I speak therefore I am: Self-perceptions of identity in immersion program language learners as an expression of intercultural competence

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated a range of characteristics of intercultural competence in young language learners in one Australian primary school. This paper explores students' expression of identity formation aligned with the act of speaking the target language, which the authors believe to be an expression of students' intercultural competence. Through the opportunities created and required by an immersion language pedagogy, the students perceive that their speaking ability is linked to their ability to *participate*, to *learn*, to *belong* and to *change*. These four functions are viewed as a series of increasingly personal stages of identity formation. Student perceptions describe their successful intercultural ability firstly to reflect and compare languages and cultures and secondly to negotiate an individual personal and cultural identity, constructed from their experience of spoken discourse. The important role

of spoken discourse in all language learning, and in the creation of relationships, identity and intercultural competence is examined in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Immersion bilingual education is a feature of various educational systems across the world and aims to teach students from a majority language group through another majority or minority language. The language becomes the 'vehicle' by which the 'content' of the curriculum is delivered. Students learn new content knowledge and they learn the new language and culture.

Possibly the most well-known documentation of such immersion bilingual programs has been in Canada. In an early study (Lambert & Tucker, 1972), an experiment was undertaken to explore the effects of an immersion program on student grades and attitudes. In later studies (Swain & Johnson, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1981; Swain & Lapkin, 2005), new understandings about this model of bilingual education have come to light.

In his encyclopedia entry defining immersion bilingual education, Baker (2006: 774) not only describes the differences between types of bilingual education models, but also how "strong" forms of bilingual education, such as immersion bilingual education, allow young students to engage in wider communications than they might normally do. Baker (2006: 777) refers to a "sympathy/empathy" that students in immersion bilingual programs can develop as a result of participating in the programs, and if reflection and introspection are encouraged, the students may develop more understanding of their heritage backgrounds and own identities.

The present study explores students' expression of identity within the act of speaking, in social action, in the target language, which the authors believe to be an expression of students' intercultural competence. Its relevance sits both within the wider second language acquisition research area, and also within TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) research.

TESOL research investigates the facilitation of communication among people who do not share the same language and national culture. While the term 'intercultural communication' became prominent in TESOL only in the 1980s, Kramsch (2001) notes that it can be traced to the work of Lado (1957) and Hall (1959). TESOL studies which have focussed on language learners constructing new identities while learning the L2 have included Gumperz'(1982) investigation of the link between discourse and social identity (see Maguire & Graves, 2001; Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

Situating the study in the literature

This section will briefly consider literature which contextualises the study. It provides a conceptual overview of the process of identity formation in the immersion language classroom, and the relationship of this to the notion of intercultural competence.

Immersion bilingual education has been viewed from many angles since the St Lambert Experiment in the 1960s (see for example, Peal & Lambert, 1962; Baker, 2006). One aspect of immersion bilingual education that has evoked scholarly attention is the link between bilingualism and the development of identity.

If, as is assumed, identity is created socially and formed through language, through an individual's negotiation with significant others, then we must also assume that negotiating in two languages may mean an individual's identity will be shaped by the intricacies of two languages and cultures (Armour, 2004; Harklau, 2000; Norton, 2000).

In the views of linguistic anthropologists such as Hymes (1974) language and culture are related to practices and values. Within different cultures there is evidence of certain practices and values being a part of the ways of existence of the members of those cultures. Members of a specific culture learn to speak and interact with other members in different ways, and this then becomes part of their individual identities.

Part of what students are learning in an immersion bilingual program is how to be 'language aware'. The new intercultural imperatives (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino & Kohler, 2003) would posit that the teaching of languages and the development of language awareness in students, can best be undertaken through pedagogies that create a language awareness reflective stance among learners. Being language 'aware' means being sensitive to language use and meanings, being conscious of what is delivered and received, being aware of the nature of language per sé, and being aware that people can be who they are because of their language (Donmall, 1985). If what is being gained in an immersion language programme implemented on intercultural principles, is students' language awareness development, then those students' identities are also being developed and cultivated. Piller (2007: 211) talks of how "we do not have culture but … we construct culture discursively." Individuals become members of community group through their use of language to be active members of that community and they become part of the culture as it is discursively constructed through language.

