ABSTRACT: The issue of learner identity as an integral part of the learning process is explored by applying the notions of “imagined community” and “investment” to an investigation of a group of BC students’ changing perspectives on the issue of Canadian Unity. The students’ unexpected change of self-awareness demonstrates how critical the role of learner identity is to the learning process. This exploration is based on the author’s observations recorded as part of her work with Canadian unity initiatives over the past decade and points to the need for an increased focus on local cultural content within FSL curricula.

KEYWORDS: learner identity, imagined communities, investment, Canadian unity, teaching culture

In his book, *Sorry, I don’t speak French*, Graham Fraser presents an update of the status of French within Canada forty years after the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which shows that Canadians’ reticent attitude towards Canada’s “other” official language is still an issue (Fraser, 2006). Despite the relative success of FSL (French as a Second Language) programs in Canada, the latest research on teachers’ perspectives on FSL teaching in Canada presents findings of “poor” materials, particularly those “representing Francophone culture” (Lapkin, MacFarlane, Vandergrift, 2006) and also of diminishing support from community, parents and students for the programs. A significant challenge, according to FSL teachers, is the diversity of students in today’s classrooms. Equally concerning, increasing bilingualism among Quebec anglophones in French and English has not translated into a closer personal relations between the two official linguistic communities on a social level (Aubin, 2007, Fraser, 2006).

Sociocultural theory has brought together ideas from a variety of disciplines to form a theoretical framework from which to approach an examination of language and culture. With respect to learner identity, B. Norton (Norton Peirce, 1995, McKinney & Norton, 2007) offers an approach in the area of second language acquisition (SLA) to understanding the attitudes of mainstream anglophone students towards francophones and the learning of FSL, in particular in Western Canada. Norton defines the concept of social identity as “a site of struggle” and sees the language learner as being “multiple” and “contradictory”
Instead of “motivation”, Norton prefers “investment” to underline the idea that the learner’s engagement in the learning process constitutes a dynamic interaction and cannot merely be defined in terms of an inherent and unchangeable character trait. In her view, traditional descriptions of the language learner as motivated provide a static and inadequate representation of both the learner and the learning process. From the poststructuralist perspective, identity is “historically embedded” and constructed out of “competing discourses” in which the individual is actively involved (McKinney & Norton, 2007, p.3). Norton argues that the learning process of the individual is dependent on the learner’s investment, the socially and historically constructed relationship of the learner with his or her world (Norton Peirce, 1995, p.17). As Pittaway (2004) points out, this concept of investment offers a more appropriate depiction of learning because it takes into account the learner’s complex and constantly changing identity.

In turn, the language learner’s investment plays a role in his/her willingness to learn the target language in that it either permits or discourages the learner from accessing what Norton (2003) calls “imagined communities”. Similar to B. Anderson’s (1991) concept of ideological community and based on J. Lave & E. Wenger’s (1991) notion of community engagement, the term “imagined communities” refers to “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (cited in Kanno & Norton, 2003, p.241). By examining the learning process in terms of investment and imagined communities, it becomes clear that motivation in itself cannot sufficiently explain a learner’s difficulty in accessing his/her target community. Pittaway (2004) notes that a learner can be integratively motivated to become an active member in a particular community, but fail to gain access to that community (p.208).

Norton’s concepts of imagined community and investment have been adopted by a number of scholars such as D. Dagenais (2003) in a study of multilingualism and immersion education, A. Pavlenko (2003) in regard to language teacher identities and the notion of the native speaker, D.S. Pittaway (2004) with respect to adult ESL learners, and Y. Kanno (2003) in an examination of student identity in bilingual schools in Japan. This article represents a reflective account based on my observations recorded as a member of the BC Unity Panel and its province-wide consultation proceedings in 1997. It focuses on a group of BC high school students who, in the course of a discussion on BC’s role in the Canadian federation, were confronted with a change of self-awareness which prompted them to adopt a new perspective on the issue of Quebec’s place in Canada. An exploration of this event in terms of the students’ identities as Canadians and their investment in the imagined communities they access may help
us to understand the continuing resistance in Western Canada towards francophones and by extension towards the French language.

