together and to respond to it with their own personal solutions. After receiving written feedback from the instructor, the students created a reflective portfolio to write about their experiences throughout the class, and how they grew as writers.

### *Findings*

After the journals were reviewed, the data from conferences analyzed, and the reflective portfolios graded, a few common themes emerged from the student responses. A theme which surfaced from the data collected included "different writing styles in English," "English style of writing is different," "cultural differences." Learners in the study expressed a desire to write in a more direct style, which, their critical reflections revealed, did not feel natural to them. Themes that I found in my analysis were "wanting to write in English like I do in my first language," "sounding more natural when talking in English," and "trying to be confident with using English in everyday life." In the data collected from the critical reflection journals, conferences, and reflective portfolios, students expressed their concern with integrating into mainstream American culture and wanting to identify as a more fluent English language speaker in daily communication. Initially, the students noticed the different nuances between their L1 and L2, but did not seem to have developed a deeper understanding of what "L2 identity" was over the several weeks until the last conference at the end of the term, as I had not explicitly taught "L2 identity" from the beginning of the course. As students learned about writing conventions and styles of writing in English, they were perplexed by how direct writing was in the North American context.

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### *Anastasia's concern with her L2 identity*

One of my students, Anastasia (pseudonym), asked further questions about why she did not “sound like” she does in her L1. She shared her concern about not being able to convey her ideas as clearly in English as she did in her first language. Anastasia, who has a background in human resources and is currently pursuing continuing education at a university in Washington state, expressed her desire to learn more about L2 identity during our end of the quarter conference.

She seemed to be shocked that the term “second language identity” existed. She asked how L2 identity is developed, and wondered if she had been developing another “side” of herself during the eight-week school term. She then asked if I had similar experiences as a second language learner of Japanese and Korean, to which I said I had, and that I had learned about it from a public lecture about L2 identity among Japanese foreign language learners at my alma mater in Washington state. When I explained to her that this was

a concept that is being studied extensively in different contexts but was lacking in adult education, she became further intrigued and requested some follow-up resources. Anastasia stated that if she could have learned about this concept earlier in this advanced ESL course, she would have come to fully realize the growth and development of her second language identity in English. With

Anastasia's experience in mind, the pedagogical implications of teaching about L2 identity should be a priority for ESL practitioners since this is an important concept for second language learners of English to formalize as they progress through educational programs.

### **Discussions and implications**

The current research literature sheds light on the need for L2 identity research for adult learners, which addresses the first goal of this research article. This study illustrated the importance of exploring and supporting second language identity development among adult ESL learners. Throughout the process it became clear that the students in this course would have experienced internal growth if they had learned about second language identities earlier. This would have allowed Anastasia to consider the potential she could reach as an English language learner, as well as identifying areas she may have lacked compared to her L1 identity, such as articulating her thoughts in English confidently in public contexts, which can be developed through time since the “transfer” of identities does not happen instantaneously.

The pedagogical implications of this study illuminate the need to provide support in the identity development of

English language learners in adult education contexts and should be addressed by administrators and ESL instructors of basic skills studies by, for example, providing more opportunities for students to immerse themselves in their L2 identities through enrichment activities such as field trips to potential career sites and inviting alumni to give talks to students about their identity development as an English language learner in a basic skills program.

The implications suggest that students are still exploring L2 identities and “second guessing” themselves about their inability to replicate their L1 identities, which instructors should act upon when they notice these shifts in their students' identity development in English. Allowing students time to understand the cultural differences between their home culture and American academic culture could stimulate discussions on their perceptions of their identities in their L1 and L2. Instructors of ESL should prepare to have conversations with their students about how the differences

between learning in their first language and second language affect their identities in each language respectively, since there is no set curriculum in basic skills programs and the content of the curriculum is dependent on the assigned course instructor.

A recommendation for instructors to prepare for these conversations would be to schedule time to conference with stu-

dents frequently during the school term, which addresses the second and third goal regarding identity development through classroom assignments and practical tools for facilitating conversations about L2 identity among advanced adult ESL learners. Asking students how they reflected on recent lessons regarding the conventions of writing and how they are perceived in English would be excellent conversation starters.

In the current study, I conferenced with students during the last week of the school term. Based on this study, I would recommend structuring qualitative interview questions about their experience learning English in the beginning of the course by introducing students to the concept of “L2 identity,” as well as holding conferences during the middle and at the end of the term, which would also be beneficial. In my course, students wrote weekly journals to reflect about their experiences in class and how I could address certain issues regarding American culture and the conventions of academic writing in English. Consequently, an inclusive and critical methodology of action research conducted for exploring and supporting second language identity development among adult ESL learners should be considered when investigating this learner population. Future researchers should also investigate whether L2 identities are covered and explored in class and investigate the effects at a deeper level.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study suggests that ESL practitioners should work with students to clarify and develop L2 identities. The study at hand provides the context necessary for ESL practitioners to incorporate these discussions into their teaching pedagogy when designing ESL courses for adult learners. Providing reflectional space for adult learners of ESL would allow students to foster a deeper connection between themselves and their identity development in the

language they are studying. In the future, studies pertaining to adult learners in ESL programs should be extensively and empirically researched, especially in basic skills programs that are classified as “workforce education.” Adult learners may be far more concerned with achieving specific goals such as getting a job, obtaining a qualification, and taking care of daily life needs than with their identity. Additional studies of this nature may help adult learners of ESL to better understand the complicated process of identity development and how it is affecting them personally.

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## CITE THIS ARTICLE

Tang, A. (2023). Exploring and supporting second language identity development among adult ESL learners. *WAESOL Educator*, 48(1), 22-25.

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