

3. Technology's Impact on the Learner's Identity in the Target Language

Peter Isackson, Confluence On-Line (COMPAL)

Abstract

Learning a language inevitably means adapting one's identity to a new set of opportunities and constraints. Among the constraints are the grammar, syntax and phonological system of the target language. But learning a language also implies allowing one's identity to evolve in the target language. It may ultimately lead to creating a new identity. Most pedagogy has traditionally concentrated on short-term performance goals and left the question of learner identity in the background. This is where the advent of multimedia promises to open up new horizons. The interactivity of the most recent multimedia systems allows modes of expression and simulated communication that have the power to stimulate those processes of identification that underlie the evolution of learners' identities. Clearly such an approach requires totally new pedagogic models and implies a different vision of pedagogic programming, new teaching styles and an original conception of both the timing and nature of practical actions to be taken in the course of a long-term programme.

Introduction

As everyone intuitively knows, language learning either happens or it doesn't happen. People often try to learn a language – at school, at work, at home on their own – and either succeed or fail. What a particular individual succeeds in learning *about* a language may or may not be converted into the ability to use that language. Those who do succeed in actively using a language often feel that they have *integrated* it, that the language has become a part of them. Many learning theories encourage notions such as *integration* and *appropriation*.

My purpose in this paper is to extend the cognitive concept of a *learning process* by looking at how it fits in with a more existential and psychological concept: that of identity. I maintain very simply that learning of any kind does not take place unless there is a deep transformation of identity or self-image. The difference between someone who learns *about* a language and another person who integrates the language, is first of all, a difference in how those learners think about themselves, both consciously and unconsciously.

The importance of this distinction is capital for pedagogy. If as trainers we can get a handle on the basic mechanics of how identity is transformed, even if we

recognise there is no simple recipe for guaranteeing success, there is nevertheless a chance that we will be more effective in helping adult learners achieve their real goals. One of the advantages of current (and future) technology is to provide interestingly varied tools that help to structure pedagogy around the theme of learner identity.

The multiple bases of identity

Identity is not a simple concept, as all psychologists will be quick to insist. The problem of identity in a pedagogical framework can be subdivided into five obvious and useful categories:

1. As a learner
2. As a speaker of the language
3. As a member of society (which society?)
4. As a professional
5. As a spokesperson (for whom?)

Using the new language will require adjustments of that form of self-awareness that we call identity on these five different planes, sometimes separately, sometimes conjointly.

The learner's relationship with the language

One way of coming to grips with the identity is to consider the idea the trainer may have of the learner's position with regard to the language. Using an extended spatial metaphor, we can imagine a number of variations describing the learner's relationship to the language:

- Outside looking in (as through a window)
- Standing opposite (as on the opposite shore or side of the street)
- Back to back
- On a parallel route
- On a guided tour
- On a roped off corridor
- Inside exploring.

All but the last represent implicit points of view that are in some way responsible for the consistent failures of traditional pedagogy to stimulate integration and appropriation. They all represent stances implying that the foreign language

Position	Pedagogic activity	Effect
<i>Outside looking in</i>	Demonstrating aspects of the language (anecdotal, mildly cultural)	Increasing the psychological distance between the learner and the target language
<i>Standing opposite</i>	Analysing the language, treating linguistic expression as a mathematical equation	Evacuating the communication dimension and all psychology
<i>Back to back</i>	Teaching isolated facts of the language	Sporadic knowledge unrelated to real communication
<i>On a parallel route</i>	Comparison of the foreign and native language	Learning more about one's mother tongue than about the target language
<i>On a guided tour</i>	Visiting the curiosities (anecdotal, exaggeratedly cultural)	Encouraging a stereotyped vision of the language and its cultural associations
<i>On a roped off corridor</i>	Discovering the official landmarks (linguistic and cultural)	Creating a stereotyped vision of the language and its use

remains foreign, i.e. exterior to the personality of the learner. In this sense they delay or even prevent the natural *rapprochement* that turns a learner into a speaker of the language. They all suppose an incremental development of knowledge but make no allowance for the changing position of the learner, who at best becomes a well-instructed outside observer.

