

## **Metamorphosis of a language learner: The dynamic interplay between identity, motivation and autonomy – an autobiographical account**

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In the last thirty to forty years, the concept of autonomy has been a key area of inquiry and pedagogical focus in language education. An autonomous learner is one who takes charge of and assumes responsibility for her learning. As befits her identity as an autonomous learner, she is said to possess certain characteristics, hold certain beliefs and exhibit certain behaviours. In language learning, such attributes can be collectively referred to as individual differences or learner factors. Crucially, when it comes to successful language acquisition, the autonomous learner recognises and accepts that the onus falls on her, not anyone else. Closely related to autonomy is the notion of self or identity. In the last decade or so, learner identity has garnered the attention of many researchers and practitioners in applied linguistics. Identity has been shown to have an important place in language learning. Further, it is postulated that a learner's success at language learning is intimately linked to her motivation for learning the language. In this paper, the author reflects upon her English learning history, detailing her budding love of the English language as a young child growing up in colonial Hong Kong, her subsequent arrival in England as a teenager, and the education she received there. By retracing the steps of her learning journey in which she explores the role of autonomy in conjunction with individual difference factors and sociocultural theory, the author argues that successful language learning necessitates a very subtle alchemy, highlighting the dynamic interplay between identity, motivation and autonomy.

**Keywords:** language learning; identity; motivation; autonomy; narrative

### **Introduction**

The concept of autonomy in language learning and teaching in the context of formal education has a history spanning some four decades. In language learning, autonomy commonly refers to “the capacity to control or take charge of one’s learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 14). In other words, to be an autonomous learner, one is to assume responsibility for one’s learning.

Upon closer inspection, it transpires that the idea of autonomy in learning, in fact, dates back much further than forty years. In *Emile*, published in 1762, the Romanticist philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau advanced the notion of natural education, “a model of education that follow[s] the child’s natural impulses and inclinations” (Benson, 2011, p. 27). This focus on the child, or on the self, suggests that identity has an important place in learning. At its simplest level, identity can be defined as the individual characteristics by which a person is recognised (Collins English Dictionary). Relating this to language learning, individual differences among learners encompass anything from language aptitude, learning style, motivation, to anxiety, personality, learning beliefs and strategies (Ellis, 2006). Thus at the outset, a nexus between identity and

language learning can be established. Further, these endogenous attributes have a crucial role in the development of autonomy in language learning. Indeed, much research has shown that “identity formation is at the centre of the language learning process for many individuals” (Chik, 2007, p. 43). Through a reflection upon my English learning history, in which I will explore the cardinal concept of learner identity, and its attendant ideas of agency, motivation and metacognition, I hope to show the extent to which I was an autonomous language learner.

### **The first stirrings**

Born in Hong Kong, I attended a local Catholic girls’ school from the age of three. Founded by a group of Italian nuns in 1860, the school has been considered one of the most prestigious schools in Hong Kong, and its standard of teaching exemplary, especially in respect to the teaching of English. As far as I can recall, full English instruction began at Primary Four whereby all academic subjects were taught in English. Although the teaching of English was rigorous, I did not find it overwhelming, nor did I find English learning an arduous undertaking.

It could be said that from the outset I displayed a positive attitude towards language learning and the fact that I learned English with relative ease points to the possibility that I had a gift for language learning. Language aptitude and motivation have been considered the big two individual difference factors in second language learning (Ellis, 2006). Further, it has been postulated that language aptitude is intimately related to measures of foreign language ability (Skehan, 1990). Though we lived in Hong Kong, my parents are not natives of the city; my father hails from Shanghai, and my mother, Taiwan. At home, they spoke to each other in Mandarin, and used two other dialects (or varieties of Chinese) – Shanghainese and Taiwanese Hokkien – when conversing with their parents and other family members. Hence from birth, I had been exposed to a range of linguistic inputs, and had had to make sense of them all. In Carroll’s (1981) early research into language aptitude, phonetic coding ability, which refers to “an ability to identify distinct sounds, to form associations between these sounds and symbols representing them, and to retain these associations” (p. 105), was identified as the most important of the four measures of language aptitude. Growing up in a household in which varieties of Chinese were spoken made me an “ear” person, whereby I became adept at differentiating sounds, and this, in all probability, exerted a material influence on my English learning.

