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POINTS OF TRANSITION: UNDERSTANDING THE CONSTRUCTED IDENTITIES OF L2 LEARNERS/USERS ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

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Using sociocultural and poststructuralist theoretical lenses, this study examines the narrative construction of language-learner identity across time and space. We applied cross-narrative methodologies to analyze language-learning autobiographies and interview data from three English users who had recently transitioned to a U.S. context for graduate studies. We found that learners’ narratives and identity constructions are shaped in unique ways by the narrators’ present and distant interactions, which can be understood by identifying points of transition (PsoT) in their stories. PsoT revealed how learners made sense of their ever-changing identities across time and space, viewed inconsistencies and conflict, and linked these conflicting identities with imagined futures. Our study contributes to research about learner identity and agency as we offer a narrative exploration of how L2 users construct identities and give meanings to these constructed identities by linking the influences of time and space in their language learning narratives.

Introduction

In the past decade, educational research has increasingly focused on the use of narratives as legitimate means of examining the experiences of learners and their contexts of experience. Narrative is a way of knowing (Barkhuizen, 2011), a way of creating a world which is at once personal and communal, a kind of creative activity in which the narrator constructs and is constructed by his or her socio-cultural context. In second language (L2)
Points of Transition

education, autobiographical narratives (specifically autobiographies focusing on language learning experiences) are often used within teacher education courses to help teacher-learners make connections between their personal experiences with language learning and second language acquisition theory. The use of narratives often shows the link between second language learning and teaching processes and identity (re)-construction (Morgan & Clarke, 2011; Norton & Early, 2011; Norton & Gao, 2008; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) and allows researchers to explore how these constructions reflect inequitable social structures and interactions. From a sociocultural perspective, L2 users are recognized as agents who contribute to their own learning and, in the process, construct specific identities (Block, 2007a; Chen, 2010).

Our study contributes to this body of research about learner agency and identity construction as we shed light on how L2 users demonstrate their agency in their autobiographical narratives and closely examine what L2 users say about themselves at specific times, within specific spaces, for specific purposes, and through specific forms of interaction (Bakhtin, 1981; Pavlenko, 2007; Philips, 2010; Waugh, 2010). Our inquiry sought to understand how researchers/educators/learners can recognize and analyze the influences of time and space on L2 user constructed identities. In the light of the specific stories of the participants of this study, we conceptualized L2 learners and users as both co-constructors of their identities and co-constructors of the meaning(s) of these constructed identities (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). By highlighting the interpretations and reasons that participants offer as the starting point for understanding the identities they construct, we found that points of transition (PsoT) revealed how learners made sense of ever-changing identity constructions. Points of transition refer to moments of transporting experiences from distant interactions to explain particular present identity constructions. As a theoretical concept, PsoT emerged from the narratives of the participants of the study while analyzing this data through a sociocultural conceptual lens. In the following section, we explain the different sociocultural concepts and the specific poststructuralist views that have shaped our understanding of narratives and identity constructions.
Conceptual Framework

The Dialogic Understanding of Narratives and Constructed Identities

Understanding the participants’ narratives and constructed identities in time and space relates to Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of the dialogic self. Bakhtin explains that all interactions occur in the chronotope (“time space”); that is, human experiences and interactions are a demonstration of an “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (p. 84). Drawing upon Bakhtin, we conceptualize narratives as constructed in space-time frame, not only by individuals but also through interactions (Pavlenko, 2007). These interactions with others may make apparent conflict with past and presents experiences as well as imagined futures, which is discussed below.

Mishler (1999, 2006) also proposes the concept of “double arrow of time” as a significant contribution to the discussion on narratives and identity constructions. The double arrow of time refers to the ways in which “present (and future) anticipations shape the past as well as the reverse” (Mishler, 1999, p. 2). Mishler explains that persons have the capacity to look backward from the present and reinterpret past events in the light of their present experiences and the meanings they give to these experiences, and that the plots of their stories are governed “by their ways of ending, that is, by the current situation in which tellers find themselves after what has happened to them in the past. They display and document the double arrow of time” (p. 36).

Mishler’s double arrow of time relates to the idea we propose in this study, namely that, the specific stories that individuals tell about their experiences are not disjointed episodes. Rather, individuals’ experiences are connected in significant ways that, until now, have not been analyzed in second language research. As humans, our stories of all times and spaces are connected in complex ways, each event dependent on and reflective of other events in our lives (Bakhtin, 1981; Nespor, 1994). Nespor describes these complex connections of our stories as “distanciation” of social action: “When we act, we’re simultaneously interacting with the people and things in the immediate environment
and the people and things spatially and temporally removed from us, but none the less present in the situation in some way’’ (p. 3). We use Nespor’s concept of distanciation to expand on Mishler’s work by emphasizing that the way stories are shared is shaped not only by the temporal order but also by the spatial relations (i.e., the interactions that go on in specific spaces/places). While Mishler (1999, 2006) pays particular and detailed attention to time, we emphasize the significance of both space and time. In the discussion below we will explain how space can be expressed both physically and symbolically in L2 users’ narratives.

