

○ CONSTRUCTIONS OF LANGUAGE AND LEARNER IDENTITY IN THE CLASSROOM: CONFESSIONS OF A FAILURE

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Teachers and learners can hold differing ideas about language and goals for language learning which are then played out in classroom interactions. Constructions of what counts as language and learning impact on learner engagement and identity and the outcomes of language learning. This study analyses a researcher's account of the learning of Arabic in three different contexts. Data consist of journals, reflective notes and document collection and are analysed using content and thematic analysis. The study found that conflicting views of language impacted on learner engagement and on the identity positions available to learners, especially to background speakers. It argues that the constructions of language and identity positions offered to learners need to be taken into account in language classrooms for language learning and teaching to be effective.

KEY WORDS: language ideologies, classroom interaction, learner identities, language identities

INTRODUCTION

Traditional models of languages as predetermined bounded systems have been questioned in recent years based on sociolinguistic and historical evidence (Blommaert, 1999; Heller, 2007; Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; Pennycook, 2010; Romaine, 1994). Makoni and Pennycook (2005), drawing particularly from work on colonialism and African languages, argue for the disinvention and (re)constitution of languages. Heller (2007), in her discussion of the history of approaches to bilingualism, traces work from linguistics, sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology arguing for more process- and practice- oriented approaches to language research.

‘... community, identity and language; rather than treating these concepts as natural, and bounded phenomena, it has become more common to see them as heuristic devices which capture some elements of how we organise ourselves, but which have to be seen as social constructs (Heller, 2007, p.13)

The complex findings from language contact studies, bilingualism and codeswitching have meant that research must take now into account contextual accounts of speakers in space and time. Seeing language as a social construct means asking why people do what they do with language and investigating how value is attached to linguistic forms and practices (Heller, 2007).

These findings are important for language teaching and learning as what counts as language is also constructed in classroom interactions. Learning contexts can determine the access to language resources, the identity positions that learners can be offered and whether learners are positioned (or can position themselves) as successful learners. Social identities of learners are situated and constructed in specific contexts through interactions and relationships (Norton Peirce, 1995). Identity options are validated and performed through discourses in which power and conflict play a role. They are thus negotiable to different extents and in some cases, learners may resist but in many contexts learners may have no choice but to withdraw. Learners' social identities also go beyond questions of power and difference and are multilayered, dynamic and often contradictory (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

This study considers language learning contexts for the researcher's learning of Arabic. It addresses questions of how 'language' and 'learning' are constructed in classroom contexts, what counts as a good language learner and what identity positions are afforded to learners.

LEARNING ARABIC

Arabic is the world's fifth largest language and one of the fastest growing community languages in Australia. It is the fourth main language spoken, after English, in Australia with 243,000 speakers in 2006 (Kaye, 1990; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The teaching and learning of Arabic in Australia, however, is faced with several linguistic issues.

At many levels, Arabic is a "pluricentric" language with widely differing regional and local spoken dialects across the Middle East and North Africa (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992). It has also been labelled a diglossic language with Modern Standard Arabic, based on classical Arabic, being used for formal spoken and written communication, and dialects for everyday communication. The diglossic situation and differences between Modern Standard Arabic (henceforth MSA) and the colloquial forms of Arabic are well documented (Beeston, 1970; Holes, 1995; Ibrahim, 1983). There are differences in phonology, lexis and grammar with MSA having dual voice, three cases and nunation for definiteness, amongst other features. MSA, the high form (*Al Fus'ha*) is used in formal written and spoken contexts, although its standardness is reported to vary widely (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992). The nature of the gap between MSA and dialect is complex and changing with the development of more informal spoken and written genres through the influence of the media, communication and universal education and hence the diglossic situation has been described more in terms of a spectrum or continuum (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992; Walters, 1996). There is convergence to regional standards but also the rise of local prestigious varieties of spoken Arabic (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992). This convergence, however, may not apply in diasporic communities such as Australia, where the gap between standard and colloquial dialect may be greater since the high functions of MSA would be met by English. This absence of formal Arabic has thus been seen as a factor in high attrition rates of literacy in Arabic.