In this study's wider investigation of intercultural competence in young language learners, the research literature also informed an understanding of the principal characteristics of intercultural competence. Various authors describe the learner as being a purposeful interactive *user* of L2 with awareness of appropriate contextual use (Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003). Scholars in this area also describe the successful intercultural learner as being reflective about the relationship between learner's languages and cultures (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003; Sercu, 2006, and having an ability to notice, and reflect on different interactions with culture (Carr, 1999; Scarino, 2000). What is suggested, is that a 'transformation of the self' occurs in the learning to speak another language (AEF, 2004). This is akin to what Ochs (1993: 288) describes when she notes "language acquisition is closely tied to social identity".

Researchers have been limited in their ability to consider sociocultural development within immersion language learning.

Swain and Lapkin (2005) call for research to be revised to include recognition and investigation of intercultural development in the learner. Lack of empirical evidence of the development of intercultural competence is acknowledged by Liddicoat *et al.* (2003) and Harbon and Browett (2006) as a significant gap in intercultural language research.

Exploring and examining student identity: the context of this study

The syllabus used in New South Wales schools describes language experience as being a three-part model: students are engaged in Using Language, Making Linguistic Connections, and Moving Between Cultures (Board of Studies NSW, 2003). The data represented in this paper were drawn from themes arising in student focus group interview texts. These themes were grouped as representing perceptions in the third area, Moving Between Cultures.

THE STUDY

The setting

The case-study school, which permitted its real name being used in this article, was International Grammar School in Sydney, a secular, independent, K–12 coeducational school, founded in 1984. Both the student population and the staff are culturally diverse. The school was chosen due to its commitment to the provision of languages education from preschool to Year 12, and in particular, the provision of an immersion language program in the primary school. Primary students study selected units of the curriculum in the target language (French, German, Japanese, or Italian) for 80 minutes each day (Moloney, 2004). The program is termed an *enrichment model*, where children learn a second or additional language at school which results in additive bilingualism (Baker, 2006).

Participants

The study sourced data from 49 students of three Year 6 classes (aged 11), French, German, and Japanese. These classes were chosen because they are the languages in which the first researcher has a proficiency. Year 6 students were chosen because of their length of exposure to the language program and for their level of verbal communication. Two further considerations concerning participants are (i) that variables in cultural backgrounds amongst teachers and students could not be controlled for and, (ii) that although one of the researchers (Moloney, 2008a) was employed at the school as Director of Languages, she had not taught any of the participating students. Table 1 displays biographical information about the student participants and the number of years they had spent in the immersion program. These data were collected during the student focus groups.

Data Collection

This qualitative study was a snapshot, cross-sectional study of students and teachers. Classroom observation took place over a ten-week period in the middle of a school year. Field notes were taken during observation and the classes were also audio-recorded. Students took part in one semi-structured focus group discussion of around 60 minutes, held in groups of between five and seven students. In addition to being observed, the four teachers each took part in a 40-minute structured interview. Focus group and individual interviews were audio-recorded. Recorded data were transcribed. Students responded in the focus groups to the stimulus open-ended questions which can be found in the appendix.

