

# 1 Inside, between and beyond: agency and identity in language learning

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## Introduction

One of Earl Stevick's enduring contributions to the field of language education is the insight that 'success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between people in the classroom' (Stevick 1980: 44).<sup>1</sup> An important part of what does or does not go on has to do with relevance, in other words, the connection between something on the external dimension of human experience with something on the internal dimension of the student's appreciation of self (Stevick 1980: 119). Relevance breaks down if what happens does not make sense in terms of the learner's past, present or future realities (p. 118). The affairs of the classroom are thus firmly connected to the world beyond.

Conceptualizing the language learner in this way suggests not only a focus on the person, but a focus on that person as a 'person-in-the-world' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 5). It also encompasses matters of agency and identity (Miller 2010). In what follows, I explore this with reference to interaction in an adult immigrant language classroom along with connections to realities beyond it.

## Agency

Second language acquisition researchers working within a sociocultural paradigm view the interrelated notions of agency, self and identity as being of importance in the learning of additional languages (van Lier 2010: ix). From a sociocultural perspective, agency is viewed as a person's capacity to act within the possibilities afforded by the social structures in which he or she is situated (van Lier 2008; Miller 2010). More specifically, as a context-related capacity:

Agency refers to people's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals, leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation ... A sense of agency

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enables people to imagine, take up, and perform new roles or identities (including those of proficient L2 speaker or multilingual) and to take concrete actions in pursuit of their goals. Agency can also enable people to actively resist certain behaviors, practices, or positionings, sometimes leading to oppositional stances and behaviors leading to other identities.

(Duff 2012: 417)

In addition to action or performance, agency is also understood to encompass the capability to ascribe relevance and significance to things and events, including agentive behaviour (Lantolf and Thorne 2006; van Lier 2008; Miller 2010). Miller connects the dots by suggesting that ‘the capacity to act and ability to assign relevance and significance to such acts emerge as individuals are positioned as (potential) agents within ideologically defined spaces’ (2010: 466). Put differently, the prevailing belief and value systems in any number of contexts, including political, social and institutional, shape conditions for interaction between people and come to bear on the significance that they ascribe to it. Explaining further, Miller contends that the constraints established by constructing a particular identity position at a given point also enable a person to act purposefully in that interactional space. Thus, ‘recognizable subject positions such as “language learner” or “adult immigrant” or “small business owner” can enable individuals to act meaningfully and also resist and transform such positioning’ (p. 468).

## Identity

According to Ishiyama (1995a), meaningful action is motivated by a need for self-validation, that is the ‘affirmation of one’s sense of self, purpose in life, and meaningful personal existence in a given sociocultural context’ (Ishiyama and Kitayama 1994: 168). It is a process often mediated in and through language (Ishiyama 1995b). In this view, self is represented as a multidimensional construct consisting of five elements: physical, or what I call *bodily self* (the body and physical aspects of being), *familial self* (family roles and relationships), *sociocultural self* (social and cultural roles and relationships outside the family context), *transcultural-existential self* (the existential aspect of self capable of relating to others at a level beyond the restrictions of sociocultural norms or externally imposed values) and *transpersonal self* (the spiritual or ego-transcending aspect of self) (Ishiyama 1995a). These inter-related dimensions are co-occurring, fluid and holistic. In related work I have suggested that the way in which an individual personally experiences or assigns significance to a particular dimension of self at any

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given time will draw on *physical, cognitive, affective* and/or *spiritual* awarenesses and capacities, some of which will be foregrounded more than others, depending on circumstances (Kristjánsson 2010).