The second issue relates to the functional uses of Arabic in Australia and the goals for learning. Although attitudes to the importance of the maintenance of Arabic are overwhelmingly positive across the Arabic-speaking communities (Campbell, Dyson, Karim & Rabie, 1993; Clyne & Fernandez, 2008) there is a high attrition rate in the learning of Arabic. One study (Kairouz, as cited in Campbell et al., 1993) found 47 per cent of students discontinued Arabic after Year 10, citing as the main reason difficulty of the subject. The final issue is the status of Arabic in Australia. There is little doubt that Arabic has a poor image in the non-Arabic speaking population. 'Our impression is that mainstream attitudes to Arabs are negative stereotypes and that these flow on to the Arabic language' (Campbell et al., 1993, p. 56). All of these issues create challenges for teachers and for classroom learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs auto-ethnography, a model of the researcher as language learner. This approach has been a feature of anthropological linguistics (Briggs, 1986) and is also fairly common in the study of second language development and teaching (Bailey, 1983; Jones, 1995; Lantolf & Genung, 2003; Lowe, 1987; Rivers, 1983; Savignon, 1983; Schmidt & Frota, 1985; Schumann & Schumann, 1977). Bell (1995) used narrative enquiry to explore the effect that different assumptions about literacy in Chinese had on her learning. Her teacher had unstated expectations of a good learner to be quiet and observant, unquestioning, and reliant on memorization. Bell found that unspoken assumptions about literacy practices which she transferred from English impeded her learning of Chinese. The present study extends the work of Bell (1995) with its focus on using the researcher-as-language-learner to explore how language is constructed and how learner identities are negotiated.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The language learning consisted of three semesters over a three-year period. The first classes consisted of 12 individual lessons in Arabic with Tony¹, an Arabic/TESOL teacher. I then took a 14 week, two hour per week course in Arabic at a local college with the teacher Ali. The 22 learners in the class were a mix of people wanting to travel to or work in the Middle East, those doing it for general interest and a group of women who had married into Arabic-speaking families. The third class was a tertiary level course with Dr Farah which I audited (two hours per week with an additional two hours in the language laboratory). The students consisted of many background speakers, a few mature-age students who had spent time in Arabic-speaking countries and younger students taking the subject for interest (and exam marks). From the three semesters I gained a level of basic understanding, beginner's level lexis and reading and writing skills. My own learning of Arabic was undertaken to develop some fluency to help research in the community and also to explore literacy practices in Arabic as part of a larger study.

I kept a research journal for each of the classes. In the first section of each book I kept notes after each session, describing what had happened and my reactions and observations. The second data source was the collection of documents: worksheets, study cards, test results with comments. At the back of each research journal I kept reflective notes. These were written generally each weekend after reading the week's field notes. The reflective notes also included comments that linked with the background reading I was doing and with other stages of the fieldwork. There were several methods of analysis. The first involved the reading and rereading of the field notes, the reflective notes and other documents. Firstly, content analysis of the notes was carried out, grouping together findings on similar topics. Themes developed and were amplified. Another approach taken was the identification of key terms such as 'Arabic', 'educated' and 'Muslim'. Common words such as 'learn' and 'study' ended up with complex patterns of associated meanings. Feelings, reactions and attitudes to the learning also figured in the analysis. Lessons were also reviewed to identify common classroom practices and events. Language practices in this study were taken to be the recurring ways the teachers and students interacted: for example, how did lessons begin? How were textbooks most commonly used? How was vocabulary taught? Key events and excerpts from the data were then identified on the basis of their representativeness of the emergent findings (themes and issues). The excerpts were then rechecked with the data to confirm the correctness of the choice.

FINDINGS

Three key issues emerged in the study: the relationship between standard language and dialect; what counted as speaking, reading and writing; what constituted a good learner. Each of these issues impacted on the learners' and teachers' investment in the class.

