

## Learner Identity in Second Language Education

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### ABSTRACT

The article reports on a small-scale classroom research study conducted at a university in Bangladesh. The study is based on the argument that a theory of identity is necessary to understand the complex dynamics of teaching and learning second/foreign languages. In this study, 18 first-year undergraduate students were engaged in a class project called e-autobiography. Naturalistic observations, participants' *autobiographical* writings, and an open-ended questionnaire were used to collect the data. Analysis of the triangulated data indicated three main findings: most students constructed *their identity as "users of English," considered themselves "privileged" to have gotten the opportunity to learn English, and believed that their geographical location was crucial to their identity construction as well as success in learning English.* The article concludes with a call for increased attention to learner identity, which is closely related to successful acquisition of foreign/second language(s).

Keywords: learner identity; autobiography; websites; foreign/second language; education

### INTRODUCTION

Individuals learn foreign/second languages for various purposes, namely, education, survival, professional development, or personal enjoyment. Regardless of the purposes, learners form different identities while learning the target language(s). Many educational and social theorists such as Giddens (1991) and Bourdieu (1988) would argue that identity formation is a process, not an essentialized fixed product. As Wenger (2000) believes, "An identity is not an abstract idea or a label, such as a title, an ethnic category, or a personality trait. It is a lived experience of belonging (or not belonging). A strong identity involves deep connections with others through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection, and mutual commitments" (p. 239). Agreeing with Wenger, I believe that anybody who has learned foreign/second language(s) would admit that learning a language involves constructing new identities with various dimensions and complexities. In addition to being a language learner, a person may have other identities based on her/his gender, social class, physical ability etc.

The ways learners construct and change their identities have clear implications for teachers and researchers. For example, a Brazilian learner's identity as a fan of Michael Jackson helped her learn English because she wanted to understand what Jackson's songs actually meant (Paiva 2011). However, the concept of learner identity has received very little attention from the researchers and theorists of second/foreign language education. As Block (2007) says, "before the 1990s, there was little or no research examining identity as a site of struggle, the negotiation of difference, ambivalence, structure and agency, communities of practice, symbolic capital, or any other constructs associated with poststructuralist identity" (866-867). In order to contribute to the growing discussion on learner identity, which was often neglected in the field of language education, the present study aimed to understand English language learners' identities by analyzing their autobiographical writings. As a teacher-researcher, I asked a class of post-secondary students to work in collaborative groups and share their autobiographical writings on a popular social networking website called Facebook. My observations, the participants' writings, and their

responses to a qualitative questionnaire yielded rich data with implications for effective teaching and learning of foreign/second languages.

### WHY LEARNER IDENTITY?

Sociocultural theorists maintain that learning occurs through participation in social activities. Theorists in this tradition draw heavily on the works of Lev Vygotsky who believes that “the way children learn is by internalizing the activities, habits, vocabulary and ideas of the members of the community in which they grow up” (Vosniadou 2001, p. 9). The sociocultural perspective views learning as embedded within social events in which individuals interact with other individuals, objects, and events. A key feature of this perspective, according to Tharp and Gallimore (1988), “is that higher order functions develop out of social interaction. Vygotsky argues that a child's development cannot be understood by a study of the individual. We must also examine the external social world in which that individual life has developed” (Valenzuela, n.d., para. 1).

In this social world, individuals' identity plays very vital roles in their development and formation of relationships with themselves and with others. In response to the question why identity matters, Moje says that “identity matters because it, whatever it is, shapes or is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with texts” (McCarthy & Moje 2002, p. 228). What Moje says has implications for understanding the roles of identity in learning, which is fundamentally a social act. Individuals' identity matters not only to how they develop relationships with others, but also to how they are understood by others. These understandings shape, to a great extent, people's acts towards one another.

In addition, it is important to note that identities often change. Many educational researchers, however, fail to understand learners having multiple identities. Each of many identities an individual has helps them perform a particular job better than others. While persons recognize themselves in various identity positions throughout their lives, their understanding of their subject positions affect how they build relationships with others. Here, the idea of relationship is not confined to only people in a social context; it also encompasses the relationships with texts. Although the word “text” has gained multiple meanings (e.g., Derrida's (1997) notion of texts as more than linguistic artifacts), I define texts in this article as “cultural tools” and “ways of knowing” (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien 2000, p. 167). Thus, individuals' identities are closely related to how they build and maintain relationships with various texts. It is, therefore, important that researchers and teachers view learners as persons with multiple and changing identities, not just as individuals with (e.g., English language) learning needs.