From this perspective, identities are constructed and validated or invalidated around the five basic dimensions of self in various contexts of human existence. These contexts of existence can be conceptualized in terms of four overlapping domains: interpersonal *relationships*, *activities*, symbolic and practical objects or *things*, and *places* or landmarks (Ishiyama 1995a). As I have noted elsewhere (Kristjánsson 2010), the domains do not exist in a vacuum but are located within a constellation of *sociocultural structures* such as government, educational institutions, organized religion and kinship structures, to name a few. These encompass relations of power and are themselves situated in broader orientations towards the world which include, but are not limited to, cultural and ideological frames, represented by the term *worldviews*. Worldviews come to bear on how all aspects are understood and interpreted in constructing identities for self and positioning others at any given junction in time and space. This is depicted in the diagram of situated multidimensional identity in Figure 1.1.

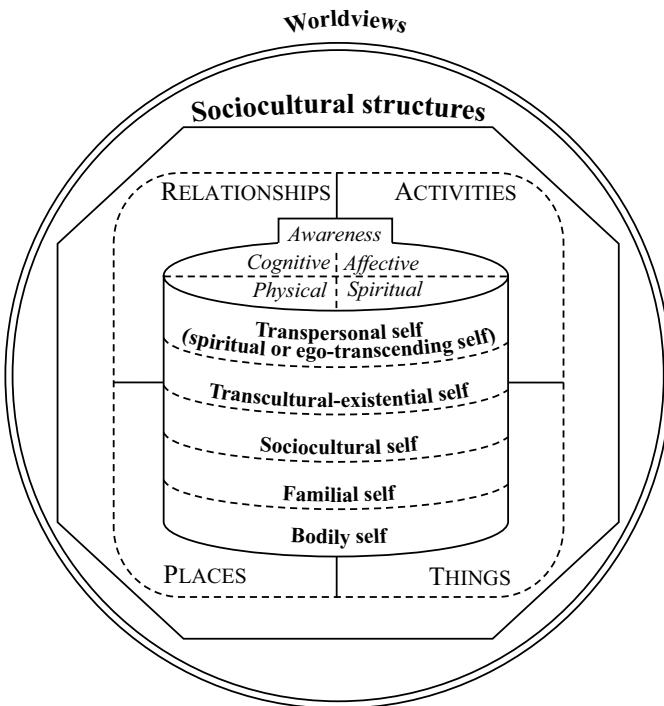


Figure 1.1 Situated multidimensional identity (adapted from Kristjánsson 2010)

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What insights about relevance might such perspectives afford when applied to the investigation of interaction in a language classroom? More specifically, what might be learned about how practices within the classroom structure possibilities for engagement of self, and how might the related exercise of agency and constructions of identity be informed by broader frames of reference and perceptions of reality? I turn now to an example to address these questions.

### **An example**

A few years ago, I conducted a study in a volunteer-run, community-based language programme that offered classes to adults who were newcomers to Canada. Classes were held two mornings a week, and an important feature of the programme was an activity known as ‘What did you do on the weekend?’ This took place during the first part of the first class each week when students at all levels were given an opportunity to talk about something they did or something that happened to them over the weekend. It was not uncommon for classes to spend up to 90 minutes, or 25% of the week’s class time, engaged in this exercise, although there was no pressure on students to participate more than they were willing and topics were up to them. The purpose of the activity was to provide opportunities for learners to use English to talk about things that were going on in their lives outside of the classroom. These sessions were typically characterized by regular accounts of routine undertakings mixed with lighthearted moments of teasing and shared jokes; however, there were also times when students chose to disclose matters that were serious in nature.

One such instance occurred in an intermediate class of female students consisting of immigrant women and mothers of young international students, many alone with their children in Canada. The class was video recorded as part of a broader investigation and a transcription made of the interaction. On the day when this exchange took place, there were 14 Taiwanese and Korean women present along with the female Canadian-born teacher of German descent. The morning began with a Taiwanese student describing the death of a 33-year-old cousin from cancer. The next student told of her ageing father’s spiritual experience in a hospital in Taiwan. A third student spoke of her husband’s return to Korea for another three-month period and how her son had cried inconsolably at his departure. The fourth student, Juling, a Taiwanese woman, began by saying that she had been unwell over the weekend, linking her condition to interrelated physical and emotional causes. When the teacher suggested it was

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because she missed her husband who was in Taiwan, Juling rejected the explanation, countering with her own view that it was due to lack of friendship.

