L2 Learner's Identities and Gender in ESL and EFL Classroom Interaction

Jina Lee

I. Introduction

Learners are extremely complex social beings with a multitude of fluctuating, at times conflicting needs and desires. Norton’s (2000) study claimed that language learning is not an abstract skill that can be easily transferred from one context to another, rather it is a ‘social practice’ that engages the identities of learners in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Norton, 2000, p.137). Based on this idea, the discussion on the notion of ‘identities’ in this paper focuses on the Norton’s ‘multiple identities’, Tajfel’s ‘social identities’, and Boxer and Cortes-Conde’s ‘relational identities,’ as well as the issues of learner’s gender identities in classroom interaction.

Learner’s identity is a very important consideration for language learning affecting ‘agency’, a concept that differs from the traditional view of motivation. Agency enhancement derives from identities that afford learner’s a sense of power
over their environment and thereby their learning. Pierce (1995) and Norton (2000) asserted the importance of ‘investment’ enhancement rather than ‘agency’ in the discussion of identity and its relation to language learning. Pierce (1995) described ‘investment’ as the relationship of social identity to power differences between learners and target language speakers. An investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner’s own social identity, which changes across time and space.

While Pierce (1995) focused on opportunities to speak, McKay and Wong’s (1996) research investigated students’ investment in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. McKay and Wong (1996) argued that investment in each of these skills can be highly selective and that different skills can have different values in relation to learner identities.

Assuming the above notions of identities that Norton and McKay and Wong provide, Boxer and Cortes-Conde (1997, 2000) introduced the notion of ‘relational identities’ (RID), which incorporates both ‘investment’ and ‘agency’. This notion of identity is intermediary between the individual identities and the social identities. Although all of the notions of identities mentioned above presuppose the changeability across time and space, and Norton’s notion of identities are mostly built on social contact in target language(TL) communities rather than in classroom, RID reflects a smaller chunk of moment-to-moment possibility of shift in frames, footings, or alignments, such as situational shift in classroom or in casual conversation. Thus, Boxer and Cortes-Conde claimed that RID mediates between individual identity and social identities. According to them, by affording the learner power over educational resources, RID has important consequences not only for identity enhancement but also for agency enhancement and investment enhancement. They especially posited a direct relation between the building of classroom community and the freedom to negotiate interaction, thus stretching the learners’ linguistic and pragmatic abilities, so that it drives negotiated interaction between native speaker(NS) and non-native speaker(NNS), and NNS and NNS for sequential