To understand learner identity, we have to keep in mind that we always go through constant cultural socialization. This socialization process helps us respond to and cope with various types of stress we encounter. How we cope with them also helps us shape and understand our own identities. Spencer (1995) proposes a framework called Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) which can be useful to understand identities as coping responses. PVEST consists of five components: net vulnerability, net stress, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities, and coping outcomes. The fourth component of this framework, i.e., emergent identities, is particularly important for my purpose in this article. As part of normal human development, we all deal with various sources of stress. We use reactive coping methods along with supports—both individual and social—to resolve situations and to respond to stressors. Thus, through cultural socialization, we learn to use, and continue to use, strategies that yield desirable results. These strategies together produce emergent identities, which “define how individuals view themselves within and between their various contexts of development (e.g., family, school, neighborhood, peer group)” (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani 2003, p. 9). It is important to note that these identities do not remain stable. As we go through various stages of our life in different social situations, we encounter different stressors. Thus, the PVEST “cycles and recycles through the life span as

individuals balance new risks against protective factors, engage new stress levels determined by the ratio of challenges to potential supports, try different coping strategies, and redefine how they and others view themselves” (Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani 2003, p. 182).

## IDENTITY IN SLA THEORIES

I shall now focus on the link between identity and language learning/teaching. Second language acquisition (SLA) theories focus heavily on the characteristics of good language learners. Many of these theories are concerned with learners’ motivation, confidence, and anxiety level. These ideas get their momentum in such concepts as comprehensible input and affective filter (Krashen 1982). Other theories focus exclusively on social contexts in which the language learning takes place (e.g., Gardner 1986). Although interactions between learner, text, and context are important for successful language learning (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien 2000), very little effort has been made to theorize the complex relationships between these three components in the field of language education. As Peirce (1995) claims, a comprehensive theory of identity can usefully address this dichotomous relations between learner and context in the SLA theories.

At this point, readers may wonder about whether or not the Vygotskian sociocultural theories focused on the idea of identity as heavily as I claim in this article. It is true that the post-Vygotskian theorists use the notion of identity and subjectivity more often than Vygotsky did. However, we need to keep in mind that “although Vygotsky did not use the terms self or identity, he laid out a scenario for the development of mind in individuals as they interact in society; they internalize practices, knowledge of, and beliefs about the world and about themselves as a consequence of their interactions” (McCarthy & Moje 2002, p. 228). Therefore, from both Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian perspectives, a comprehensive theory of identity can inform our understanding and practice of learning as a social act.

As far as the purpose of this article is concerned, a theory of identity or subjectivity can assist us in understanding the complex dynamics of teaching and learning second/foreign language(s). Weedon (1987) outlines three features of subjectivity: the multiple nature of the subject, subjectivity as a site of struggle, and subjectivity as changing over time. In this framework, language always plays crucial roles in the forming and changing of subjectivity. As Weedon (1987) claims, “Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (p. 21). However, most theories of SLA treat the learners as individuals with learning needs and do not sufficiently focus on different identities learners carry with them. Therefore, as Peirce (1995) argues, “SLA theory needs to develop a conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction” (p. 13).

## UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The present study was designed to explore and understand English language learners’ identities by engaging them in an autobiography writing project. Auto/biography has lately attracted the attention of many educational researchers. Scholars generally agree that one of the earliest autobiographies was Saint Augustine’s *Confessiones*. In the 1760s, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* established itself as a successful literary genre. Since Rousseau’s time, many writers have written autobiographies as a mode of expression. However, the 1990s witnessed a dramatic growth of interest in different forms of autobiography. Scholars from various fields and disciplines such as critical studies, literary criticism, feminism, post-colonial studies, sociology, anthropology,

psychology, and history became interested in autobiography. Nonetheless, there is another group of scholars who are very skeptical about the validity of auto/biographical texts. They often consider these as ‘gossip’ and incapable of offering comprehensive understanding of social and personal phenomena. On the other hand, the proponents of auto/biography argue that it is a true portrait of people, things, and events. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American transcendentalist poet, argues strongly for auto/biography saying that history is always subjective, thus all history is biography (Emerson 2000).