Juling: Last week I'm very sad because I feel uncomfortable. I have some runny nose ... and cough and I feel very lonely.

Teacher: Oh, you miss your husband.

Juling: No, because I came to here and haven't good friend (fights tears) and so I pray.

Amid offers of support and friendship from others in the class, Juling told how she had called an immigrant acquaintance who had initially experienced physical illness in Canada which she too linked to loneliness. Now that the acquaintance had friends, this was no longer a problem. Juling reported that the woman had given her advice on how to make friends, but that she felt she still did not know what to do and so she had prayed once again. She subsequently received phone calls from several friends who lived at a distance and neighbours dropped by for a visit. She interpreted these events as an answer to her prayer. The teacher responded empathetically:

Teacher: Good. I sometimes have lonely days, too. I think we all do ... Women need each other. We need to talk, and I know for lots of you it must be very hard.

This led to a declaration from Mi-Hye, the most senior Korean student, that Juling had good friends among those in the class and comments from others that Juling was not the only one to feel sad and lonely. Jinhee, another Korean student whose husband was in Korea, then initiated an account of her own recent experience, which turned into a humorous, yet serious, co-constructed commentary with the teacher and Mi-Hye each incorporating disclosures of their own.

Jinhee: Early morning I receive a call from my husband. Suddenly, why I cried? I don't know.

Teacher: Because you missed him! [General laughter]

Jinhee: I'm not missing him. Just a little. [General laughter; Jinhee laughs]

Teacher: [Acts as if phoning] But all of a sudden you hear his voice and then you really miss him!

Mi-Hye: My husband always with me, but I sometimes will cry too. [General laughter] Yeah, not husband! [General laughter]

Teacher: I miss my children now that they're married and don't live in my house. Sometimes I'm crying [gestures to show tears streaming down face] and my husband says, 'What's the matter?' [with mock teary voice] 'I miss C!' [General laughter]

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Jinhee: Sometimes my feeling is low. I am crying. My husband really worry about me. He say, ‘Why you crying?’ So I answer.

Mi-Hye: ‘I need you.’ [Much general laughter]

Teacher: ‘I need you!’ [More general laughter]

Mi-Hye: ‘Right now.’

Teacher: ‘Yeah, right now! Come home!’

Jinhee: [Mimics her husband] ‘I think you catch some cold?’ I, ‘Yes’, but I’m not catch cold. [Laughs]

Teacher: You just said you did.

Jinhee finished her account by stating that in contrast to when she was in Korea, in Canada she too sometimes experienced the feelings described by Juling. The teacher then turned to Juling and commented on the benefits of her disclosure. Two other students offered related contributions:

Teacher: Juling, it is very good that you shared this with the class because now you know that we all have this.

Yu-Jeong: Now I think it is time to test myself, to [be] strong.

Teacher: Oh yeah ... It’s a testing time.

Yu-Jeong: [To Juling] Everyone is difficult, are difficult, live here.

Yunjin: You have to stand alone ... we feel alone, lonely. Try to share, share together. [Gestures to include the class]

Juling responded by elaborating further on the cause of her loneliness: missing the Lunar New Year celebration in Taiwan. This sparked an exchange, initiated by Jinhee and supported by the teacher, regarding special holidays and the loneliness people feel when separated from loved ones at such times. At the end, the teacher again thanked Juling for her contribution. Juling responded with an apology, an action met with protests from the teacher and other students:

Teacher: Don’t be sorry!

Various: Don’t be sorry!

Jinhee: Don’t be sorry. [Gestures with hand to indicate ‘no’]

Teacher: No, it’s very good ... you feel better when you talk about it and you find out that others feel the same thing.

