

Article

Identity, Motivation, and Investment in Second Language Learning: A Qualitative Analysis of Two Adolescent Learners

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the connection between identity, motivation, and investment in second language learning by means of the examination of two adolescent English language learners. Based on Darwin and Norton's conceptual framework, the study explores how students' transforming identities shape their motivation, levels of investment, and engagement with the target language.

Keywords: Identity, Investment, Motivation

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition is impacted not only by cognition-related processes but also by cultural, social, and identity-related determinants. Recent study highlights the prominence of perception how learners mediate their identities while learning a new code, as identity plays a pivotal role in molding motivation and investment. This paper analyzes two adolescent learners from bilingual backgrounds to investigate how identity influences their motivation and investment in foreign language learning. Furthermore, motivation functions as a key factor in the assessment stages. Individuals possessing instrumental and incentive motivations tend to perform more effectively as compared to those who lack them. Supportive assessments lead to a significant shift in the level of motivation (Sultanova, 2025).

2. Materials and Methods

This study implements a qualitative descriptive approach drawing on learner background study and critical reflection. The data includes comprehensive learner profiles, observations of learning behaviors, and theoretical study guided by Darwin and Norton's model of identity, motivation, and investment.

Background Summary with a Focus on Identity

Learner 1

The learner is a 14-year-old student who studies at a public school where English is delivered three times a week. She attends additional English courses daily and exposes herself to the target language via reading books, media, and communication with peers in the speaking club events. The student is an intermediate-level user of the English language. The student is bilingual with Uzbek as her native language and Russian as her L1, since she receives Russian medium instruction and communicates at home and with friends in the Russian language.

The learner is intensely motivated and aspires to achieve high-level language proficiency. The learner aims to go abroad for academic and professional purposes in the

future. She dedicates her time and effort to the improvement of her linguistic skills. The student's image of her future self as a certified individual who is an advanced language expert motivates her to work diligently and devote substantial effort to her learning. Mitchel et al. (2013) asserted that an individual's perception of an ideal and proficient language user inspires their commitment to language learning. The student allocates additional time beyond her classroom hours to achieve her language-oriented goals in education and her future career.

The student's identity is dynamic, typically introverted, with a preference for solitary activities such as reading, listening to podcasts, and watching movies as a tool to learn the target language. However, driven by robust motivation, she transforms into an extroverted individual, engaging in social interactions and group work to enhance her proficiency and fluency in the language. The multifaceted nature of identity shapes learners' investment in specific contexts, which aids in explaining why they might feel conflicted about learning and practicing a target language (Darvin & Norton, 2021, p.3). Moreover, the learner experiences intrinsic conflict regarding which language to prioritize. As the learner is bilingual and acquiring an additional language, this context introduces significant complexities in determining which language should take precedence. This conflict generates ambiguity regarding the extent to which the learner's identity should be influenced by the global language and remain attached to the local culture. As the student immerses herself in the target language to attain professional competence, it is inevitable that her identity becomes primarily shaped by the global language and aligns with Western cultural norms. The student exhibits receptiveness and a sense of ease in adapting to global cultural norms which creates tensions within her local community. This conflict has a substantial impact on the language learning experience that may result in undesirable consequences.

Learner 2

The second learner is a 12-year-old boy. He studies at a public school and receives English classes four times a week. He has been attending English courses for 3 months and is showing substantial improvement in the target language performance. The learner is enthusiastic and absorbs knowledge instantly. His native language is Uzbek and he also speaks Russian. The learner struggles to learn English as the linguistic structure of his native language substantially differs from English. As the student was raised in the Uzbek language community, he identifies with his local culture. However, the learner demonstrates a robust aspiration to connect with the target language community, despite facing challenges in comprehending the cultural norms and pragmatic aspects of the target language community. The student displays a high level of motivation, driven by a strong belief that achieving proficiency in the target language will significantly contribute to his future professional development and career advancement. The learner's aspiration to gain international recognition and acceptance as a professional in his field motivates him to invest considerable time and effort in the language learning process. The student endeavors to balance his commitment to his local culture with his pursuit of learning the target language, aiming to contribute both internationally and to the advancement of his local culture.

The learner demonstrates shifts in his identity depending on divergent academic and social settings. As Darvin and Norton (2017) stated, the concept of identity explains phenomena as consistently evolving and changing across different periods and contexts. The process of identity alteration constructed by personal experience, societal and cultural aspects, and motivation has a profound influence on the learning outcome and success in language acquisition. The role of the language instructor extends beyond teaching linguistic elements and skills. It also involves supporting learners in balancing their aspiration to excel in language learning, integrating into the global culture to achieve higher social status, and preserving their local cultural identity.

Motivation and Investment

Learner 1

Motivation

In their article "Investment and Motivation in Language Learning: What's the Difference?", Darwin and Norton (2021) defined motivation and investment as interrelated notions, yet distinct in their focus and scope, with motivation framed as a psychological phenomenon and investment as a social one.

The first learner demonstrates a combination of integrative and instrumental motivation. She enjoys learning the target language engaging in activities such as reading books, watching movies, and participating in English-speaking clubs. Her love for the target language culture and community norms suggests she is driven by a desire to assimilate into and feel part of the culture. To exemplify, during the regular English classes at school, she prefers to write in pencil in her copybooks, even when she is asked to write in pen, explaining that the target language community supports the idea of writing in pencil and we as individuals learning the language of that community need to accept these traditions.