STANDARD AND DIALECT

When I began the classes I expected to be exposed to a range of spoken and written language based on my preconceptions about the nature of language learning. In practice, the dialect or low forms of Arabic were excluded from classes. Tony, the first teacher, taught from a BBC conversational Arabic course which was based on Egyptian Arabic (although he had grown up using Syrian dialect). He constantly advised me to use more standard forms and often commented that Egyptians mistakenly thought that they spoke standard Arabic. He supplied many of his own materials to minimise this perceived Egyptian bias. Tony was also concerned that I speak a form that would be respected, a form expected of an 'educated' person.

Tony often warns against using certain expressions or says that certain words are not 'correct' and would not be understood outside Egypt. This is the first time I have come across the problems of dialect and standard in a real life situation. What should I say in what situation? A lot of our interaction is me asking Tony, but when do I say this? His

normal advice to me is not to speak as people speak but to use the standard that nobody uses. ‘Educated’ people he explained would understand me and that was important. I can always learn the dialect when I need to. I explained that my interviewees would mainly be of Lebanese background. He looked askance and told me not to try and learn Lebanese. He explained the different groups of dialect. (Language diary 12th October)

Ali, the teacher in the adult education classes, did not see it as his role to teach what he called dialect and stated in the first class that it was not possible to learn dialect. Arabic for him needed to be learned through the standard written form. This was shown when Ali taught forms of the language based on *al fus’ha* which were not used. He introduced and taught the dual form of the pronouns adding later that these forms were not used. He explained that being ‘educated’ meant knowing the dual forms. Teachers seemed to be working from an understanding of the levels of approximation to the standard of grammar, lexis and phonology which defined appropriateness/ correctness in terms of MSA not written or spoken usage.

Sometimes Ali introduces two words for the same meaning. The paper he handed out called the word for orange *naranj*, and yet Ali introduced *burtoqali*. At another stage he introduced telephone as *tilifon* while the book said *hatifi*. I did not know if his words were Egyptian dialect or if the books terms were too formal. He also introduced all the personal pronouns, including the dual form. He then told us that the dual was dying out and was only a literary form not used in newspapers. One student up the back said under her breath ‘Then why are you teaching us this?’ I felt the same as I had done with Tony, that I was not sure what to use where. (Language journal 15th April).

In actual fact, *tilifon* was a European loan word, and *hatifi* was a coining designed to keep Arabic free from such borrowings (Beeston, 1970).

Dr. Farah clearly stated that his course was Modern Standard Arabic. He saw dialect as an interference and in many ways a ‘hybridised’ and inadequate form of the standard language. In the course text book which he had written, were several dialogues in hotels and restaurants in which the participants used MSA. In essence he had constructed situations in which the use of MSA attempted to be authentic. Most dialogues had foreigners using MSA with each other. He also had many written passages about cultural issues where the use of MSA was more appropriate. In other words, the spoken conversations in the textbook seemed to be recreations of formal language in everyday contexts.

The term dialect was thus constructed in a pejorative sense of ‘That’s only dialect’ meaning incorrect, deviating from the standard. It was linked with ‘uneducated’, ‘inappropriate’ and ‘non-literate’. This lack of acknowledgement of dialect, in fact, led to a strong diglossic situation being set up for learners. The standard MSA or *al fus’ha* was constructed as an ideal form which we had to learn to have access to written and spoken language. My first reaction

to this diglossic split was to link it to traditional language teaching I had experienced in the past with Latin and French, where the written form of the language was seen as the norm and the way through which spoken fluency (if needed) could be achieved. These assumptions were challenged as the class progressed.

WHAT COUNTS AS SPEAKING, READING AND WRITING

Reading played an important part in all three courses. In the university classes the key part of lessons was students reading around the class and then translating from the textbook. Although it was not stated, it was accepted that these passages had to be prepared, something which required several hours of preparation. In the community classes worksheets and sentences were read around the class and translated. The teachers' explanations were of word meanings, grammar points and difficulties in understanding. Passages were followed by comprehension questions which focused on literal understanding. Questions in Arabic were then read and translated by students. The notion of reading as prepared reading differed from my perceptions of reading as independent decoding in English.