Yalin, a Taiwanese student, then offered to help Juling make contact with other Chinese in the church community to which she belonged. This was followed by additional comments of affirmation and support for Juling and a concluding observation by Jinhee that listening to Juling’s story had caused those in the class to feel closer. The teacher concurred, bringing this part of the activity to an end.

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### **Classroom practices and possibilities for self, agency and identity**

Language teachers often place high value on communicative language use; however, what actually goes on in many classrooms falls short of the mark. In fact, studies across a broad spectrum of language classrooms have shown that interaction is frequently teacher led and dominated, often characterized by IRF (teacher initiation – student response – teacher feedback) (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) or IRE (teacher initiation – student response – teacher evaluation) (Mehan 1979) sequences (Thornbury and Slade 2006; Waring 2009; Doherty 2010). By contrast, the interaction arising from the ‘What did you do on the weekend?’ (hereafter Weekend) activity is a complex multi-participant discussion that encompasses the exchanges of six students and a teacher, and resembles casual conversation.

Viewed through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday 1994), language is a resource for making several kinds of meaning simultaneously: meaning about the world, meaning about the message and interpersonal meaning about the roles and relationships of people. Casual conversation accomplishes all of the above; however, it is driven by interpersonal meanings (Eggins and Slade 1997: 6). This is encoded in a variety of ways that communicate attitudinal stance, including evaluative language and humorous devices. The latter facilitates the serious work of evaluative meaning-making while representing attitudes less explicitly. The former constructs an attitudinal profile of feelings, thoughts and behaviour along a continuum of negative to positive orientation. An analysis of interpersonal meaning provides a view of how people in conversation enact and construct their social identities, position and reposition conversation partners, and build alignments (Eggins and Slade 1997: 314; Thornbury and Slade 2006: 69). In short, it provides a linguistic snapshot of social action in a given context. It is therefore helpful to take a closer look at the use of evaluative language by participants in the Weekend interaction. For this purpose, I draw on the tools of Appraisal analysis, using the following categories (Eggins and Slade 1997: 125; Martin and White 2005: 42–68):

- AFFECT: speakers’ expression of emotional states  
*Guiding question:* How do you feel about this?
- APPRECIATION: speakers’ reaction to and evaluations of reality – concrete, abstract, material or semiotic things  
*Guiding question:* What do you think/know/understand/believe about this process/event/phenomenon?

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- **JUDGEMENT:** speakers' judgements about behaviour or character – the ethics, morality or social values of people  
*Guiding question:* How do you judge this behaviour or this person's character?

The results of an Appraisal analysis of the transcript of interaction in the Weekend activity show that evaluative language is associated with the lived experiences of participants, that is, identity positionings and alignments related to the realities of women who are newcomers to Canada. More specifically, the interaction highlights their feelings in this regard and is characterized by the use of linguistic resources of AFFECT throughout. For example, Juling begins by framing her weekend experience in such terms (e.g. 'I'm *very sad*', 'I feel *uncomfortable*', 'I feel *very lonely*') and brings her initial account to a close by attributing the unexpected events of the weekend to an answer to the prayer born out of loneliness ('Because I prayed, "God, I'm *very lonely*"'). The teacher extends the scope of the discussion by noting her own experience of loneliness and generalizes it to others ('I sometimes have *lonely days* too. I think we all do'). Subsequent comments by Yunjin, Jinhee, Mi-Hye and Yu-Jeong incorporate comments that describe related feelings linked to their experiences as newcomers to Canada. While much of the interaction revolves around feelings of loneliness associated with this aspect of their lives, it ends on a positive affective note when Jinhee sums up the impact of hearing Juling's story ('we *feel more close*').

