LEARNER IDENTITY AND INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS IN AN EFL CLASSROOM CONTEXT: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores the relationship between students' identities and the learning environments when deciding how to teach students in the EFL classroom. Based on the post-structural theories of identity, investment, and motivation created by the researchers (Darvin & Norton), and drawing on Krashen's Input and Affective Filter hypotheses, we will be looking at two students: one who has been learning English as a foreign language (EFL) and the other who come from very different educational backgrounds. We used data collected through teacher observations from the classroom, reflection notes from teaching, and an analysis of instructional tasks over a two-month period at a private language school. We found that differences exist with regard to the structure of a student's previous learning environment that affects the student's confidence, accuracy, and interaction with the other students in the classroom. Our findings also indicate that the application of a communicative, student-centered philosophy of teaching informed the way we adapted both input-based and task-supported instruction for the particular needs of the learners. In summary, the findings from this case study illustrate the dynamic relationship between learner identity, teaching philosophy, and teacher practice. In addition, the findings suggest that using theory to inform the teaching philosophy of a teacher leads to a responsive and equitable form of teaching English as a foreign language. Finally, implications of the findings are discussed for teacher education and further research in EFL contexts.

Keywords

Case study, identity, investment, motivation, hypotheses, educational background, instruction, teaching philosophy

I. Introduction

This study adopts a **qualitative case study design** to explore how learner identity and learning environment influence instructional decision-making in an EFL classroom. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth examination of learners' experiences, identities, and classroom behaviors within a specific instructional context.

The study was conducted at a private English language center offering IELTS-oriented instruction. The classroom environment was interactive and competitive, with an emphasis on communicative tasks and real-world language use. Instruction was delivered exclusively in English, and lessons included both individual and collaborative activities.

II. Description of Participants

The participants were two adolescent EFL learners enrolled in the same class. To ensure ethical considerations, **pseudonyms** are used throughout the study.

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Participant A. *Muhammad Amin* was a 13-year-old learner from an Uzbek-speaking family who had previously attended an international school where English was the primary medium of instruction. His educational background included extensive exposure to English through content subjects such as mathematics and information technology, taught by native or near-native English-speaking teachers.

Participant B. *Muslima* was a 13-year-old learner from an Uzbek-speaking family who had attended a local public school. Her prior English education emphasized grammar instruction, reading, and writing, with limited opportunities for oral communication or interaction in English.

The two learners were selected purposefully due to their **contrasting educational backgrounds**, which provided a meaningful basis for examining differences in learner identity, confidence, and instructional needs.

III. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected over a **two-month instructional period** using multiple qualitative sources to ensure triangulation.

1. **Classroom Observations**. Regular classroom observations were conducted to document learner participation, interaction patterns, and responses to instructional tasks. Particular attention was paid to learners' speaking behavior, confidence levels, and engagement during pair and group activities.
2. **Reflective Teaching Notes**. The teacher-researcher maintained reflective teaching notes following lessons. These notes focused on instructional decisions, learner responses to tasks, and adjustments made to input, task difficulty, and interaction patterns.
3. **Informal Learner Interviews** .Informal, unstructured interviews were conducted with both learners during and after lessons. These interviews explored learners' perceptions of their English abilities, learning experiences, and future goals.
4. **Learner Work Samples**. Samples of learner-produced texts, including email drafts and written tasks completed during instruction, were collected and analyzed to identify patterns in grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, and task completion.

IV. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**. Classroom observation notes, interview responses, teaching reflections, and learner work samples were reviewed and coded to identify common patterns. The analysis focused on three main areas:

- learners' confidence and level of participation,
- accuracy and fluency in language use, and
- instructional changes made in response to learners' identities and educational backgrounds.

The identified themes were then interpreted using **learner identity theory** (Norton; Darvin & Norton) and **Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis** to explain how learner characteristics and emotional factors influenced learning and teaching decisions.

V. Research Questions

This study aims to examine the relationship between learner identity, learning environment, and instructional decision-making in an EFL classroom. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. *How do learners' educational backgrounds and learning environments shape their identities as English language learners?*
2. *How do differences in learner identity influence learners' confidence, accuracy, and classroom participation?*
3. *How do learner identity and emotional factors inform instructional decisions in an EFL classroom informed by Krashen's Input Hypothesis?*

These research questions guide the analysis of classroom data and support an in-depth understanding of how theory-informed teaching practices respond to learners' individual needs.

VI. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by **learner identity theory** and **Krashen's theory of second language acquisition**, which together provide a framework for understanding how learners' backgrounds and emotional factors influence language learning and instructional choices.

From a poststructural perspective, learner identity is viewed as **dynamic and socially constructed** (Norton, 2013). Learners' identities develop through interaction and are shaped by their access to meaningful learning opportunities within specific educational environments (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Darvin and Norton (2017) further emphasize that learners' investment in language learning is connected to their goals, imagined future identities, and the value they place on learning opportunities. In this study, learner identity theory is used to explain differences in learners' confidence, participation, and learning priorities.

In addition, the study draws on **Krashen's Input Hypothesis** and **Affective Filter Hypothesis** (Krashen, 1985). The Input Hypothesis suggests that language acquisition occurs when learners receive input that is understandable and slightly above their current proficiency level. The Affective Filter Hypothesis highlights the role of emotional factors, such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes, which may limit learners' ability to benefit from language input. These concepts help explain how instructional tasks were adapted to support learners with different levels of confidence and accuracy.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a basis for examining how learner identity and teaching philosophy influence instructional decision-making in the EFL classroom.