In spite of the critics’ skepticism, the proponents of auto/biography believe that personal narratives are extremely powerful and they can help to bridge the gap between personal experience and social structure. They also believe that personal narratives can offer much insight to understand the central issue of social sciences, i.e., the relative influence of and the relationships between individual agency and social structure. From these perspectives, the use of personal narrative can be very useful in educational research because its use recognizes that human lives are not compartmentalized; there are many different aspects to them. As Weiner (2011a p. 6) says:

First, it recognizes that lives are not hermitically compartmentalized, that is, that individuals have professional, private, and other aspects to their lives; second, that there is a crucial interactive relationship between individual lives, perceptions, and experiences and the educational setting in which individuals live and work; and, third, that individuals are active in negotiating their identities within social and cultural norms and expectations.

These arguments are closely aligned with the sociocultural theories of learning that maintain that learning takes place through social interactions. At the heart of these interactions is how individuals negotiate and construct their identities. These constructed identities have the most potential to influence and control individuals’ agency and their ability to establish social relationships that play crucial roles in learning new knowledge.

The notions and perceptions of identity have changed over time. For example, the notable psychologist of the twentieth century Erik Erikson believed “that a person’s identity emerges through the adolescent turmoil of the body and the resolution of future career, parental role, and life uncertainties” (Weiner 2011b, p. 26). This perception of identity was considered more or less fixed and indicative of developmental maturity. However, the present perceptions of identity focus more on the nature of consciousness and the development of personhood. This development is often mediated by such factors as social class, gender, peer-groups, ethnicity, and language that provide individuals with various frameworks by which they make sense of the world around them. The contemporary theories of identity also maintain that identity is always fractured and in the process of change (see, for example, Giddens 1991). In this light, auto/biographical writings can be a medium of understanding individuals’ identity and the various factors that contribute to the fracturing and re-shaping of identities. These writings are important not only for the students but also for the teachers. By engaging in auto/biographical writings, students can understand how their identities are shaped and changed by various personal, social, spiritual, and material conditions. Moreover, the auto/biographical writings of the students can shape the practices of the teachers by informing them what matters most to their students. This understanding may be helpful for the teachers to incorporate the students’ interests in their teaching activities. Scholars such as Samaras (2002) place much emphasis on knowing the social and cultural influences that shape the development of students. Thus, the knowledge gained from students’ autobiographical writings can help teachers to facilitate effective teaching and learning activities.

### WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY ON A POPULAR WEBSITE

In order to engage the participating students in the autobiography writing project, I used a popular social networking website called Facebook. Websites can be of great importance for both teachers

and students. First of all, websites are a massive source of information. Second, websites can facilitate student-student and teacher-student collaborations. For example, Google Docs can be a great way of doing collaborative work. Moreover, websites can be a tool for communication, which can be both synchronous (occurring in real time) and asynchronous (requiring sequential steps). Examples of the former include web-based phone calls and video conferences, and of the latter may include emails. Another important use of the websites can be content management, which is particularly helpful for teachers. Instead of making copies of handouts and worksheets, teachers can conveniently organize and store them on such websites as Blackboard, WebCT, LiveText, Moodle, and the like.

Although educators generally agree that the website has great potential for teaching and learning, many teachers across the globe do not utilize this opportunity. Teachers' lack of time, training, and interest are among the main barriers with respect to integrating technology into teaching (Kleiner, Thomas & Lewis 2007). Students, on the other hand, welcome the use of technology for educational purposes. One key reason for this may be the fact that they spend a large amount of their time on using various technological tools on a daily basis. According to a UK-based survey conducted in 2009, teenagers spent an average of 31 hours online per week. The survey cited social networking and watching videos on Youtube as the most common activities (Whitehouse 2011, p. 8). According to a Microsoft survey, 82% students aged between 16 and 18 years use the Facebook website every day (Coughlan 2011). However, many of them do not get an opportunity to translate their skills of using this technology into their educational experiences. Therefore, social networking sites such as Facebook can play a vital role in a context where online portals such as Blackboard or Moodle are not available or affordable.

Nevertheless, many teachers are reluctant to use popular social networking sites for educational purposes. A study (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty 2010), carried out at a university in the southern region of the USA, compares faculty and students' responses to the use of Facebook and email for school-related activities. The study concludes:

that faculty and students differ somewhat in their current and anticipated uses of SNSs [social networking sites] such as the currently-popular Facebook. Of particular note is the significant difference between the perceived role of this tool as social, rather than educational. Students seem much more open to the idea of using Facebook instructionally than do faculty. (p. 138)

Another survey carried out with 300 undergraduate students at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), indicates students' positive attitudes toward using Facebook. Analyzing the feasibility of teaching and learning of the English language, the study concludes that "the technologies that support FB [Facebook] and features that characterize FB are able to engage students in meaningful language-based activities" (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin 2010, p. 185).