TABLE 1

Demographic information about student participants

Characteristics	Students N=49
Girls	26
Boys	23
Number of students in each class	
French	18
German	16
Japanese	15
Family background	
German	6
French	5
Greek	4
Spanish	3
Chinese, Korean, Japanese	2 each
Russian, Maltese, Italian, Bosnian, Lebanese	1 each
Knowledge of a language other than English and TL	16
Number of years in immersion program	
Since preschool (8 years)	19
Since kindergarten (6 years)	12
Since Year 1 (5 years)	2
Since Year 2 (4 years)	2
Since Year 3 (3 years)	6
Since Year 4 (2 years)	2
Since Year 5 (1 year)	6

An iterative inductive process was used in the coding and analysis of data. Transcriptions of audiotapes were thematically coded by content analysis, using a coding system devised by the researcher, detailed below, as described by Ryan and Bernard (2000) and Mackey and Gass (2005). In the course of reading the textual transcripts, a coding system for data was developed, with units of analysis (words, themes) identified (Neuman, 2000). The researchers read the data, re-read the data, and looked for, and marked patterns (Mackey & Gass, 2005), allocating a code symbol to the utterances. There were 23 codes isolated. The researchers were aware that not every utterance produced by the students was "codable" (Mackey & Gass, 2005: 236) because some utterances did not fit into the coding scheme. The researchers looked for "emergent patterns and themes

by looking for anything pertinent to the research question or problem" (Mackey & Gass, 2005: 241). Codes had been isolated in the research literature and other codes emerged from the data itself. A code list was developed and relationships between the themes investigated.

Table 2 below displays a selection of code areas isolated by the researchers. Various student comments were considered by the researchers to link to the coding themes. These utterances were directly linked to the coding theme. The number of students whose comments were linked to a particular theme was tallied. All students mentioned more than one theme.

TABLE 2

Number of students who mentioned items in Code Areas (focus group discussion text: content analysis)

Code	Total N=49	
Student mentions that he/ she…	No.	%
Code 1 … copies teacher language model	40	82%
Code 2 … prioritises speaking activities as most important	33	67%
Code 3 … notices aspects of TL	30	61%
Code 4 … mentions enjoying experiential tasks	41	84%
Code 5 … reflects, compares L1/TL	31	63%
Code 6 … reflects compares TL/ L3, L4	25	51%
Code 7 … mentions language as embodying culture	19	39%
Code 8 … reflects, compares L1 culture, TL culture	33	67%
Code 9 … has positive attitude to going to TL country	35	71%
Code 10 … indicates identification with TL culture	36	73%
Code 11 … has positive attitude to target culture	47	96%
Code 12 … mentions ability to move between cultures and languages	32	65%
Code 13 … notes ownership of exclusive knowledge through speaking	16	33%
Code 14 …. mentions teachers as conveyors of culture	35	71%

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data, four particular themes emerged which link speaking to identity and intercultural competence. These four themes construct the focus of this article. We see that the process of identity formation may be constructed through students' recognition of speaking as an experience of being able:

- to participate

- to learn

- to belong to the learning community

- to change

We address each of these language functions in the paragraphs below.

Speak to participate: Students' belief that speaking the target language represents participation in the language

The students' prioritisation of speaking activities (Code 2, 33 of 49, 67%) is a reflection of the immersion pedagogy in which they are engaged. In an immersion classroom students need to comprehend and interact with the teacher, and each other, in the target language. Philippe (male, French class) says:

> *We know it in French, we're thinking in French, we're understanding in French.*

Good speaking ability enables students to take part in popular games and hands-on tasks (Code 4, 41 of 49, 84%). When asked what type of task helped her to learn most, Tamsin (female, German class) said: *I like it when we are playing games 'cause then it's something good you are learning it for.* Speaking ability enables participation in interaction with the teacher as illustrated in this brief interchange with Timmy (male, French class):

> *Teacher: Timmy, tu parles à tout le monde! (Timmy, you are talking to everyone!)*

Timmy: Non, je suis multitasking! (No, I am multitasking!)

Speak to learn: Students' belief that speaking the target language affords them 'learning' experiences

Tracked in the data was the fact that students identify speaking as the activity within which they experience learning. Sharon (female, French class) explains: *If you actually speak it, you learn new things*.

