



Title of Project:

Learning English as an L2 in PreK:
A Practice Perspective on Identity and Acquisition

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Project Summary:

“Little kids are like sponges,” goes the saying. While young children are commonly believed to be naturally good language learners—and have often been used in second language (L2) research as a homogeneous comparison group for older learners—this project paints a more complex picture of their language acquisition process. This study takes up one of TIRF’s research priorities—students’ age and effective English language education in schools. Rather than studying L2 learning across ages, this study seeks to understand more deeply the process of learning an L2 at one age, for four-year-olds in their first year in school. In particular, the study explores how language learning relates to students’ social context and their developing classroom identities. Past research (e.g., Norton Pierce, 1995; Toohey, 2000; Hawkins, 2005) has shown that social identity can impact possibilities for language learning, in terms of the kinds of interactions, and thus ways of using language, in which learners are able to participate. In this study, I asked: What are the differences in how students in their first year of prekindergarten learn English as a second language? In particular, how do these differences relate to students’ emerging social identities?

This ethnography took place in a mostly English-speaking, former Rust Belt city, where a growing population of resettled refugees meant that many teachers had become de facto English language teachers. After briefly investigating the historical and economic factors that led to the city’s present demographics, I zeroed in on one Head Start classroom that reflected the city-level changes. I followed the classroom’s parents, teachers, and children—six English speakers, eleven Nepali speakers, and one Turkish speaker—across the school year. Data were collected one full school day per week for 27 weeks through field notes, video recordings, and interviews. I first coded these data thematically to understand how parents’ and teachers’ perspectives on language shaped students’ learning context; then, through a combination of coding and discourse analysis, I



used the data to show how four focal students were positioned as more or less competent and authoritative in the classroom. Finally, from fall and spring video transcripts, I constructed corpora of focal students' talk, which I then used to assess English language growth over the year.

The results of these analyses showed that there were indeed significant differences among the learners in how they learned English over the year; however, the relationship between these differences and students' social identities was not as straightforward as anticipated. In the classroom, students who were seen as socially and academically competent were also seen as linguistically competent—by teachers, by peers, and even by me. This was because what mattered day-to-day was what students could *do* with English. Competence meant the ability to assemble linguistic resources in order to accomplish social tasks, to be listened to, and to be taken seriously. Yet, at the end of the year, when I compiled corpora of student talk and analyzed them for growth in English vocabulary and syntax, the relationship between social success and language growth did not hold. In vocabulary and utterance complexity, the most socially successful student (Kritika, L1=Nepali) had learned much less language than her teachers (or I) had thought, and one of the most peripheral students (Hande, L1=Turkish), whom the teachers and I had not credited with much learning, had in fact learned much more. In classroom life, where language was understood and assessed as a social practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), Kritika appeared to have learned the most English; by examining learning as the acquisition of a system of words and grammar, Hande instead seemed to have learned the most.

The results of this study have several implications that span research, theory, and teaching. First, by accounting for language as both social practice and a system of vocabulary/syntax, this study shows that there are multiple kinds of success in language learning and that different versions of success do not always align. In this study, examining language one way made Hande look successful, while examining it another way made Kritika appear more successful. Neither of these is wrong; rather, each only tells part of the story. While the teachers' view of language as social action may seem to have been unfair to Hande, whose great strides in vocabulary/syntax went unseen, the standardized assessment that the students would be given before kindergarten, and which might highlight Hande's learning, would not be able to showcase Kritika's skill. Teachers, as well as researchers and creators of assessment material, must understand that how one defines language changes how one measures success. Building assessment tools and training teachers to approach language in more than one way might balance the current trend of measuring success solely as the individual accumulation of words and structures. Future work must also ask what other ways of defining language learning there could be, and who would be made to look successful by them.

A second implication is a call to reconsider an assumption of both past research and of my own study's design, that a competent and authoritative identity and a central place in a social network are inherently good for language learning. While Kritika's positive identity might have opened doors to English interactions, it also meant that other Nepali-speaking girls constantly sought her out and that she spent a lot of her days playing in Nepali. Additionally, Kritika's reputation as a competent speaker constrained her to maintain that identity, and she was the only student who was ever visibly upset by *not* being understood in English. Rymes and Pash (2001) discuss a first



grade English learner whose efforts at maintaining an identity as “competent” prevented him from seeking actual understanding and learning. Kritika’s social success may have had the same effect. Meanwhile, Hande, despite a socially difficult year as the only Turkish speaker in the class, was free to work quietly alone, to listen to other’s conversations, and to practice English to herself, largely undisturbed. This resulted in significant English gains. Thus, while this study supports the idea that identity matters in language learning, it also underlines the importance of asking, “*How* does identity matter?” Exploring “how” in two different ways led to two opposite findings as to identity’s impact on learning: While a positive social identity supported students ability to accomplish social acts through English, a positive identity did *not* lead to better outcomes in vocabulary and syntax growth, and may have had a negative effect.

Finally, this work raises questions about the necessity and nature of interaction in language acquisition. In nearly every theory of language learning, interaction plays a pivotal role—from cognitive theories, in which it serves as input, to sociocultural theories, in which interaction is the location of learning itself. In the influential work of sociocultural theorists Donato (1994), Lantolf (2000, 2013), Lantolf & Thorne, (2006, 2007), and Swain (1997, 2002), for example, learning occurs through collaborative dialogue, negotiation of meaning, and co-construction of knowledge. In this study, however, Hande was on the sidelines of peer interaction in the participant role of a tolerated overhearer. As a result, she did not collaborate in dialogue or negotiate meaning. Yet, through active listening and later self-talk, she succeeded at mediating her learning in ways that Kritika, who engaged in the kinds of interactions traditionally valued in SLA, did not. Saville-Troike wrote that in the field of SLA researchers have often made the “unconscious assumption that nothing of significance was happening unless learners were talking to each other” (1988, p. 569). By defining interaction as synchronous, active peer talk, studies of language learning, including this one, may have limited how we investigate students’ paths to language acquisition. By expanding our notion of interaction, to include participant roles like overhearer and eavesdropper and to span time and space, we may better understand learners like Hande and render visible their learning.



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