## RESEARCH CONTEXT & PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted in Bangladesh where English is taught as a core subject in Grades 1 – 12. Although very few people speak English in their personal lives outside classrooms, the government focuses heavily on the English language for international business, increasing job opportunities for the citizens, and educational development. Realizing the importance of learning English, the government introduced a series of policy changes in 2000. In spite of the reform initiatives, the situation of English language teaching (ELT) has failed to show significant achievements (Chowdhury & Le Ha 2008, Hamid & Baldauf 2008). What are the factors affecting the ELT situation in Bangladesh? Why and how do teachers adapt their curricular and pedagogic practices? Many researchers (Pennycook 1989, Kumaravadivelu 2001, Akbari 2008, Wedell 2009) have raised questions about pedagogical effectiveness of ELT methods. Moreover, there are claims that

the methods, originated mostly in the English-speaking West, often undermine the local knowledge and cultural values about teaching and learning. The intermittent use of sociocultural theories of learning in the Western ELT methods calls for a locally-situated pedagogy for foreign language acquisition (Anwaruddin 2011). Keeping this sociocultural perspective in mind, I chose to engage a class of my students in this study named “e-autobiography project.”

University College<sup>1</sup> where the study was conducted is a private urban university located in the city of Dhaka. Students from both urban and rural areas come to University College (UC). A diversity of socio-economic status is generally observed in every class of students. All students speak Bengali as their mother tongue, and their proficiency in English varies to considerable degrees. The majority of the student population comes from schools where the medium of instruction is Bengali. In those schools, students are required to take English courses from grade 1 through 12. On the other hand, there are schools where the medium of instruction is English. Most of the students who graduate from these schools are generally fluent users of English. Graduates from both Bengali and English medium schools come to UC for higher education. As a result, each class at UC comprises students with varying levels of competence in English. According to students’ scores in English in their Admission Test, they are advised to take specific English language courses corresponding to their proficiency levels. At UC, all undergraduate students are required to complete at least two English courses regardless of their major areas of study.

For the present study, I chose a section of my English class. This section had 18 first-year undergraduate students from various disciplines. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 21 with an average age of 19. Of the group, 11 were males and 7 females. All of them were in the course ENG 103 and I was the instructor of the course. All participants had completed ENG 101 prior to taking ENG 103. English was a foreign language for all the participants. Thirteen of them graduated from Bengali medium high schools and five from English medium high schools. All the participants had access to the internet in the university computer laboratories and at their home.

## METHODOLOGY

In this study, I took a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. I designed an instructional unit in which the participants were asked to write a brief autobiography and post their writings on Facebook. The focus of the unit was on multi-paragraph essay writing. The lessons were designed to promote students’ critical thinking skills and to develop their understanding of ethos, pathos and logos so that they could critically analyze various texts. Since all participants had Facebook accounts, they joined a Facebook group I created for them. It was a restricted group, i.e., only the members could see and comment on each other’s posts. I instructed each member of the group to write their autobiography in three sections focusing on their experiences as a member of their family, community, and school. They completed the three sections for three consecutive class sessions. I also instructed them to read and write comments on at least three other class members’ posts. They were advised to find elements of ethos, pathos and logos in the autobiographies and comment on them. As the instructor, I also read all participants’ posts and wrote my comments. During our classroom meetings, I provided a conceptual framework for analyzing the contents and assigned prompts for whole-class and small-group discussions.

To collect the data, I used naturalistic observations, students’ autobiographical writings as artifacts, and an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix). Observation as a method provided me with an opportunity to watch the behavioral patterns of the participants in a classroom situation where the observable behaviors naturally occurred. The writing artifacts were an important source of data. By analyzing these writings, I was able to understand how students construct and change their identities. Another method I used to collect the data was a qualitative questionnaire, which is

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym is used to maintain the anonymity of the institution.

based on open-ended items and “often used for exploratory research, such as when the researcher wants to know how participants think or feel or experience a phenomenon or when the researcher wants to know why participants believe something happens” (Johnson & Christensen 2008, p. 177). The qualitative questionnaire helped to identify the participants’ thoughts, feelings and perceptions from their responses to the open-ended items.