Owing to the uncertainty of Hong Kong’s political future in the 1980s, many Hong Kong families either emigrated or had their children sent abroad for education. I remember asking my father at the age of ten or eleven, if he had any such intention. He confirmed that he did, and in time, he hoped to send me to the UK. It has been said that the development of autonomy in English learning is related to the development of identities as learners of English (Chik, 2007, p. 41). To a young child, going abroad was a very exciting prospect. I would venture to propose that this anticipation of going to school in England, of joining and belonging to the target language community in Norton’s (2001) terms, was that which subconsciously informed and motivated my English learning. Motivation, the second of the big two individual factors, pertains to the learner’s orientation, that is, her long-range goals for learning a language (Ellis, 2006). Indeed, my dream of joining an imagined community also proved to have a significant impact on my identity construction (Norton, 2001).

### The emerging L2 self

Learner agency has been described as “the ways in which and the extent to which, the person is compelled to, motivated to, or coerced to *act*” (van Lier, 2010, p. x). Although I would not have been aware of the meaning of autonomy, its footprints were evident even in my early approach to English learning. I was becoming, in van Lier’s (2007) terms, an “agent of [my] own educational destiny” (p. 47). Out of school, between the ages of 10 and 12, being young girls, a couple of classmates and I developed an interest in American pop music. We loved an American boy band who, in the late 1980s, were very popular on both sides of the Atlantic, though they were little known in Hong Kong. There were five members in the group and we each had our favourite. We, like most impressionistic young girls, adored and worshipped these young men. In order to learn more about them and to be able to understand their music, I realised that I needed a better grasp of English. Such discernment can be viewed as an indication of my emerging metacognition.

American developmental psychologist John Flavell (1976) defines metacognition as knowledge about and control of cognition and in language learning, it refers to “what a learner knows about how he or she learns a language, [and is] a process of relating the language learning to the self” (Murray, 2011, p. 7). I used to play my favourite songs over and over, listening intently to the lyrics to try and understand them, an exercise of which I never tired. I also went to great lengths to seek out books or magazine articles that were written about the band. Although my level of English did not allow me to comprehend the texts fully, motivated by my enchantment with the band members, I persevered in my efforts to make sense of what I was reading with the help of a dictionary. Such perseverance can be perceived as a form of intrinsic motivation, which Noels, Pelletier, Clement, and Vallerand (2000) define as “motivation to engage in an activity because it is enjoyable and satisfying to do so” (p. 61). I hungered for any snippet of information I could glean about my idols.

According to Wenger (1998), imagination helps us “defin[e] a trajectory that connects what we are doing to an extended identity, seeing ourselves in new ways” (p. 185). I was a precocious child, with a fecund imagination and was full of curiosity. Books, in particular, intrigued me. My visits to the bookstore in the basement of the Landmark in Central were a treat in those innocent years. The bookstore stocked exclusively books written in English. Walking through its aisles, gazing at shelf upon shelf of English books, a sense of awe came over me. I felt that people who read those books belonged to a special club; I wanted to be able to read them so that *I* too could become a member of that club. My sunny disposition towards the target language community can be regarded as a sort of integrative motivation, which is characterised by the learner’s wish to understand the culture and/or become a member of that community (Gardner, 1985). This aspiration marked the very beginning of the emergence of my L2 self: I had a vision of my ideal self as an English speaker and a global citizen. Consequently, I started reading English novels written for young children, a practice which would have been considered rare among children my age in Hong Kong at the time.

In Benson’s (2008) view, “autonomy is primarily concerned with learning, in a much broader sense, and its relationship to [learners’] lives beyond the classroom” (p. 15). In addition to books, I habitually watched English programmes on TV. I was a fan of Studio 930 on a Friday night. My favourite films included *The Ten Commandments* and *The Labyrinth* – “holiday pictures” that were shown at Christmastime, year after year. Owing to my imagination, I nurtured a fascination with the supernatural. I enjoyed horror films, (a popular genre in the 1980s), in particular, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

and *The Omen* trilogy. Although it is likely that I had but a superficial understanding of the dialogue, I was never deterred by it. Besides, the dramatic quality of moving pictures, not to mention the power of my imagination, more than compensated for my language deficiency. In the words of Dörnyei (2010), “the ideal L2 self acts as a future self-guide, providing incentive, direction and impetus for action” (p. 257). Exploiting reading and film watching as opportunities for language acquisition highlighted the joint operation of imagination and metacognition, and exemplified my early efforts at autonomous learning.