Second, we emphasize that as individuals tell their stories and construct their identities, they also offer points of transition for their audience; that is, they offer explanations and insights that help to connect their stories and give meaning to their identities. Third, in connection with Leo van Lier’s (2000, 2004) notion of affordance we explain that every interaction has the potential to simultaneously constrain and enable the agency of a learner across time and space, and thus influence and shape the story this learner may tell. As learners tell their stories, their present interactional experiences are in constant dialogue with their distant experiences, all of which influence and shape their narratives and identity constructions. Their narratives and identities are therefore understood as co-constructions and cannot be treated “simply as factual data subject to content analysis” (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 214; see also Pavlenko, 2007).

In theorizing identity, we apply a poststructuralist lens (Bourdieu, 1977; Derrida, 1997; Foucault, 1980; Weedon, 1997), which moves beyond the search for universal laws of humanity to “more nuanced, multileveled and ultimately complicated framings of the world around us” (Block, 2007b, p. 13). In our own approach to understanding the discourse in L2 user narratives, we drew upon Weedon’s (1997) explanation of the links between language and subjectivity. Weedon explains that as individuals use language in time and space, they also construct identities that are always in process and dynamic, allowing identities to become sites of struggle between competing discourses in which the individual plays an active role (see also Norton Pierce, 1995; McKinney & Norton, 2008). In connection with Weedon’s poststructural views on identity, we emphasize that identifying the points of transition in participants’ narratives reveals the contradictions inherent in
these narratives and in the identities that have been constructed through these narratives.

Methodology

Participants

Participants of this narrative study included three female doctoral students—Raani, Ying, and Viki (pseudonyms)—who were taking courses in the College of Education at a university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The participants were selected among the students in a graduate seminar on second language acquisition because of their self-identified status as learners/users of English as a second language and their willingness to participate in intensive interviews. While they shared similar academic training, the three students came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Raani is from India, Ying from China and Viki from Sri Lanka. All participants were highly proficient users of English and doctoral researchers themselves.

Data Sources

We collected and analyzed six language learning autobiographies (LLAs). The first three LLAs presented narratives of the second language learning experiences of the authors written at the beginning of a course on second language acquisition (we refer to these as first LLA or LLA1); the second set were critical examination of their initial autobiographies, largely from a socio-cultural perspective (we call these second LLA or LLA2). We describe the second LLA as a reflective narrative, that is, a narrative in which individuals seek understanding of their experiences and share these understandings with their audience. The assignment guidelines were worded in the syllabus as follows: LLA1 (three pages): “Write an autobiographical essay about your experience learning a second language.... [Your] writing should be honest, straight-forward and nontechnical.” LLA2 (five to seven pages): “Re-read and re-write your initial language learning autobiography and consider the ways that the different theoretical perspectives discussed throughout this course may explain
your language learning experiences. Link your autobiographical essay to concepts, theories and issues discussed in this class.’’ The participants were not explicitly directed to write about identity constructions in their LLAs; questions about their identities were asked during the interviews conducted a semester later. Also, at the time of writing their LLAs, the participants did not know that their writings would be part of our study. The idea for the study emerged after both autobiographies (LLA1 and LLA2) had been written and evaluated, and grades were submitted.

Data Analysis

Based on cross-case analytic strategies (Borman, Clark, Cotner, & Lee, 2006; McKay, 2006), we adopted a cross-narrative approach to analyze participants’ narratives (including their LLAs and interview transcripts). In a cross-case analysis, data from multiple examples is selected to inform a particular research question, focusing on what several cases (or narratives) reveal about a particular phenomenon. As each participant’s LLA1, LLA2, and interview responses came together to form the person’s narrative, a cross-narrative analysis allowed us to organize excerpts from the narratives under recurring categories in order to address our research focus (Borman et al., 2006).