The second shock was pronunciation, which related more to reading and understanding the words than being a sub-skill of speaking. Dr. Farah did not worry about slight differences in pronunciation of vowels, but whether there was a gap or not between consonants. In Arabic, the script is essentially consonantal, using a three consonant root inflectional system, with flexible use of internal vocalic patterns to indicate syntactic and semantic differences (Holes, 1995). The important concept was thus the root, since nouns, verbs and adjectives all varied in predictable ways from that root form and context would normally make the meaning clear. All three teachers stressed the importance of knowing the three consonant roots. Pronunciation was only corrected when the wrong consonant could have been assumed in the pronunciation or when Arabic background speakers used a dialect form. Ali accepted widely differing pronunciations of vowels. In the initial lessons of the university course vowel diacritics were used to aid understanding. Dr. Farah, however, explained that these were only used for children and beginners.

I documented feeling frustrated that more attention was not given to pronunciation; other students expressed similar feelings. I had experienced a range of teaching methods in the past. I had learned Italian communicatively, Latin and French through grammar translation. I had taught using the different methods. I had expected, however, an initial focus on listening and speaking in all the classes, whatever method was used. With Ali I assumed this was because of the backgrounds of the students, few of whom had a metalinguistic knowledge. With Dr. Farah I had expected this initial focus even though I knew, as a university class, the teaching would move later to a focus on more formal elements. The surprise for me was not in the method used but in the realisation that the notion of standard was not based on literacy.

The standard was a reified one drawing from Classical Arabic which was realised in different contexts of use.

Writing had two meanings in the classes. The first centred on the correctness of the written form with much time being spent with students coming up and writing on the board. Writing in this sense was handwriting, calligraphy being of great importance. Both Ali and Dr. Farah placed much emphasis on the different shapes of the letters in initial, medial and final positions. There was much comment on the beauty of the written Arabic. The other meaning for writing was translation from English into Arabic. When Dr. Farah spoke of ‘writing’ being in the tests he was referring to the writing of a text in Arabic translated from English. Writing as composition did not occur in our classes.

Speaking occurred regularly in all classes involving short interactions between teachers and students in Arabic rehearsing greetings, performances of learned dialogues, question/ answer routines between students and presentation of short prepared speeches. Speaking was a means of making learning public and also of practising what was being learnt. Ali commented in the adult education class that the skill of speaking would develop naturally at a later stage. In the university course the acquisition of spoken Arabic was the responsibility of the individual students in spending some four hours per week in the language laboratory. There were no examples of specific listening activities apart from a practice dictation in class prior to the exam.

In all three classes the dialect, or spoken varieties were seen as having little value. Spoken forms were associated with a lack of education. The classroom construct of Arabic was one of diglossia. Attachment to and acquisition of *al fus 'ha* was linked to the status of Arabic as a world language and distancing learners and teacher from local diasporic communities. The acquisition of the high form was embedded in writing and reading, and the role of these skills in being able to realize *al fus 'ha*. The emphasis on pronunciation aligns with the role of choral or prepared reading in Arabic teaching contexts and has been explained as a linguistic necessity because of the difficulty of reading the unvowelled Arabic words without diacritics and out of context (Abu Rabie, 1997; Gregory, 1998; Wagner, 1993).