**Background: BC’s Unity Talks**

In 1997 I had the opportunity to be a citizen panelist on the British Columbia Unity Panel as part of a province-wide consultation process on the Calgary Declaration which sought to provide “a framework for discussion on Canadian unity” (BC Unity Panel, *Report*, 1998, p.2). The Declaration was signed by all premiers and territorial leaders with the exception of Quebec premier, Lucien Bouchard, in September 1997 and was ratified by all of their legislatures following extensive public consultations across the country. In BC, a 22-member panel of citizens, MLA’s and Members of Parliament was formed with the mandate to focus as much as possible on discussions regarding the role of British Columbia within the Canadian federation. Interestingly, the future of Quebec’s place within Canada received much of the attention in both written and orally presented responses.

**Setting the scene**

The panel’s meeting with a class of high school students was held in a medium-sized classroom with a long table at the front of the class for the handful of panelists who attended. Student desks were arranged in a horseshoe format around the back of the classroom. The students seemed in part curious and pleased, but also a little apprehensive at the thought of sharing their opinions on this issue with such an official group. With respect to the following presentation of research data, my focus at the time was only on content and the statements were recorded for my own interest without the intent to use the information for research purposes of this kind. I list the comments chronologically in the order in which they were spoken and, based on my memory, I can attribute them to at least 8-10 different students. Almost all students actively took part in the discussion by contributing comments, agreeing verbally or by nodding and attentively following what was being said. As is often the case with this age group, the students seemed to move through the discussion as a group, one student’s comment eliciting the next along similar lines. The panelists prompted the discussion at the beginning with some basic questions as to the students’ views on BC’s role in Canada. The discussion then found its own course, guided by intermittent questions of clarification from the panelists. While the comments presented here constitute only a snapshot of what was said, they nevertheless represent the types of comments expressed at the various stages of the discussion.

**The play-by-play**
During the first part of the discussion, the question of BC’s role in Canada and Canadian unity elicited the following remarks from a number of different students:

1. We don’t focus enough on a common Canadian bond but talk too much about diversity.
2. There shouldn’t be special benefits to, for example, aboriginals just because they have been here longer, or the francophones in Quebec, because they speak a different language.
3. Not sure what else Quebecers are pushing for.
4. If we grant Quebec something special, other groups will want the same.

This first set of comments from the students represent similar statements made by adult speakers during the public hearings at a town hall meeting that same evening and elsewhere, as well as comments in local newspapers. Comment 1. points to what is wrong with Canada and the discussion about unity. Comment 2. repeats a commonly held view that no group in Canada should be treated differently from others based on linguistic or historical considerations. Comment 3. constitutes a reproach rather than a question, and comment 4. goes so far as to give excuses for why recognition of Quebec as a distinct society, as was attempted in the failed Meech Lake Accord in the late 1980’s, is not workable. To me these comments reflected feelings of defensiveness and perhaps even some fear on the part of the students. This may explain why the students seemed to be repeating statements they had read in newspaper headlines or heard their parents and teachers make.

The second set of student comments signal a shift in attitudes towards Quebec and Quebecers as well as a transformation in the reflections of the class on the unity issue itself. The following three comments were made approximately 20-30 minutes into the discussion:

1. There is a lack of info in Quebec and the rest of Canada. The two sides don’t understand one another. We should be better informed on the issue.
2. Canada will lose out with separation
3. BC is not recognized as unique as well. We’re left out in the cold.

While the second comment points out a consequence of failing to achieve reconciliation on the issue of unity with Quebec, the first comment goes so far as to propose what the underlying problem might be – not only a lack of understanding of the issue but also an inability to understand the other’s views on the matter. More importantly, this comment demonstrates the beginning of the shift in that the students group Quebec and the ROC together by pointing out
that the people in both regions may have a need to be more informed about one another. This sense of identifying with the other is also evident in the third comment with the words “as well”. Although the comment itself may well have been another argument against granting unique status for Quebec, there is still the idea that a similarity exists between British Columbians and Quebecers, perhaps with respect to the problematic relationship both feel they have to the federal government. These comments no longer reflect the adversarial and defensive tone expressed earlier during the discussion and the students are no longer resorting to the rhetoric they hear in the news or others around them. Instead they are beginning to reflect on the questions before them and seem to be saying: What is the problem? What will happen if we don’t solve it? We all share in this predicament.