Following a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), we applied open, axial, and selective coding as we read through the narratives to identify the themes that were extensively discussed by participants. The open coding process began with scanning, reading, and re-reading the narratives for categories of phenomena and for relationship among the categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). We found that all participants chose to highlight the way they were constructing multiple and dynamic identities as L2 users/learners; therefore, in the next step of analysis, axial coding, we focused on how the participants used different narrative threads to construct L2 learner/user identities. The initial narrative threads we identified included: a) the learners’ re-examination of others’ perceptions of their own proficiency, b) affirmations and contradictions between their worldviews before and after beginning their graduate work, c) changing relationships with English, d) expanding identities beyond
an academic context, and e) connections with a larger socio-
political context. A central proposition that emerged at this cod-
ing stage was the importance of “points of transition” within
and across narrative threads to connect language learning expe-
riences across time and space.

Identifying points of transitions across the learners’ narra-
tives guided the selective coding analysis stage to make sense of
participants’ dynamic identity constructions. To identify points
of transition across several narratives we looked for markers of
time and space in the text (e.g., “at the beginning …,” “when
I was in China …,” “I had to make a transfer to a new con-
text”). We analyzed the narratives, coding for change of state
verbs and references to past, present, future, and tense shifts
drawing from Pavlenko, 2003, 2007). We also looked for ref-
ences to geographical/physical and imagined/symbolic spaces
(such as “in the United States,” “in India,” “in my classroom,”
“in TESOL professional contexts”). The narrators’ reference to
geographical space was often a way to call attention to bound-
aries and boundary crossing, which made visible larger socio-
historical structures or distinct cultural practices (e.g., “profici-
cy in English associated with the part of country”). As learn-
ers’ identities shifted, the marker of space, the physical or sym-
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Participants’ stories, their narratively constructed identities, and our understandings of these constructions in a time-space frame. To guide our analysis we asked, “What do these points of transition reveal to the authors and interpreters of these narratives and why is this important to foster critical understandings of language learning and learner identity constructions?” As we re-read the data focusing on the points of transition, we found patterns across the learners’ narratives that we grouped into three major themes. We found that points of transition revealed: 1) the shifting and situated nature of one’s ownership and perceived proficiency of language, and identity constructions; 2) inconsistencies, impermanencies, and illegitimacies of these perceptions; and 3) the movement toward the future and ongoing processes of becoming language users. In the discussion below we explain each of these themes and give examples from the students’ narratives that illustrate these themes.

Shifting and Situated Nature of Language Ownership and Perceived Proficiency

As students explained their language learning experiences, their narrative markers of time and space made visible the ways that their own and others’ perceptions of their language learning was context dependent. As the participants’ learning experiences shifted across time and space so did the way they described their language proficiency. PsoT become the hinges of the narratives, the bridge on which we travel as we seek to understand the identities constructed, linking voices in present narratives to voices in distant, untold stories.

We observed students making meaning of situated identity by comparing different contexts and spaces, which made visible the tensions and importance of positionality and perceived proficiency (Martin-Beltran, 2010) in different contexts. For example, Raani explained how her interactions in the United States caused her to define herself as a “proficient user of English,” an identity construction that had a different significance when she was in India (expressed in both LLA2 and interview). We begin with a quote from Raani’s interview as she was reflecting on her LLAs.
Excerpt 1, Raani: Perceptions of Proficiency as Conflicting and Context Dependent

It is the shift from India to the United States\(^1\) that has made me conscious to define myself in terms of proficiency because I realize that the way I express myself may not always match how other people perceive me. My perception of myself came to be at loggerheads ... with the perception others had of me ... In India if someone compliments you on the proficiency of your English, it would be quite different from receiving the same compliment here in the States. Here, more often than not, such compliments could be a way of trying to make a connection between how I look and how I sound; it could be a connection between the color of my skin for instance and my fluency. (Raani, Interview Transcript)

In this example, we notice how the narrator travels metaphorically into the distance to draw on experiences in India and the United States (as interactional spaces) to express her identity construction in the present. In retelling her language learning experience she uses PsoT to mark the disconnection between her home context and her new space to learn. Raani’s narrative highlights the importance of context to make sense of evaluations of language competency and the situatedness of race in relation to perceived proficiency, which also reveals how shifting notions of language ownership come into conflict across time and space.

Participants also expressed awareness of the multiplicity and dynamic nature of their identities. For instance, in her LLA1, Ying compared points in time and across space, in different educational contexts as she reflected on her shifting identity construction as English learner. In both her first and her second LLAs, she referred to China not simply as a geographical space but also as a cultural context, connected to Confucian thought which ultimately shaped her position as a student and learner of English. In her LLA1 and LLA2 as she moved across spaces (from China, to the United Kingdom, to the United States), the once invisible cultural assumptions become visible in her own reflections of her journey as a language learner. In her first LLA she used points of transition to highlight the differences between her positive and negative experiences learning English.