When asked by the researcher about how he learns Malcolm (male, German class) said: *By talking German*!

Rachael (female, French class) states: *You think to yourself, oh my lord, I am actually learning this language, it means I can speak this language!*

Some children indicated awareness of meta-cognitive strategies in speaking. Oscar (Male, Japanese class): *When we talk, we learn how to put Japanese together*. Students also indicate strategies of code-mixing *We mix English and French a bit* (Diana, French class) and approximation when frustrated with limitations: *I try to say it a different way* (Jacqueline, French class).

Speak to belong: Students' belief that group 'membership' comes with speaking the target language

The idea of exclusive knowledge and membership of the language group was expressed in these data as occurring through the act of speaking. Rachael (female, Japanese class) explains her beliefs about being a member of a particular group, the Japanese speakers, through her speaking ability in Japanese:

> *Its like a code, you can talk to somebody and communicate and they don't understand it unless they are Japanese.*

Where siblings study the same target language at school, the speaking community may be within the family. Charlie (male, Japanese class) says: *I like it that I can speak to my sister in Japanese and my parents can't understand.*

Jacqueline (female, French class) expresses how she would like her self to be seen as a smart French speaker:

> *I think that knowing a second language in general is really important. For example, you'd like to say something in a different language and someone would say " whoah, she's smart", or talk to someone who's French.*

Speak to change: Students' belief that personal change occurs through speaking the target language

Students often expressed the alignment of the act of speaking with their sense of change in themselves. We consider this as evidence of their ability to move between cultures, and a negotiation of identity between two languages and cultures. The focus of the students' comments is not on acquiring a new identity aligned with their target language, for example taking on 'French behaviours', but rather on recognising a new intercultural identity for themselves as someone who is pleased to own a new language and can move between cultures.

Naomi (female, French class), who joined the French program as a beginner only in Year 4 (as compared to classmates who may have studied since Kindergarten), is aware of her transformation, through speaking, into a user of French, when she says: *I've changed, in that now I can speak to other people in French.* Grace (female, Japanese class) identifies her Japanese speaking ability as her expression of her bilingual self: *I'm used to trying to speak Japanese; it's just part of me, so I feel like myself* .

Degrees of physical and emotional identification in the three languages, (Code 10, Code 11, Code 12), expressed in the context of *speaking* the language, were expressed respectively by Naomi and Malcolm:

> *I feel one hundred percent Aussie outside the French class, but inside the French class, I think I feel like a backpacker in France, I hardly know the words but I'm getting there (Naomi)*

I feel like a tourist in Germany... but at language camp, you really feel, you really talk German (Malcolm). Malcolm's alignment of *feel* and *talk* is echoed by Violet (female, Japanese class). Violet implies that the talking embodies the 'persona', when she says: *I kind of talk, and act, Japanese.*

Students are keen observers and admirers of their teachers' speaking ability (Code 1, 40 of 49, 82%), which engages them in the learning community context and relationships. Marie (female, French class) expresses her response to the teacher when she aligns 'feel' and 'talks' and 'answer': she says, *I feel like a different person, like, when the teacher talks to you in French, you go, right, I'm in French class, I'll answer in French.*

Students frequently express the wish to emulate the teachers' persona, perceived to be inherent in the teachers' speaking ability. Violet (female, Japanese class) aligns 'talk', 'learn' and 'be':

> *I see the Japanese teachers talking to each other… you really want to learn how to do that, you really want to be like that.*

Students made frequent reflective and personal comparisons between languages (Code 5, Code 6) and cultures (Code 8). The learning motivation expressed in these student statements of identification suggests it is a strong indicator of the effectiveness of the bilingual immersion pedagogy in the three classrooms of this case study (Moloney, 2008b).