## FINDINGS

The analysis of the triangulated data indicated three main findings: most students constructed their identity as ‘user of English’, they considered themselves ‘privileged’ to have gotten the opportunity to learn English, and their geographical location was crucial to their identity construction as well successful learning of English. First, the desire to improve skills in English contributed to most participants’ identity construction. For example, in her autobiographical writing, Participant F2 wrote that she was not able to speak English fluently when she was in her high school. After coming to UC, she started speaking English that gave her a new identity as a ‘speaker of English’. Another participant believed that his ability to use the English language motivated him to work hard and acquire competence in English. Participant M5 stated that his ‘goal was to become a global citizen’, and the English language was his means to achieve this goal. Moreover, the ability to use English provided the participants a higher social status among their peer groups (Participants F3, F5, & M4).

The second important finding was that most participants believed that it was a privilege for them to be able to learn and use the English language. For instance, one student mentioned:

Many of my friends did not get a good opportunity to learn English. Even though they were very motivated to learn English, they could not go to good schools where they could learn English effectively. I feel lucky because I went to a school where I got a good environment for learning English. (Participant M5, Autobiographical Writing)

In addition to school, home environment and parental involvement were also identified as important factors. Participants, whose parents helped them learn English at home considered themselves ‘privileged’ in comparison with others whose parents did not directly contribute to their learning at home. Moreover, their ability to attend a private university was considered a ‘privilege’. At this university, the only language of teaching and learning is English. The participants generally agreed that they were lucky to have attended this university because here they had an opportunity to develop their skills in English as they were required to use English in all their learning activities.

The third significant finding was the participants’ construction of identity with regard to their geographical locations. Where they lived was a crucial factor of learning English as well. As Participant F3 stated:

When I lived in a small town, there were no good schools to learn English. But, when my parents moved to Dhaka [the capital city of Bangladesh], I was admitted to a school where teachers spoke English, and I learn how to speak fluently in English. My school friends who remained in that small town were not able to develop their skills [good communicative competence]. Now when I talk to them, I can see the difference. (Autobiographical Writing)

Thus, it is clear that students considered their geographical locations as an important factor of learning English. Another participant believed that living in the capital city provided him with a higher social “status” because he was in the center of the country. When he visited his village home (where his grandparents lived), his peers from the neighboring families treated him with “respect.” This special treatment gave him a high self-esteem and motivated him to do well in school. He also believed that his ability to use the English language was related to his geographical location. As he

said, “because I lived in the capital city, I got the chance to learn English and I think it is a privilege for me” (Participant M6).

In addition, to understand the participants’ identity construction, the study also tried to explore how they related their personal experiences and identities to the texts that their classmates created. As one of the participants said:

I like to read my friends’ autobiographies because we share so many things. We can understand each other’s problems. There are many things that we cannot share with our parents. I feel comfortable to share my stories with my friends. (Participant F6)

Most of the participants also found the online activities engaging; they enjoyed using their favourite internet site to do collaborative class work. This was clearly reflected in another participant’s comment:

I think I am addicted to Facebook. I use it all the time. When I work with my computer, sometimes I unconsciously log into Facebook. Last week I did not have to spend extra time for Facebook because I was doing my assignment and reading my friends’ comments and posting my comments [sic]. (Participant M11)

The participants recommended the use of networking websites such as Facebook in other English courses. They thought that they benefited from it because it was convenient for them to share stories with all of their classmates and to learn the course contents at the same time. They also had flexibility to work on their project at their convenience. One of the participants wrote:

Facebook should be used in every class. We can share pictures and website links so easily with others. When I read books, I have to listen to what the author says. I cannot raise my voice and give my opinions. But when I use Facebook, I can share my opinions at the same time I can learn from others. I feel important. (Participant M9)

Thus, the students’ comments and responses indicate that they liked to read each other’s autobiographical stories. Facebook gave them a convenient way of telling their own story and listening to other’s stories at the same time. By actively communicating with one another, each participant of this study felt like a part of the learning community.

## DISCUSSION

My observations, the participants’ autobiographical writings, and their responses to the qualitative questionnaire indicate that the students construct and change their identities as they go through the processes of learning English as a foreign language. Regarding learner identity, the study provides us with three main findings. First, the participants constructed their identity as the user of a foreign language. The ability to communicate in a foreign language was a new experience for them. Second, they believed that they were privileged to get opportunities to learn English. They were aware of the importance of learning English as an international lingua franca. Additionally, they were attending a university where the medium of teaching and learning was English. For all these reasons, when they compared themselves with many of their friends and peers, they felt “privileged.” Finally, their geographical locations were important factors of their identity formation and language learning. Most participants believed that their (or their family’s) ability to live in the capital city helped them to attend “good” schools to learn English. Compared with their friends and/or relatives who lived in rural areas or in small towns, the participants believed that their geographical location was positively related to their ability to learn English effectively. Thus, the findings attest to the claim that learning of foreign/second languages is intimately related to issues of learner identity formation and contestation.