\(^1\)Bold text is used for analysis, to call attention to the students’ use of markers of time and space.
Excerpt 2, Ying: Comparing L2 Learning Experiences in Different Educational Settings

Contrary to my preschool cheery song-learning experience, [in middle school] I found myself sitting through every English class like a brainless machine, monotonously completing all those drills and exercises provided by the teachers without giving a thought to what I was doing, and why I was doing that. [...] I always felt frustrated about how boring the English lesson was, there seemed to be no option for me, as a student, but to silently accept and endure the reality. (It was against the tradition in China, at that time, for a student to challenge teachers’ authority, because according to the Confucian thought, any act of questioning or doubt upon teachers’ authority amounts to despise and disrespect on the part of students.) (Ying, LLA1)

In her second LLA, Ying reflected on her narration of her experiences and she made visible the points of transition in her first LLA as she described and reflected on her “journey” of English learning. Ying explained her shifting construction of her own language learner identity across spaces and times as she repositioned herself as a human agent who makes conscious choices for how to exercise her power and transform her learning contexts.

Excerpt 3, Ying: Journey of L2 Learning and New Positioning as Agent

When recounting my journey of English learning, ... I depicted myself as a victim of the traditional English teaching method ... A reflective scrutiny of this autobiography, using the Activity Theory, revealed an alternative image of myself, that of human agency, who chose not to exercise my power to change the traditional pedagogy, rather than simply a victim of such pedagogy. (Ying, LLA2)

This point of transition in Ying’s narrative was marked with her use of the word “reveal,” which suggests a turn in her understanding. She described the revelation of an “alternative image” that was triggered by her new understanding of theoretical frames encountered in the class readings (i.e., Activity Theory) and her participation in this community of fellow graduate students who wrote about similar issues in their language learning narratives. Similar to Ying, Viki’s retelling of her language learning experiences revealed her alternative narrative that challenged others’ perceptions of her ownership and proficiency in English. In her
interview Viki described the shifting nature of her ownership and perceived proficiency in English, which revealed constraints and injustices of social structures.

*Excerpt 4 Viki: Crossing Boundaries of L2 Proficiency Based on Class Membership*

In *Sri Lanka*, I do not belong to the privileged minority who actually speak English *at home*; children from these families speak English *right from infancy*. I do not belong to *this class*, right. I actually studied English as a second language, and I remember the encouragement I received from my father to do so. I remember the struggles I had to go through, but I also remember how little by little I made it *through college to the university*. *There*, certainly I was not counted among those who could speak English fluently, according to the standards of the privileged minority. (Viki, Interview Transcript)

In Viki’s narratives, we observed her use of PsoT as she made reference to her upbringing in Sri Lanka and her interactions framed by geographical and cultural space. Referring to time, space, and social structures, she explained how she was positioned outside the class of the “privileged minority” who had access to English from infancy. Her use of PsoT revealed the injustices of socially constructed boundaries across space in which she “was not counted” or recognized. In the face of these challenges, she crossed traditional boundaries of class membership and demonstrated the illegitimacies of such perceptions of language proficiency based on race, class, and ethnicity. We take up further discussion on the illegitimacies of perceived proficiency in the next section.

*Inconsistencies, Impermanencies, and Illegitimacies of Perceived Proficiency and Identity Construction*

Points of transition that revealed the shifting nature of ownership and perceived proficiency of language across time and space also made visible the inherent conflicts and inconsistencies among these perceptions and positions. These excerpts from the students’ narratives demonstrate the ways that participants recognized and contested illegitimate perceptions and positioning.
Excerpt 5, Raani: Perceptions of Identity Construction and Language Learning are not Fixed

I found out first-hand, when Indians come to the United States and are exposed to the native-speaker ideology, the ‘unproblematic’ may become problematic. If (my) identity and (my) language are intimately connected (Norton & Toohey, 2001), and if my identity is indeed “in flux” (Cook, 2002, p. 276) and “in transition” (Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997, p. 310), then can my perceptions of how I acquired the language remain fixed? If I am in the process of examining and exploring the manner in which my dynamic identity impacts my understanding of my own language learning experiences, then am I in the position to provide a coherent narrative of the same? (Raani, LLA2)

In this excerpt, Raani used PsoT to tie together her experiences with key concepts from the course readings, interweaving other scholars’ narrative with her own. Raani’s observations reflect Mishler’s (1999, 2006) concept of double arrow of time whereby she constructed her narrative retrospectively, making it possible for present (and future) anticipations to reshape or reconstruct understanding of past experiences. Raani explained that her experiences in a graduate TESOL program in the United States offered her the opportunity to reflect on her language learning experiences in the light of the work of scholars with sociocultural viewpoints and caused her to look back and realize that what she once considered simple and unproblematic was, in fact, complicated, contradictory, and sometimes contentious. She, therefore, questioned the coherence of her own narrative.

