

Self-value, belonging and EAL migrants

Here I discuss main findings from my Ph.D. research into English as an additional language (EAL) learner identities, in the process inquiring into our practices as EAL education providers and educators.

Not surprisingly, many Asian migrants become language learners when they settle in Aotearoa New Zealand. They see English language learning as necessary for communicating with the outer world, hoping to increase chances of taking part in various social and career related communities. They learn at both EAL institutes and in other communities they belong to. But significantly, their language learning identities are also built around notions of self-worth, around other identities they have, and around their sense of belonging to the communities they participate in. There is therefore an active, ongoing interaction between language, identity and society.

These are some of the findings from a narrative inquiry research study of the way language learners negotiated their identities. Six Asian migrant women living in Aotearoa New Zealand engaged in eight iterative individual in-depth interviews over a twelve-month period (two participants each from China and South Korea, one from India and one from Japan). They shared stories which they perceived as significant for their identities.

The participants' stories displayed a gap between their perceived self-value and imposed value as language learners. The gap was closely related to the belief that they did not belong to the mainstream society, which they often explained as a lack of language skills—limited language learner identities. They used the same limitations to explain negative experiences in social interactions and a lack of sense of self-worth.

During the interviews, the participants continued to negotiate their experiences. The negotiation highlights the use of *strategies* (Marginson, 2014), like diversity and hybridity, that the participants drew on to increase their sense of value while reporting their negative experiences. Diversity included previous knowledge and skills, social connections, job, title and qualifications, personal qualities, and success of family members. Hybridity included an in-between knowledge based on the knowledge and experiences of a bilingual and multicultural self to create a new “indistinguishable category where origin and home are indeterminate” (Bolatagici, 2004, p. 76).

Recourse to these strategies also relates to the interview environment, by which a safe and non-threatening process can provide space for them to re-construct their limited identities.

These outcomes reinforce the idea that positive and enabling relations between teachers and students can promote EAL learners' sense of self-value and belonging.

I call this a relationship of *safe bridging places*, drawing on the concept of “safe houses,” which Pratt (1991) defines as “social and intellectual spaces . . . sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, and temporal protection from legacies of oppression” (p. 40).

We should therefore ask ourselves two questions: Are we providing safe places for EAL learners? Are classrooms, schools and institutes, and our communities safe places for them?

And we can usefully remind ourselves that the idea of safe bridging places is not limited to classroom and communities, but includes any social interactions we have with others, in particular EAL learners.

References:

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