Moreover, the learner-generated texts used in this study seemed to engage the participants in the learning activities. When I introduced the idea of using Facebook as a learning activity, students welcomed it because it seemed authentic to them. Their familiarity with the website motivated them to work on the project because they did not have to learn new concepts/skills in terms of technology use. In addition, the autobiographical texts they created were interesting, familiar and meaningful to them. They were interested in learning each other's stories, and were also able to relate their personal, social, and cultural experiences to the texts. Their increased attentiveness, as found in my classroom observations, during the e-autobiography unit shows that they found the learning activities interesting and motivating.

Another important outcome of this project was the students' interest in collaborative learning. They actively engaged in both in-class and virtual teamwork. One of the reasons for this active collaboration was that they did not need to arrange in-person meetings for group-work. They were able to accomplish the project following their regular schedules. Some of the participants thought that they actually saved time by working on Facebook. Another positive impact of this project was student empowerment. As indicated in a student comment mentioned above, students can voice their opinions in this type of project. In this way, they feel important and can actively participate in the learning process. By participating in a technology-based activity such as the e-autobiography project, they can join the process of creating knowledge. Therefore, various project-based assignments using communication technologies can play vital roles in empowering students and thus actively engaging them in learning activities.

As the findings of this study indicate, the construction of identity is heavily influenced by the students' daily activities in which computer-based technologies play crucial roles. For this reason, if we want our students to enjoy their educational activities, we need to bridge the gap between the "digital natives" and the "digital immigrants" (Prensky 2001, 2010). It is possible that many students find the learning materials and classroom activities de-motivating because they cannot relate them to their life experiences. Moreover, when teachers use traditional learning materials and instructional methods, today's technology savvy students may feel distant from their teachers and see a dichotomy of "us-vs.-them." In this situation, we need to focus on how students learn rather than how we teach. Our job is not properly done if our students do not learn, no matter how well we think we teach them. One of the effective ways to engage the students in active learning processes is to learn about how they construct and change their identities. Moreover, as the findings of this study show, learner-generated-texts can be culturally responsive because learners find familiar socio-cultural experiences in the stories they hear from their peers. It also gives them an opportunity to tell their own stories and become an active member of the learning community. Thus, communication technology and autobiographical texts can engage EFL learners in active learning activities and help them achieve their educational goals.

## IMPLICATIONS

The main goal of this article was to generate attention to learner identity in the teaching and learning of second/foreign languages. Researchers and teachers in the field need to understand that learners have many different and dynamic identities. Regrettably, most theories do not adequately address the issues of learner identity with reference to larger and complex social contexts in which the learners live and develop (Peirce 1995, Block 2007). Moreover, the theories that attempt to deal with this issue often take a narrow view of identity (Firth & Wagner 1997). Therefore, we need comprehensive theories that shed light on learners' identities shaped in both real and figured worlds. We should not pay any less attention to the figured world because it is one of the sites "where identities are produced. People 'figure' who they are through the activities and in relation to the social types that populate these figured worlds and in social relationships with the people who perform these worlds" (Urrieta 2007, p. 108). In the case of second/foreign language learning,

identity—from both Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian perspectives—play very central roles. As Chee (2003) has found learners' identities impact “the need, the desire, and the opportunities to receive input and practice the TL [target language]” (p. viii). Therefore, as I have shown in this article, the findings of the study have clear and practical implications for us to understand how English language learners form identities in various social contexts and across time, and how their identities may impact their learning.

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## APPENDIX

### QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE E-AUTOBIOGRAPHY PROJECT

Please respond to the following questions. You may skip any question if you wish. Thank you for your time and thoughts.

1. What did you think about the unit on e-autobiography? How do you think your identities have changed since you started your post-secondary education?
2. How would you describe your identity as an English language user?
3. Did you think that the use of computer-based technology was helpful? Why or why not?
4. Would you recommend the use of social networking websites in other English courses? Why or why not?
5. Is there anything that you would like to mention about the unit on e-autobiography?