### **A very English education**

After two years of secondary schooling in Hong Kong, at the age of 14, I was sent to England to continue my studies, joining the Upper Fourth form, the year preceding the start of the GCSE curriculum. In the words of Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), I had “physically and symbolically crossed the border [...] between one way of being and another” (p. 174). I was a full boarder at a girls’ school in a charming village in Surrey. The boarding unit was very small, with only about 20 boarders altogether, and of those only six or seven of us were full boarders. I was an independent girl with great resolve; though I missed home, I did not much struggle with the integration, nor did I struggle much linguistically. Years of autonomous, out-of-school English learning involving reading and film watching were not without their benefits. My dream of joining the target language community had been realised and I was glad of it.

Being a full boarder meant that I was in an English-speaking environment all the time, and this immersion into English boarding school life marked the beginning of what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as situated learning, which focuses on “the relationship between learning and the social situations in which it occurs” (Hanks, 1991, p. 14), and furnished me with an array of affordances as regards English learning. One such affordance relates to Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) conception of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the gap between what the learner can achieve independently and what the learner can potentially accomplish under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). According to him, learning develops through social interaction, and learning from adults or more capable peers was something that I practised on a daily basis.

Life in the boarding house presented myriad opportunities for Vygotskian collaborative learning or what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). The theory postulates that through a process of LPP, newcomers interact with old timers in a given community setting, become increasingly experienced in the practices that characterise that community and gradually move towards full participation. The boarding life was one marked by discipline and regimentation. There was a routine for weekdays and another for weekends. All meals were taken communally. On Saturdays, a trip to the village on foot to do our weekly shopping during which I lingered at the stationer’s flicking through teen magazines, was the highlight of the week. As the kitchen staff took their well-earned break at the weekend, boarders would assist the housemistress on cooking duty in the kitchen. We helped prepare meals and did the washing up afterwards. My participation in the boarding house was an induction into the English way of life, and my close interactions with my peers, teachers and housemistresses, which involved a great deal of observation, meant that my English, in particular, my spoken English, improved in leaps and bounds during my first year in the UK. Although at the time I was ignorant of its

association with Vygotsky, the ZPD was the guiding star which underpinned and defined my approach to learning, not just language learning, but learning in general.

As my linguistic competence accelerated, so did the development of my self-awareness and metacognition. According to Flavell (1979), metacognitive knowledge characterises the approach of expert learners to learning, and is activated intentionally when the nature of the learning task requires conscious thinking and accuracy. After my initial year in the UK, it became apparent that I nurtured a deep interest in the arts and humanities, and that I was good at them. This awareness of one's interests and strengths is a kind of self-knowledge, or what Flavell (1979) refers to as *person* knowledge. To me, English literature and history were essentially stories, stories that tell of man's dreams and endeavours, struggles and achievements. To excel at these subjects, the *sine qua non* was good English. That fuelled my desire to improve. Again, this self-awareness is regarded as a form of declarative knowledge, which refers to knowledge about the factors that may influence one's performance (Schraw, 1998).

### **The final metamorphosis**

They say everything changes when we read. I was a creative, growing teenager who was eager to make sense of the world and my place in it. Identities, in van Lier's (2007) terms, are ways of relating the self to the world at large. Reading provides a window to the world; that I fell in love with books came as no surprise. I enjoyed exercising my freedom (my autonomy) in determining the content of my learning; I did so by choosing the books I wanted to read. Relating this to the construct of agency, Lantolf and Thorne (2006) assert, "learning a language is necessarily the action of an intentional agent" (p. 142). The more I read, the more I loved the English language; and the more I loved the language, the more fervent my wish to master it. Such are all instances of an intentional agent at work, utilising both her imagination and metacognition, what Murray (2011) refers to as "two aspects or processes of the self" (p. 6). My deep commitment to mastering the English language can also be perceived in terms of Norton's (2001) concept of "investment", where she proposes, "an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity" (p. 166).