In her first LLA, Raani narrated her experiences of how she acquired English, beginning with how her mother taught her the English alphabet and how she learned her L2 through reading. For example, she wrote about her childhood experience learning English, which at the time seemed effortless and unproblematic.

Excerpt 6, Raani: A Seemingly Unproblematic Childhood L2 Learning Experience

I believe I picked up the language almost unconsciously then. To me it was not a task in language learning. I was reading books because I enjoyed them immensely. (Raani, LLA1)
In contrast, in her LLA2 she juxtaposed her childhood experiences on her later adult learning experiences and discovered the contradictions across learning contexts.

Excerpt 7, Raani: Contradictions in L2 Learning Experiences Revealed by PsoT

I realize that although I wrote in detail about English language acquisition during my childhood, I am strangely silent on the past two years here in the United States. . . . I wonder if this “lapse” may be the result of the tension that I have become aware of in the past two years—that I perceived my language learning experiences in India as largely unproblematic (in terms of legitimacy and ownership) before I came here, but subsequently came to question many assumptions as a result of my experiences after coming to the United States. (Raani, LLA2)

In expressing these tensions in her narrative and identity construction we see Raani use PsoT skillfully to connect different experiences, and we see PsoT as moments of clarity where she links present and distant interactions. She begins to recognize her learning experiences in the present as she reflects on her narration of the past. The meaning she gives to her story depends on her understanding of herself and her experiences at a given time and in a particular space, aware that these present experiences are linked to other distant experiences. Raani’s explanations, using PsoT, also reveal the disconnections and disjunctures across time and space, and point to the problematic and politically situated nature of language learning. When language learners move from one socio-political and cultural system to another and make comparisons across space, the inherent, implicit hegemonic forces in those systems are made visible.

We also observed students identifying points of transition as sites of contention, struggle, and conflict while recognizing their own agency. As Raani and Viki reflected on the socially constructed constraints they encountered across time and space as language learners and users, they made meaning of these PsoT framed by scholarship (course readings) that critically examined the native speaker (NS) fallacy that persists in TESOL professional communities (e.g., Cook, 1999; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Morgan & Clarke, 2011; Pavlenko, 2003). For example, Raani
explained that in an interactional space where she is perceived as a nonnative speaker, she needed to define herself as a proficient user. She justified her identity in terms of time and space as she described her history of using English: she is from India where English is an official language, and almost all her formal education was in English (expressed in her LLA1). Using PsoT she recognized the illegitimate perceptions of her proficiency and described her own resistance to any ascribed identity construction that depicts her as incompetent speaker.

Similar to Raani, Viki also revealed the shifting nature of ownership and perceived proficiencies through her use of PsoT, and she also made apparent the illegitimacy of socially constructed perceptions of proficiency and stereotypes. This recognition of contextual dependency of others’ perceptions of one’s language ownership builds resilience, as experiences and challenges serve to reinforce the person’s understanding of self. Points of transition revealed inconsistencies and injustices in Viki’s experiences, such as the way English teaching employers discriminated against people of color. As she compared her language teaching and learning experiences across time and space (using PsoT), she also demonstrated the persistency of the NS fallacy and racism, as she recognized that whiteness (and country of origin) was misconstrued as a marker of language proficiency.

**Excerpt 8, Viki: Problematizing Native Speaker Fallacy and L2 Proficiency across Contexts**

As an English speaker in the *Japanese context*, I noticed that my identity as a legitimate English speaker was threatened and problematized by the NS idealized norms of whiteness and NS accent and pronunciation when I was rejected for teaching English by most of English business companies based in Japan due to my color and the fact that I am a NNS [nonnative speaker] of English from Sri Lanka. In the process of my struggle to construct my own identity as an English teacher in the *Japanese context*, while working collectively with some Japanese teachers with the little Japanese competence I had, I could empower some social agency among those few teachers, liberate their stereotypicalized mentality of native speaker ideology (norms, standards) in teaching English as an EFL [English as a foreign language] and help them construct their own identities as Japanese English teachers. (Viki, LLA2)
When reflecting on her experiences in Japan, Viki recognized the harsh realities of discrimination in the teaching field because of her “nonnative background” (LLA1 and Interviews). Viki explained that in the Japanese context, she was not considered a proficient user of English because of her race and Sri Lankan background (see Motha, 2006, for a discussion on the importance of race in legitimatizing language proficiency). Over time, Viki explained that she gained respect when she formed collaborative relationships as she discovered a shared identity with her Japanese colleagues, as fellow non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs), bridging shared experiences across time and space.