The last three comments, made near the end of the discussion, represent the final stage of the transformation:

1. We need to talk about this issue more.
2. We’re Canadians, not British Columbians.
3. We don’t understand Quebecers maybe because we feel Canadian first.

Comment 2. clearly demonstrates the students’ attempts to include Quebecers as part of their own imagined community, this imagined community being Canada rather than just the province of BC. The third comment may point to the students’ recognition of Quebecers’ need for a strong identity as francophones in Canada, a concept which for anglophone Canadians does not have the same relevance. The students are beginning to identify with Quebecers and at the same time to acknowledge that there may be important differences which need to be explored in order to better understand their fellow Canadians. Very important in this third comment is the use of the word feel as opposed to are because it signals this particular student’s awareness that the issue in question is not so much about being right or wrong but rather about having different points of view. The notion of flexibility and the possibility for change is thus acknowledged, which is even more strongly conveyed in the first comment.

Comment 1. brings us full circle by introducing the need for action. While the content of the message appears to show the student’s recognition that spending time reflecting and talking about Canadian unity leads one closer to understanding Quebecers, it more importantly demonstrates the students’ investment in the issue by showing their willingness to become active participants in trying to find a solution to the problem. The statement “We need to talk…” contrasts significantly with the first statement heard earlier, “…we should be better informed…” . The students have moved from passively identifying the problem to actively taking on the responsibility of doing something about it.
This shift in the tone and content of the discussion occurred over the duration of one hour, which, as an observer, struck me as remarkable given the setting of relative formality and unfamiliarity between the participants. I did not come across such a shift in attitude among a group of speakers at any other time during the many encounters with other citizen groups during the panel’s consultation process.

**Discussion**

I would like to argue that what transpired during the meeting was a shift of community affiliation for the students and by extension a change in their own perception of who they were as community members of BC and Canada. The comments above demonstrate how accurately Norton’s conception of a learner’s identity applies to the students grappling with the issue of Canadian unity. During the initial stages of the discussion the students’ social identity was constructed to reflect their connection with the people around them – other British Columbians. The students recognized the province of BC as their imagined community. Within this context, the students did not initially view Quebecers as belonging to their imagined community, defined here in terms of geography. However, as the class discussion continued, the students’ shifting views of themselves as Canadians in addition to being British Columbians allowed them to include Quebecers within their imagined community.

While the panels’ discussion with the students did not involve the learning of a language, the students’ learning process constituted an investment on their part in terms of a re-conceptualization or negotiation of their identity as British Columbians within the context of Canadian unity. The ensuing shift in the students’ imagined communities from BC to a Canada which includes Quebec, prompted a transformation of their imagined identities as British Columbians to Canadians, that is to a shared identity with Quebecers. This broadened imagined identity resulted in a new type of investment for the students, namely to work towards ensuring that this constructed larger imagined community be a well functioning or “unified” community.

**Conclusion**

While this discussion on unity appears to have prompted a learning process which encouraged a reconstruction of identity among the students, this shift occurred in terms of a national identity. The concept of culture has been widely discussed in the field of SLA with respect to the teaching of culture in second and foreign language classrooms (Atkinson 1999; Heller, 2007; Hinkel,
Given the context and topic of discussion with the students described above, however, my observations of this event and its exploration within the socio-cultural framework lead me to believe that an increased focus on cultural engagement with francophone communities in local contexts, both provincially and nationally, could offer French language learners access to the communities whose language they are learning to speak. The type of learning process involved in providing such access remains to be explored, but the critical role of learner identity as part of this learning process is clear. This perspective on learning as an active and dynamic process provides, in my view, a very hopeful approach, not only for second and foreign language teaching but for changing attitudes towards cultural differences. It is not only knowledge, but more importantly, the practices, experiences, and relations of the learner which are the principle agents for social change.

References

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