LEARNER IDENTITY POSITIONS

Learners in the classes reacted with frustration and insecurity when their assumption of and desire for a standard of acceptability of spoken language was challenged. Most of the students in the adult education class had come because they wanted to acquire language for communication. Several were married to Arabic speakers and wanted to learn for conversational purposes. Some were doing the course out of interest in culture and art or were planning to travel to the Middle East. Some were doing it for work reasons. During the first lesson, one of the students commented that she wanted to learn how to speak Arabic not to read and write it. Her husband was of Lebanese background and that was the reason for

her learning. Several others nodded in agreement. The student then asked if she was in the correct class and if Lebanese and Arabic were the same language. Ali explained that Lebanese was not proper Arabic and that students had to learn the ‘proper language’ before they could speak it. The student replied that her husband couldn’t read Arabic but he could speak it. Several conversations like this took place in the first two lessons. The students in cross-cultural marriages were the first to drop out. The group began with 24 and dwindled to three or four by week 10.

Students who were fluent in forms of spoken Arabic felt their knowledge devalued. I recorded that Dr. Farah, for example, gave more encouragement to non-Arabic speakers than to Arabic background speakers. The pronunciation of Arabic background speakers was always corrected. During class sessions when students were called up to write on the board, points were made about the problems of Arabic background speakers with letters/ sounds such as *tha*, *jim*, *dhal* and *ghayn*. I noted that after the third lesson the Arabic background speakers tended to sit together and leave classes early.

Sonia asked about a hand movement in Arabic. Dr. Farah said it meant nothing in Syria which was the country where he had grown up. One of the Arabic background speakers, Maha, said the sign was very rude in Lebanon. I do not know if they were trying to stir Dr. Farah or not. Dr. Farah then cut off the conversation and said that Arabic was like a forest. All the trees are different. What happens in Lebanon he said was just local. He explained that he had worked in Algeria and had had to strain his ear to understand his students as the Arabic they spoke was such a mixture of Berber, French and Arabic (Language diary 26/3).

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER

The key terms that were often used with students were ‘application’, ‘good habits’ and ‘hard work’. Dr. Farah expected four hours of work outside class for every hour in class. Several fellow students told me that they were doing double the work for Arabic they did for other subjects. All three teachers spoke of the amount of work needed in learning Arabic. Dr. Farah often said that the classes were a part of the language learning. The work outside the classes was practice and memorisation and thus the development of good habits. Background dialect speakers were seen as having more work to do in this area because of the ‘unlearning’ of ‘incorrect’ habits they had to do.

Memorisation was a key factor in making a good language learner. I was expected to learn some fifty words each week with Ali and Dr. Farah. Part of the lexis was related to the topic or theme of the lesson but most words were related to the letter/s of the alphabet being taught. These letters were grouped according to shape. I was also expected to memorise talks to be given to the class, dialogues and written texts. There were many more occasions when students had to recite learnt texts and dialogues without reference to the text. The main type

of memorisation was based on the written texts read aloud by the teacher. The memorised texts were then recited individually in class by students when called upon. The second type of memorisation was purely visual, of letters in different positions. Students were called upon to write words and letters on the whiteboard. Memorisation was linked thus to performance. The role of memorisation has been a key finding relating to the acquisition of Qur'anic literacy in Arabic in many studies (Farah, 1998; Field & Aebersold, 1990; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Sarroub, 2002; Wagner, 1993).

The role of student as code-breaker, trying to work out the language puzzle, was the role that was most possible in the classes. The conflict between desires for oral fluency and 'success' in the classroom was resolved by coming to see Arabic as a puzzle that needed to be worked out. I found that I had to adjust my language learning goals to lessen my level of anxiety and frustration. It was only when I focused on improving my handwriting and memorising the lexis and grammar that I found I improved in class. I entered the classes as a confident language learner. I had learned traditionally through grammar and memorising and so was initially quite comfortable with his approach. At the same time I was worried at how little I had learned to understand and speak.

My feelings are often of panic. I feel confident answering questions because I concentrate on the oral components. I feel frustrated at not having more guidance in pronunciation. I feel worried when the writing comes up as I am not confident in knowing the letters. Some of the students lack all confidence in speaking. The class situation does not help this. Farah asks people according to their levels of fluency. He clearly has an idea of hierarchy (Research diary 20th March).