Her motivation is also instrumental and is oriented on achieving specific goals. The student's primary goal is to become a highly skilled and sought-after professional and earn recognition for her expertise, achieving significant financial success as a reflection of her demand in the industry. The learner aspires to become a certified learner and views this opportunity as a beneficial tool for receiving qualitative higher education and better career prospects.

Investment

The investment of the first learner is more profound and multi-faceted compared to the second learner. The learner not only devotes her time and effort to mastering the language but also views it as a means to shape her identity within the global English-speaking community. By engaging deeply with cultural activities, she demonstrates a belief that English grants access to symbolic capital, such as prestige, knowledge, and a sense of cultural belonging, while also offering opportunities to redefine her social identity. The target language serves the learner as a vital tool for cultural integration and personal development. However, sometimes it can be challenging for students to invest in the learning process. Darwin and Norton (2021) stated that for learners to engage meaningfully in their education, they must constantly redefine their identity across different contexts to establish their ability to perform in the target language.

Learner 2

Motivation

The second learner exhibits strong extrinsic motivation driven by clear career objectives. He aspires to become a lawyer, and he firmly believes that mastering English will enhance his ability to succeed in his chosen field. While he values English, his enthusiasm for learning the target language suggests he views it as a more immediate and practical step toward achieving his goals. His motivation is instrumental as he assumes language acquisition as a means to advance his career prospects. It is essential to mention that the learner is deeply determined to achieve language mastery. Even when the learner feels overwhelmed by the volume of tasks and homework or struggles to grasp complex grammar structures, his motivation level can waver. At times, he forgets key concepts, leading to frustration and an increase in his affective filter (a psychological barrier that occurs when learners feel anxious or less confident, making language learning difficult). However, during such moments, he recalls his ambition to become a lawyer and the professional values of learning the language. This reminder reignites his enthusiasm, aiding him to navigate difficulties and remain dedicated to his learning journey.

Investment

According to Darwin and Norton's framework, the learner's commitment to acquiring the language is intricately tied to his vision of himself as a competent and professional lawyer. The language is of exceptional importance to this learner,

demonstrated by his active engagement and eagerness beyond the prescribed curriculum. He dedicates significant time to seeking additional resources during both English classes and supplementary courses, consistently expressing a desire for more. He is the only student in the group who advocates for extending lessons, asking for further explanations of additional units, and emphasizing his belief in the necessity of mastering English to meet his goals. This demonstrates his strong commitment and his recognition of the unique value of language learning in his professional development. The learner's aspiration to maximize the benefits of private tutoring can be attributed to his material resources, which allow him to invest in additional learning opportunities. This aligns with the concept of material capital, where resources as financial means, support the learner's educational journey and investment. Learners use their existing capital to gain new resources and convert them into symbolic capital (Darvin & Norton, 2017).

He perceives language skills as essential for his future role in engaging with international legal communities, participating in professional exchanges abroad, and fostering mutual benefits between foreign legal systems and his home culture. This vision of his professional identity shapes his language learning efforts, as he views it as a necessary tool for both personal and professional development.

3. Results and Discussion

The observations of this study imply that identity plays a pivotal role in constructing learners' motivation and investment in second language learning. Both learners demonstrate marked levels of motivation; yet, the nature of their engagement with the target language diverges substantially due to variations in identity positioning, cultural alignment, and future aspirations.

The first learner demonstrates a robust alignment between identity and language learning, with English operating as a core element of their evolving self-perception. Her motivation is both integrative and instrumental, which triggers persistent and rigorous investment in the target language. She actively engages in language-related activities beyond structured teaching and pursues cultural immersion, suggesting that they perceive English as an avenue to social prestige such as sense of global community and professional authenticity. At the same time, her bilingual background creates cognitive dissonance, as she negotiates between cross-cultural and local identities. This tension occasionally impacts her emotional involvement with language learning and contributes to identity-related pressure.

The second learner shows a principally instrumental motivation toward English learning. His motivation is closely related to clear professional aims, particularly his ambition to become a lawyer. This long-term focused identity supports tenacity and effort, even during phases of complexities or minimized confidence. His investment is conspicuous through active classroom participation, pursuit of additional pedagogical time, and engagement with complementary learning resources. In contrast to the first learner, his identity remains more deeply ingrained in the local culture, and his interaction with the global language community is mainly operational rather than identity-transformative.

Overall, the results suggest that students who link the target language with future identity formation and access to social capital and expertise are more prone to demonstrate sustained motivation and substantive investment. However, the findings also disclose that identity-related tensions, cultural dissonances, and affective factors can impact the quality and consistency of engagement in language learning.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined the relationship between identity, motivation, and investment in second language learning through the analysis of two adolescent learners. The findings confirm that identity is dynamic and jointly negotiated across social, cultural, and

educational contexts, substantially influencing learners' motivation and levels of investment.

The study supports Darvin and Norton's assertion that motivation alone does not wholly elucidate learner engagement. Instead, investment provides a broader understanding of how learners devote time, effort, and resources based on the indicative and material merit they associate with the target language. While one learner invested in English as a means of identity transformation and global integration, the other perceived it primarily as a tool for professional enhancement.

The findings also emphasize the significant role of educators in supporting learners as they traverse identity conflicts and balance global language aspirations with cultural connections. Creating inclusive and supportive learning environments can aid learners retain motivation, curtail anxiety, and invest meaningfully in language learning.

In conclusion, recognizing the multifaceted interaction between identity, motivation, and investment is critical for understanding learner behavior and promoting successful and enduring second language acquisition.

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