As participants connected distant interactions across time and space issues of cultural sensitivity, discrimination, and identity reinforcement became salient. Another example comes from Viki’s story. In her language autobiographies she recounted her experience learning Japanese and constructing her identity in the Japanese culture.

**Excerpt 9, Viki: Cultural Sensitivity and Construction of Multicompetent L2 Identity**

During the period of exposure to Japanese culture for almost three years, I never aspired to acculturate into its culture or join a particular Japanese group, but rather I was constructing my own identity as a multicompetent Sri Lankan postgraduate student in the Japanese context. However, my exposure to this cultural context for a long time led me to use both verbal and nonverbal behavior appropriate to Japanese culture. (Viki, LLA2)

In Japan, Viki constructed her “identity as a multicompetent Sri Lankan student.” Her use of the term “acculturation” reveals her social relationship and investment with the target language and Japanese culture. While she had no intention of changing her identity to match any particular group in the Japanese cultural context, she did acquire some of the identity tools of language, including what she called “verbal and nonverbal behavior appropriate to Japanese culture.” When we asked her to explain this part of her narrative in her interview, she responded:
Excerpt 10, Viki: Resilience, Agency and Identity Construction

After exposure to Japanese culture for more than three years, my communicative competence in Japanese improved. But the way I was brought up in Sri Lanka made me construct my own identity, and so wherever I go I try to maintain that. Even in Sri Lanka, when I moved to the university to advance my English, I would not change my identity. Many of my colleagues would do many things to appear different, like using fanciful clothing; I would not subscribe to that. I had constructed my own identity as a typical suburban middle class Sri Lankan female, and I would not change that... I still value my cultural practices that are worth upholding. (Viki, Interview Transcript)

Viki linked her experiences across time and space with PsoT, which suggested that she transported her identity across geographical and interactional spaces (in Sri Lanka and Japan) and maintained moments from her past experiences in her future interactions. Her use of PsoT also reveals the impermanency of others’ perceptions of her identity as a language user. By defining her self as “a typical suburban middle class Sri Lankan female,” she referred not only to time and space but also to social class, which contextualized the way one was perceived as a legitimate language user.

Identifying PsoT in narratives also helps to understand how individuals’ experiences in specific cultural spaces might lead them to construct their identities as outsiders. An example is found in excerpt 11.

Excerpt 11, Ying: Cultural Insensitivity and Identity Construction in Academic Spaces

In MA program in Cambridge, ... I took some courses in media and cultural studies, but my experiences in those classes were very disappointing. We were just talking about British culture, about pop and jazz music, making me feel like I am always an outsider, always learning something that does not belong to me. (Ying, Interview Transcript)

In this excerpt, Ying’s use of points of transition made visible the boundaries between distinct cultural and academic spaces and demonstrated how she constructed her identity as “an outsider” while in a graduate program in Cambridge. As she recognized the differences across academic and cultural contexts, she recognized
the injustice of her positioning in her courses and her marginalization in language learning opportunities. Making sense of these points of transition, we observed her critically examining this marginalization and asserting her agency in her second LLA.

Identifying the PsoT in narratives of these participants gives readers the opportunity to understand how others’ perceptions or assumptions are often inconsistent with how second language users identify themselves. PsoT can reveal conflicting ideologies (as Raani explained past perceptions “at loggerheads” with present contexts in excerpt 1), contradictions in L2 learning experiences, L2 learner agency and resilience, as well as discrimination and its influence on how people construct identities. Ultimately the students’ recognized the impermanency of others’ perceptions and their positions. In the next section, we discuss how this recognition manifests itself in the ways the participants understand their learning experiences and identity constructions as movement.

Movement Toward the Future and Ongoing Processes of Becoming Language Users

Points of transition in these learners’ narratives also revealed their own agency as learners involved in an ongoing process. Viewing the learner’s experience through a sociocultural lens, Roebuck (2000) maintains that learners, as human beings, “are agents who act upon the world and engage in activity, constructing their environment in unique ways” (p. 83). As users of English as a second or foreign language, participants showed evidence of this sense of agency as they described their identity construction as one of “movement.” These points of transition bring light to L2 learning experiences and identity constructions in time and space that involve resilience, contestations, transfer and ultimately a projection into the future—which we illustrate with excerpts from the participants’ narratives.