In addition to disclosing personal feelings, participants also communicate their perceptions of the circumstances and related behaviours of newcomers to Canada, drawing on linguistic resources of APPRECIATION and JUDGEMENT. For example, Juling's feeling of sadness is precipitated by the perception that she does not have a close friend ('I came to here and *haven't good friend*') while Yu-Jeong notes the difficulties faced by all ('Everyone is *difficult* ... live here'). From Yunjin's perspective, newcomers cannot look to others for support ('You have to *stand alone*'); however, within the class the situation is different. Whereas Juling positions herself as unable to make friends, Mi-Hye challenges this by observing that she has friends in the class ('You have *very good friends* here'). For her part, the teacher highlights the acceptability of Juling's disclosure ('it is *very good that you shared this* with the class because now you know that we all have this') and reframes her behaviour with reference to the general desirability of and need for women to support each other. When Juling apologizes for her tearful disclosure ('I'm *sorry*'), suggesting a perception of her behaviour as inappropriate for that setting, the teacher counters with an explicit statement of



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approval ('No, it's *very good*'), repeating her earlier statement that talking about difficulties is an antidote to feelings of isolation.

To summarize, the contributions of participants in the Weekend activity feature expressions of Appraisal linked to self or others within the context of personal stories and related comments regarding the experience of being newcomers to Canada. It is within the context of this overarching story that identity positions are constructed in the give and take of meaningful discourse action by overt naming or implication, including instances where positions are claimed (e.g. 'friendless newcomer'), resisted (e.g. 'lonely wife'), renegotiated (e.g. 'newcomer with good friends'), transformed (e.g. it's a time to be strong – i.e. 'strong women') and extended (e.g. all women (not just newcomers) need each other – 'mutually supportive women'). However, these discursively constructed positions can also be seen as grounded in broader, foundational, dimensions of self.

Ishiyama's (1995a) model of validation is based on the assumption that people are motivated to seek validation, that is affirmation, around the five dimensions of self. By linking the Appraisal analysis above to the broader categories of self and related validation domains derived from Ishiyama's work, we can gain an enhanced understanding of agency demonstrated in the Weekend activity. Table 1.1 illustrates this connection with Appraisal samples from the interaction which have been

**Table 1.1** *Appraisal analysis and validation elements*

Appraisal	Appraisal category	Dimension of self	Validation domain
I feel very lonely. I haven't good friend.	Affect – Appreciation – (Judgement –)	Sociocultural self under/invalidated	Relationships
I prayed, 'God I am very lonely.' ... He brought you some hope. Good. [He brought you some hope.]	Affect – Affect + Appreciation +	Transpersonal (spiritual) self validated	Relationships

(cont.)

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**Table 1.1** (cont.)

Appraisal	Appraisal category	Dimension of self	Validation domain
You have very good friends here. ... we all care about you.	Appreciation + (Judgement +) Affect +	<u>Sociocultural</u> self validated	Relationships
We all do [have lonely days]. Women need each other.	Affect – Appreciation +	Transcultural-existential self validated – all have similar needs	Relationships
I cried. I am not missing him [my husband]. Just a little bit.	Affect – Affect –	Familial self under/invalidated	Relationships
In Taiwan ... every year I have this special dinner [Lunar New Year celebration], but this year I haven't.	Appreciation +  Appreciation –	<u>Sociocultural</u> self under/invalidated	Place/Thing/Activity
It is very good that you shared this with the class.	Judgement +	<u>Sociocultural</u> self validated	Relationships

thematically analysed with reference to Ishiyama's categories. This level of analysis suggests that the evaluative comments made by participants can not only be understood as views related to particular lived experiences and perceptions of reality, but also be seen to indicate validation or invalidation of foundational dimensions of participants' sense of self. Although the Weekend interaction centres primarily upon identity positions related to the dimension of sociocultural self, the discussion also encompasses appeals made to the transpersonal, transcultural and familial self as illustrated. At the most basic level, positive polarity, i.e. an expression of positively oriented sentiment (+), generally signals validation of a dimension of self. Negative polarity, an expression of negatively