Dr. Farah set mid-term tests. The first section was a composition which we had to prepare. I had time to use the books and translate and so prepared quite a good one. Dr. Farah gave a *mumtaza* (excellent) and later read my effort to the class. In the test my written translation from Arabic to English was the best because of my previous training in languages. My translation into English from an Arabic text read aloud was poor because of my lack of experience in listening to Arabic. My translations from English to Arabic were appalling because I had not revised the specific sentences in the textbook.

The attrition of students in the Adult education class was the most dramatic, as this class was voluntary. By week 10 there were only three or four of the original class remaining. The students in the tertiary class who kept attending were primarily non-background speakers, with some experience of language learning who were motivated by the desire for getting good marks. Several non-background speakers dropped out early on because of the workload; background speakers tended to continue but showed increasing resistance. In each of the classes, the number of identity positions was circumscribed by the focus on MSA and acquisition of language knowledge above other goals. It was in the tertiary class that I felt I

had least power. Being in a privileged position as an academic and mature-age auditor also meant that I had to also respect the lecturer. Because of this relationship, my self-esteem was also more at risk. The learners in the community class also had less to lose as their attendance was voluntary and not that costly. It was in my one-to-one classes with Tony that I had the most power and thus was not forced as much to confront my own and Tony's presumptions about language and learning.

DISCUSSION

The teachers' notion of Modern Standard Arabic defined a prescriptive teaching grammar as its central focus, one in which pronunciation and syntax played less of a role. The construction of grammar was framed in a range of historical, social and cultural factors. In the teaching context a diglossic situation was established for background speakers between MSA and their spoken language and for non-native speakers and their learning of spoken forms through MSA. MSA was the valued language and dialects were seen as lacking in value or interfering with the standard. There has been some debate about whether Arabic is best viewed as diglossic or as a continuum of varieties (Campbell et al., 1993; Djite, 1994). In the three teaching contexts I experienced the language situation was constructed as diglossic. The implication is that diglossia can be defined procedurally, by the patterns which emerge from its many settings in educational contexts and daily practice.

The classroom construction of diglossia raised issues of "correctness" as opposed to "appropriateness". Variation in written and spoken forms of language occurs in different contexts relating to the mode of interaction, the topic and the relationship between the participants. The acceptance of a model of MSA in a diglossic situation could mean that 'correctness' and approximation to this standard become the key factors.

The identity positions open to the learners in the classes were thus circumscribed. In the tertiary class, the background speakers became beginners in the acquisition of MSA. Their links to local communities were seen as a shortcoming and their 'local' knowledge something which had to be unlearned. The students from mixed marriages in the Adult Education class were trying to learn a language which did not exist. The framing of Arabic in terms of historical, social and global factors positioned both teachers and learners in specific ways. The ascription of power to an idealized form of MSA distanced the teachers from the ability to negotiate learner positions with the students. The practices in the classroom privileged memorization, gaining language knowledge and translation. The identity positions of students as travellers, workers, intercultural learners or new participants in the diasporic community were thus limited. Learners were thus faced with the options of resisting or complying and changing their learning goals and approaches. In many ways this process was external to the personal relationships established between teachers and learners.

CONCLUSIONS

What counts as language in Arabic and English may be different for a complex set of sociolinguistic, cultural and ideological reasons. Learners and teachers bring individual experiences which embed linguistic, social and cultural ideologies. It is difficult for both teachers and learners to uncover and explore their presumptions about language and learning because of power differences in the classroom and because it means questioning the social, historical and cultural baggage learners and teachers hold.

Much recent work has focused on contextual approaches to teaching which take into account local social and cultural factors; basing teaching on learner goals and needs (Holliday, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). The finding of this study is that social, historical and cultural factors are realised and (re)constructed in classroom practices; practices which in turn are open to exploration, challenge and negotiation.

At first sight the teaching methods in this study would be seen as traditional and out of step with learner needs. The teaching methods, however, were very much in line with the notions of language constructed in class. The findings from this study support a research focus on classroom contexts and language learning in the study of language and social identity.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Teachers' names have been changed.