Wenger (1998) further defines imagination as "a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176). Books, or more specifically, literature, provided me with the means through which to accomplish that. Within a year or two of my arrival in England, English Literature had become my favourite subject at school. Not only did reading facilitate language acquisition, importantly, it also broadened my mind, enabling me to think critically and laterally. Sublime writing and evocative language – two qualities of literature – captivated my imagination. Together they allowed me to look at the world with fresh eyes and explore its infinite variety. Writers were my heroes, people I worshipped and hoped to emulate. As an earnest thinker, self-expression was a constant preoccupation. How I longed to express my thoughts and ideas with power and grace! I found that as my reading repertoire expanded, my writing improved correspondingly. This determination to master the language had a profound impact on the evolution of my L2 self and my sense of identity: I now aspired to join the ranks of writers.

Chik (2007) argues that "it is the formation of identity which navigates the development of learner autonomy" (p. 57). Although I was not a native speaker, I was studying English and being assessed in the same way as my native-speaking peers. That I did it with relative ease and success can be attributed, in part, to my self-determination. The self-determination theory, advanced by Noels et al. (2000), posits

that the more self-determined a learner is, the greater the achievement. My ideal L2 self, which had shaped and steered my English learning trajectory, propelled me to be the best I could be, and that I was not a native speaker was irrelevant. That said, in terms of spoken fluency and accent, there was still a gap between my English friends and me. Notwithstanding, I found that the more I immersed myself in English culture, in the English way of life, in other words, the more “English” I was, the more fluent and “native” my English became and the more I was able to narrow and close that gap. This accords with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) view that learning both “implies becoming a different person” and “involves the construction of identities” (p. 53). The assimilation was primarily achieved by a gradual abandonment of my Chinese identity and the adoption of an English identity. This transformation was most acutely felt when I went to a boys’ boarding school for sixth form and A-levels.

Unlike the girls’ school I had attended which had only a handful of pupils from overseas, the pupil demographic of the boys’ school was much more international, and had a relatively large number of Chinese boys from Hong Kong. While I was acquainted with some of them, we never became close friends. I may have been in England for just four or five years, but these were my formative years, significant in terms of my (meta)cognitive development. My English friends were the ones with whom I grew up. Together we had the best fun and between us we shared the most serious and intense of conversations. In terms of English learning, they were my more capable peers, assisting me in monitoring and evaluating my progress as we collaborated in the ZPD. In terms of regulation in Vygotskian terms, they were the ones that helped me move from being other-regulated to the holy grail of self-regulation, which is a hallmark of autonomy. It is little wonder that I identified more, and felt a great kinship, with them because sociocultural factors, or in Oxford’s (2003) terms, “the context of autonomy” (p. 87) play an instrumental role in one’s development as an autonomous language learner.

## Conclusion

My love of books eventually led me to read English at university where I spent three happy, carefree years studying literature through the ages. During that time I also experimented with creative writing, and wrote a 100,000-word novel in my final year. My foray into creative writing can be viewed as an attempt at realising my dream as a writer. My autonomous approach to English learning first manifested itself in the form of agency, which was guided by metacognition as well as motivation. Living in the UK allowed me to make the most of situated learning where I underwent a cultural metamorphosis, which involved immersing myself in English culture and embracing new norms and values. In selecting the books I wanted to read, I took my prerogative to determine the content of my learning thus exercising my autonomy as a learner. Through the establishment of L2 identities my long language-learning journey was complete. I had fulfilled the dream of joining an imagined community, of becoming an English speaker, an English writer and ultimately an English student at university. Although I have lived away from England for much of my adult life, my love of the English language, fervent as it was twenty years ago, continues to be my *cynosure* and permeates every aspect of my life from my previous career as an in-house editor at an international airline, through my personal life and to my current academic pursuits. I may have been born in Hong Kong but I was, without a doubt, *made* in England, and I owe all that I am today, and all that I have today, to that. In a wider sense, autonomy is a concept that is as old as the hills. On a political or personal level, unfettered autonomy

is often considered an ideal, “such stuff as dreams are made on”. Idealistic though it may be, autonomy is nonetheless desirable, and in the context of language learning, its influence can be powerful and prodigious.

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