Excerpt 12, Raani: Showing Resilience (Bouncing back) across Contexts

Sometimes when someone asks me some question [about my proficiency] in this [U.S.] context, and I think about it, I become aware that I have a skin that is a little bit different from that of the speaker, and it feels a little unsettling.
But these are little dents that are made on your identity, but you **bounce back** because there are a whole lot of things that happen to reinforce your identity. And if you **come from a society or context** where you’ve already formed a strong identity of your own, then these incidents may unsettle you but they do not break your identity. And the more you face these, the more reinforced your identity **becomes**, because **when you bounce back, you bounce back stronger** than before. (Raani, Interview Transcript)

The language of “bouncing back” refers to the way that her narrative identity takes shape rebounding back and forth over time and spaces linked by PsoT. Raani acknowledged the ever-changing nature of her constructed identities, yet she also realized that she maintained a strong identity despite changes across time and space. Understanding shifts of one’s constructed identity and connecting these shifts across present and distant situations implies the awareness and agency that learners possess. Change in understanding of self is possible because there is always a reference point. One’s understanding of oneself is contested, challenged, threatened and appreciated differently in different contexts yet connected and made coherent by the use of PsoT.

Another example is found in Viki’s story when she described her identity as contested and problematized and recognized the learning process as ongoing (e.g., she wrote, “I am still learning”). Because she recognized her learning process as ongoing and constantly in movement, she demonstrated a strong sense of agency as she expressed her active part in forming and maintaining her identity across time and space.

**Excerpt 13, Viki: Still Learning—Future Life as ESOL Educator**

I am very much conscious of my legitimacy both as an English speaker and learner which is problematized **here in the United States** according to the NS [Native Speaker] ideological norms. However, I should say that I am **still learning** it and my writing in this autobiography clearly reflects my thoughts and my identity as a Sri Lankan. I do not want to problematize it since my identity reflects me as a legitimate **postcolonial Sri Lankan speaker of English**. At the same time, I perceive learning English as a **postgraduate student in the United States** as symbolic capital (Norton, 1995), which will definitely be converted into economic and social capital **in my future life** as an ESOL educator. (Viki, LLA2)
In her narrative, Viki uses PsoT to connect past, present, and future and imagined space within the community of professional TESOL educators. As she looks into the future, she anticipates new meanings that will be given to her experiences in the United States as she returns in Sri Lanka. When asked to expand on her LLA2 in her interview (see excerpt 14), Viki refers to her future position as a faculty member in a Sri Lankan university and connects that imagined future with her ongoing experiences in Japan, the United States, and an international context. Comparing her experiences across these contexts, she discusses the persistence of the privileged position of a graduate degree from Western or predominately white institutions. She, however, expresses confidence in her own agency to construct a professional identity that will allow her to overcome the challenges awaiting her in her next professional context.

*Excerpt 14, Viki: Future Job in Sri Lanka and Possible Contestation of Japanese Degree*

I perceive myself as an unconventional student who does my postgraduate (both my MA and PhD) studies in Japan; I’m sure that when I go back to Sri Lanka and apply for a faculty position in a university, my identity as a PhD holder from a Japanese university will be problematized by the Sri Lankan standards and norms. You know especially in my field of study, the ‘white certificate’ is highly recognized. However, I hope that I could face that challenge and construct my identity as a qualified professional in the Sri Lankan context. (Viki, Interview Transcript)

The idea of “movement” is also made manifest in Ying’s narrative (see interview in Excerpt 15). When Ying was asked to explain what she had written in her first and second LLA about her changing views of herself as a student and changing understanding of teacher authority (recounted in excerpts 2 and 3), she referred to conflicting experiences across time and space.

*Excerpt 15, Ying: Transfer, Movement and L2 Learner Identity*

That was something that created some tension for me at the beginning of my program, especially in the courses that fostered and encouraged a lot of discussion. Because even in the United Kingdom my experience was largely a lecture approach, which tied in with my known and cultural background and
method of teaching. I think I was not used to participation all the time and coming from a culture in which modesty and humility of a learner is expressed through listening in silence, it was not easy to make a quick transfer to this new context with a new emphasis on discussion and participation. In the Chinese classroom, my experience was that if you ask too many questions in class, you would be marginalized, because it would be seen as challenging the authority of the teacher, which is rooted in the concept of authority in the culture. Finding myself in this new context then, I would say that my identity with regard to my agency is evolving more and more. I am not there yet, but there is certainly a movement.