If we look more closely at the six examples we notice the following pedagogic attitudes and their likely effects:

Without the trainer's effort to prepare and manage the change of position from *outside* to *inside*, the learner will logically fail to make real progress in the language. The ultimate danger is that the language itself will remain something abstract and distant, of no direct concern to the learner who will simply be proud of the trivial knowledge acquired concerning the language and the culture.

On the other hand, the final model, *inside exploring*, implies not only that the learner will learn to feel comfortable in contexts where the language is used, but also supposes a complementary reversal of the relationship: *the language exists inside the learner*. Such a symbiosis is achieved at the level of learner identity, which can be summed up not only by *how* the learner feels about the language, but *who* the learner feels to be in the language.

The importance of context

Linguistic context can be defined on two levels: that of the general discourse situation (macro) and that of the sentence (micro). In both cases surrounding linguistic material has a determining influence on the choices and strategies available both for comprehension and expression. It could be said that context therefore serves the purpose of defining specific sets of opportunities and constraints and that learning to use a language means adapting one's comprehension and expression, but also one's identity to a new set of opportunities and constraints. Among the micro-constraints are the grammar, syntax and phonological system of the target language. This means not only the mental gymnastics of listening and speaking required to adapt, but also the complete set of language-specific physical operations involved in communicative interaction: breathing, articulating, physical attitude, gesturing, etc. Among the opportunities provided by this effort at adaptation are, of course, the well-known goals:

- the possibility of exchanging practical information with people who do not speak your own language,
- the discovery that you as a person exist for speakers who belong to a different culture and community than your own.

In short, learning a language inevitably implies, not just memorising a new set of rules and patterns, but also allowing one's identity to evolve in the target language. This means that the social personality, having absorbed characteristics required for effective communication in the new language, will not be totally identical to the

personality in the mother tongue. Beyond this, the set of memories associated with communicating in the second language, memories and precedents that combine to build the subjective contents of an organic personality, will be different in quality and in type to those of the mother tongue. This is an inevitable and necessary process that most people who have learned a foreign language recognise in some uncomprehending but real way only after it has taken place.

Implications for teaching methodology

Most traditional pedagogy has concentrated on short-term performance goals and left the question of learner identity in the background. The obvious reason for this, whatever the teaching approach adopted, is that the classroom or training course situation is ill-adapted to any kind of long-term constructive work on identity. This is where the advent of multimedia promises to open up new horizons. Work on video in communication training since the 1970's when cameras and VCRs came onto the marketplace has shown the potential impact of this particular medium: assessment of self-image as an instrument in progressive behavioural adjustment (video camera) and observation of complex actions as well as their impact on other members of a communication situation (interactive video). The interactivity of the most recent multimedia systems allows modes of expression and simulated communication that have the power to stimulate the processes of identification underlying the evolution of learners' identities. Recording technology makes it possible to develop, through contextualised vocal work the notion of a credible and authentic personal voice. The integration of the World Wide Web provides a social stratum in which the roots of a learner's new identity can nourish the growth of a communicating personality.

More generally, it can be said that technology provides three important elements lacking in traditional pedagogic organisation:

1. A potentially infinite variety of experiences, input and models.
2. An elastic time scale for training and post-training development that allows for the integration of short-term, medium and long term goals and strategies.
3. A social setting that goes beyond purely pedagogic relationships (teacher-learner).

Clearly an approach that aims at helping to build identity as an integral part of the language learning process requires totally new pedagogic models and implies a different approach to pedagogic programming, teaching styles and practical action. Reflection on the combined force of complementary media can lead us to imagine the type of long term training programmes required for a future where multimedia and the Internet are permanent fixtures of all professional and many leisure activities.

New horizons using media

The new media can be used to build a comprehensive approach to language learning if the specific interest of each media component is recognised. Here is a schematic breakdown of the specific value of each of the known media.