Identity formation through the use of the target language

Through the opportunities created and required by an immersion language pedagogy, students are engaged in speaking their target language in the classroom context across a broad range of tasks and situations. The students perceive that their speaking ability is aligned with their ability to participate as members of the classroom's target language speaking community, to learn new knowledge, to belong to the community of target language speakers in the classroom, and to change, in becoming a target language user:

another part of their identity. These four functions of speaking can be viewed as a series of increasingly personal stages of identity formation. Student perceptions can be aligned with a successful intercultural ability, firstly to reflect and compare languages and cultures, and secondly to negotiate an individual personal and cultural identity, constructed from their language and culture discourse.

The 'transformation of the self' through speaking, as described in this case study students' comments, illustrates key notions in the scholarly literature published in the intercultural area, such as promoted by the Asia Education Foundation (AEF, 2004: 47):

> *intercultural language learning means moving well beyond a static approach to learning isolated facts about an individual culture, and involves the learner in a process of transformation of the self, his/her ability to communicate and to understand communication, and his/her skills for ongoing learning.*

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the dynamic function of spoken interaction in all language learning, in the creation of relationship, context and personal identity formation. It suggests that identity formation, as expressed in the four identified outcomes of speaking, is aligned with intercultural competence.

The students' description of themselves as being active users of spoken language through *participating, learning, belonging* and *changing* illustrates the intercultural notion which Kramsch (1993) describes, of language learners establishing their identity as a user of another language. Confident speaking skills in students are a recognised feature and strength of immersion programs (Swain, 1996). From the case study data considered above, however, speaking skills are also part of the program's capacity to facilitate broader student intercultural competence, through negotiating an individual personal and cultural identity.

This study suggests that, for either an L2 learner or a TESOL English learner, identity formation through the empowering ability of a students' developing spoken discourse is part of an emerging intercultural competence. Intercultural competence in communication is acknowledged (Kramsch, 2001), in an era of progressively shifting interdependent and hybrid identities and cross-cultural networks, as integral to learning success for both L2 and TESOL learners. The study suggests a broader pedagogic value be ascribed to the development of confident interactive speaking skills.

As a limited study of the role of identity formation in effective language learning, this study presents implications for TESOL-related research. It is hoped the findings will provide useful and challenging insights for TESOL teachers and further TESOL research.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONS USED IN THE STUDENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

You and your language learning

1.   What do you like about learning an extra language ?

2.   What do you like doing best in language class? Why?

3.   (a) How is second language class different to your home class?

      (b) Do you feel different to when you are in home class? In what ways? Give me an example.

4.   Do you act or feel different when you speak L2 compared to when you speak English? How? Give me an example.

5.   (a) Do you think Ms/Mr X is very French/German/Japanese ?

      (b) What does he/she do that might make you think this?

      (c) Do you want your second language to be like his/hers? What do you do to make it like his/hers?

6.   What things do you do in class that help you most to know about (target) country and how to use your second language there?

7.   Could you give me a rough estimate of how much you understand in second language class?

      * I hardly understand anything   *I pick up a few words

      * I get about half of what is said   * I understand almost everything

How you learn:

8.   How do you understand what the teacher wants, when you don't know all that he/she says? How do you 'catch on' to the task, the lesson?

9.   Have you been to (target country)? How did you get on there with communicating?

10.   How do you think you would get on if you went to the country? – what things would be hard? Give me an example.

11.   (student who entered after Year 3) Did you have a second language at your old school? What was it? What learning skills did you bring from that class?

12. (continued from 12) Have you caught up in L2? how did you catch up in L2? What do you do when you don't understand? How do you feel about L2?

13. Do you have any friends /know any kids or people who are native speakers of L2? Outside of language class, do you ever communicate with them in L2? How would you rate your ability to communicate with them in L2?

    * Very good/ confident; * good ; *just OK; *its difficult;

    *its very difficult.

14. Pictures of life in Japan/France/Italy: identification and discussion. e.g., Japanese house- if you were in a Japanese home, what things would you do? What would you say? What can you tell me about this picture?