Ying connects threads of interaction across different contexts, which illustrate how identity construction is context-specific. She connects experiences across time and space as she compares the lecture approach in her UK classroom as similar to the approach in her Chinese classroom, which reinforced her cultural understanding of the identity of a learner. However, when she moved into a context in which discussion and participation were encouraged and rewarded (marking a point of transition), she not only recognized the need to “make a quick transfer” regarding her agency and learner identity, but also recognized that such transfer involves difficulties and tension, affirming the poststructuralist conception of identity as “site of struggle, and changing over time” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 14). Through her narrative, Ying gives her readers a sense of the multiple and changing nature of her identity by linking experiences in different social and academic spaces (China, United Kingdom, and United States). As we examined the PsoT in her narrative, we also saw Ying show how multiplicity and dynamism involve struggle, as multiple identities can inherently be contradictory while still connected (Weedon, 1997). Expressing her awareness of the dynamic nature of identity, Ying uses PsoT as she draws from past and present experiences and even refers to the future identity construction as ongoing development. As she compares her experiences across time and space she recognized the “movement,” which connects the themes of understanding language learning and identity development in terms of context dependency, impermanencies, and inconsistencies across time and space, and linking this movement with the imagined future.

Identifying PsoT in narratives is particularly important in second language education and research, which address issues...
in interactional spaces where the discourse related to linguistic and cultural diversity often devolves into such dichotomies as “us v. them,” “native v. nonnative,” and “English v. other languages” (Faez, 2011). Identifying the PsoT in narratives of these participants also gives researchers and readers the opportunity to understand how these second language users identify themselves in relation to their target language, rather than positioning them with an ascribed linguistic identity construction.

**Conclusion**

A growing body of research has discussed the importance of learner agency and co-construction of learner identity in relation to language learning (Block, 2007b; Norton & Gao, 2008; Pavlenko, 2003; see also Morgan & Clarke, 2011), yet more research is needed to shed light on how learners make sense of this identity construction in the narratives of their own experiences. Our study contributes to research about learner identity and agency as we offer a narrative exploration of how L2 users construct identities in their language learning autobiographies and, more specifically, how they link the influences of time and space in their own ongoing learning narratives and so give meaning to their constructed identities. We found that points of transition revealed how learners made sense of ever-changing identity constructions, and in particular, shed light on how learners express shifting identities across time and space, how they view inconsistencies and conflict, and finally how they link these conflicting identities with ever-moving futures. As Block (2007b) explains, in “discussions of language identities, there needs to be a great focus on the achieved or inhabited subject positions around language use . . .” (p. 41). We argue that identifying the PsoT in the narratives of second language users is one step in this direction as the differences and inconsistencies between these positions are made salient.

We do not argue that the themes revealed by PsoT, that is, 1) the shifting nature of ownership and perceived proficiency of language across time and space, 2) the inherent conflicts and inconsistencies among these perceptions and positions across contexts, and 3) the ongoing movement toward the future, are
unique to this study. On the contrary, these findings corroborate common themes discussed in previous studies of learner identity as a site for struggle (Norton & Gao, 2008; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Weedon, 1997). We posit, however, that this study advances our knowledge by offering concrete examples of these issues and fresh insight about how learners link distant and present interactions to make sense of these prevalent issues of language learning and language learner identity construction.

Findings from this study offer theoretical and practical implications for teaching and research of second language learning and identity construction. The theoretical concept of PsoT offers a lens to analyze and understand the ways that learners' identities are constructed in present and distant interactions. By identifying and becoming aware of the PsoT in language learning narratives, learners and educators together become aware of their involvement in co-constructing specific interactions in space-time frames (Bakhtin, 1981) and how these interactions shape their narratives, their identity constructions, and the meanings they give to these constructions. PsoT make visible points of contention, and it is at these transitions that conflicting constructions of learners' identities meet and learners have agency to give meaning to their own constructions, reimagine themselves (Pavlenko, 2003), and make their next move. Identifying PsoT not only recognizes participants as co-constructors of the interactional space but also seeks to understand the meanings that participants make of their space and of themselves. In this paper we have begun to understand how researchers are part of narrative constructions of language learner/user identities. For instance, our perspectives as researchers influenced our interpretation of the data; by specifying a research focus, asking questions, giving instructions, making epistemological and methodological choices, we have filtered the experiences of our participants and left parts of their stories untold. In future research, we hope to further explore our own investments and the ways our positioning influences the stories of our participants (Norton & Early, 2011).

As a construct, PsoT may also have practical implications for teaching and learning by revealing the interactive positions of teachers and learners at key turning points, allowing teachers and learners to reflect on their teaching and learning practices and relationships that may trigger transitions in learning. By
encouraging learners to discover their own points of transition, educators can offer additional insight to learners as they make meaning of their learning trajectories, become aware of their own investment (McKinney & Norton, 2008; Norton Peirce, 1995) and their agency to make transitions and shift future learning opportunities. It is our hope that the construct of PsoT offers teacher-learners, researchers, and teacher educators a fresh look at engaging in the inquiry of their own language learning and teaching experiences.

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