Video

Video can be broken down into two compartments: recording of original documents (learner-produced) and playback of prerecorded documents. To simplify we contrast two technologies: the video camera and the VCR. The camera favours the assessment of one's self-image and the experimental development of oral expression. The VCR develops the observation of complex actions, following and building understanding of scenes and stories and learning to appreciate situations and styles.

Multimedia

Multimedia includes CD-ROM, DVD-ROM and interactive laserdisc. Within this category there is a tremendous amount of variation. Multimedia allows for a four-dimensional representation of reality (i.e. context + interaction), the integration of all media for simulation purposes and 2-way logic (input/output).

World Wide Web

The World Wide Web is the multimedia version of the Internet. The extent of its multimedia potential is largely dependent on technical factors, in particular the amount of bandwidth available for transmission over cables, phone lines, satellite systems, etc. The World Wide Web is essentially an international multimedia communication system. It opens up several interesting new horizons: access to the real world in real time, a complete social dimension, personal and personalised communication, encyclopaedic resources and online pedagogic support.

Expected results

The judicious mixing of the different media, with the appropriate kind of pedagogic stimulation and guidance, will lead to a variety of positive results for learners in their quest for a stable new identity in the language:

- Exposure to varied modes of expression
- Simulated communication
- Active stimulation of identification
- Credible and authentic personal voice
- Growth of a communicating personality

In other words, use of varying media provides a potentially infinite variety of experiences, input and models, an elastic time scale for training and post-training development and a social setting that goes beyond purely pedagogic relationships (teacher-learner). The variety of media, if properly managed, is likely to influence favourably the development of learner identity. A complete and sound pedagogic strategy should include:

- The use of a diversified range of resources
- Integration of communication parameters into everything!
- A project management approach to learning
- Emphasis on socialisation of learners
- Integration of the notion of style into linguistic pedagogy.

Before the general availability of the means provided by recent technology it was difficult for teachers to attempt to influence learner identity. One of the reasons was that *pedagogic time* (essentially classroom time) was ill-adapted to such an approach. The learner's identity can only grow if two conditions are met:

1. There must be the notion that learning is a project taking place in a larger time frame than that defined by an educational or training programme.
2. The learner must have the freedom to discover and spend time with a wide variety of linguistic and human resources.

Without the notion of taking on, experimenting and developing both temporary and permanent roles within a functioning human society, it is hardly possible to envisage construction of identity or any real language acquisition. This is where the Internet, alongside other multimedia resources, can play a key role. The major

elements of such a strategy are:

- Communication with the trainer
- Communication with other learners
- Navigating in the foreign environment
- Communication with the English speaking world
- Creating and projecting one's identity on the World Wide Web.

New opportunities, a new technological culture, the widespread commercial availability of what were once exotic instruments in a training environment, all this coupled with the growing awareness of the globalisation of economic and cultural activity means that we are now at a pedagogical crossroads, where strategic decisions must be made. We must all adapt, in the interest not only of increased productivity but also personal satisfaction, for the trainer and learner alike. At COMPAL we have created a Web site (www.compalearn.com) dedicated to trainers' needs, with the purpose of helping them understand and learn to dominate, from a newly forged pedagogic perspective, the trends of the marketplace and the current evolution of technology. Many other Web sites exist for trainers and teachers; their combined effect should bring about, over the next five years, a new training culture that is likely to be much more inspiring and stimulating than past pedagogic cultures, and much closer to responding to the real needs of language learners.

Biodata

Peter Isackson, 51, American, is an EU expert (DG XIII, Language Engineering) author, producer, publisher of numerous language learning programmes. He was educated at UCLA and Oxford. From 1977 to 1983, he was language consultant for companies and educational publishers (teacher training, product development). In 1983, he created Way-In, specialised in open learning systems (resource centres); in 1986, he worked at SODETEG (Thomson) on development of interactive video for training; in 1988, he created Interaxis, multimedia publishing; then in 1991, Confluence Multimedia (CD-Rom). In 1997, he created Confluence On-Line (COMPAL), a Web site dedicated to interactive services for the language and teaching community.