VII. Instructional Considerations

In a dynamic, competitive classroom environment, Muhammad Amin and Muslima engage alongside peers in activities that foster motivation through fun and collaboration. This setting proves ideal for a lesson on email writing, which builds practical communication skills and enhances academic language proficiency for these focal students. The session incorporates

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individual tasks alongside peer interactions, promoting cooperation, creativity, and skill refinement for all participants.

Drawing on Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, instruction targets comprehensible input at the i+1 level—slightly beyond students' current proficiency—to accelerate acquisition. For Muhammad Amin, whose speaking fluency stems from international schooling but reveals gaps in grammar and writing due to prior informal exposure, targeted exercises emphasize sentence accuracy and academic vocabulary. Model emails and pattern-recognition drills expose him to grammatical structures, bridging these weaknesses.

Muslima, with her grammar-focused background yielding strong structural accuracy yet high caution in communicative contexts, benefits from a low-anxiety space to lower her Affective Filter (Krashen, 1985). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) facilitates this through paired work with Muhammad Amin, enabling natural language use in email drafting to boost confidence without sacrificing precision.

Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) integrates seamlessly, merging email composition with language practice across brainstorming, drafting, and revision stages. These scaffold grammar, morphology, and tonal appropriateness. Complementing this, The Silent Way employs subtle prompts and self-discovery exercises, empowering both students to self-correct errors amid authentic content tasks.

Students' backgrounds shape tailored support: Muhammad Amin's confidence requires formalizing writing skills, while Muslima's accuracy needs functional application. Motivation aligns with Dörnyei (1998) and Darvin and Norton (2021), who link investment to success. Muhammad Amin's aspiration for overseas study drives his engagement with complex academic expression; for Muslima, aiming to guide tourists, email tasks underscore professional fluency transferable to speaking.

This multifaceted approach—leveraging Krashen's hypothesis, CLT, CBLT, and The Silent Way—addresses individual needs, backgrounds, and goals. It equips Muhammad Amin and Muslima with enhanced grammar, writing, and communicative competence in a meaningful, effective manner.

VIII. Analysis of Instructional Practices

In this study, instructional decisions are analyzed as **evidence of how teaching responds to learner identity and emotional needs**, rather than as personal teaching preferences. Classroom practices were examined to understand how different learners reacted to specific instructional approaches.

For example, communicative language teaching (CLT) activities, particularly pair and group work, were used to support learners who showed anxiety when speaking English. Observation data suggested that these activities encouraged participation and reduced hesitation, especially for learners with lower speaking confidence. This supports Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that lower anxiety allows learners to benefit more from language input.

Similarly, structured writing tasks with clear models were used to support learners who showed strong oral skills but weaker grammatical accuracy. These tasks appeared to help learners notice language forms while still engaging in meaningful communication, aligning with Krashen's Input Hypothesis.

Overall, instructional decisions were shaped by learners' identities, prior learning experiences, and emotional responses to classroom tasks.

IX. Findings

The analysis revealed three main themes related to learner identity and instructional decision-making.

Learner Identity and Confidence. Learners' confidence in using English was strongly connected to their previous learning environments. Learners with greater exposure to spoken English demonstrated higher willingness to participate in classroom interaction. In contrast, learners whose prior education focused on grammar showed more hesitation when speaking. These differences reflect how learner identity develops through past learning experiences (Norton, 2013).

Tension Between Accuracy and Fluency. The findings showed a clear difference between accuracy and fluency among the learners. One learner demonstrated fluent spoken English but made frequent grammatical errors, while the other showed high grammatical accuracy but limited spoken confidence. This tension influenced instructional choices, as tasks needed to balance form-focused support with opportunities for meaningful communication.

Instructional Alignment with Learner Goals. Instruction was adapted to match learners' future goals and motivations. Learners who aimed to study abroad were given tasks that focused on academic writing and formal language use. Learners with career goals requiring spoken interaction were supported through communicative tasks that emphasized fluency and confidence. These adaptations reflect the importance of learner investment in language learning (Darvin & Norton, 2017).

Ethical Considerations and Limitations. Ethical considerations were addressed by using **pseudonyms** for all participants to protect their identities. Participation was limited to two learners, which allows for in-depth analysis but limits the generalizability of the findings.

In addition, the researcher acted as both teacher and researcher. While this provided close access to classroom interaction, it may have influenced the interpretation of learner behavior. This limitation is acknowledged, and findings are presented as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable.

X. Conclusion

This qualitative case study examined how learner identity and learning environment influence instructional decision-making in an EFL classroom. Drawing on learner identity theory and Krashen's Input and Affective Filter Hypotheses, the study explored the experiences of two adolescent learners with contrasting educational backgrounds. The findings showed that learners'

previous learning contexts played a significant role in shaping their confidence, accuracy, and classroom participation.

The study demonstrated that learner identity is closely connected to learners' emotional responses and engagement with classroom tasks. Learners with extensive exposure to spoken English showed higher confidence and fluency, while learners whose prior instruction emphasized grammar and accuracy demonstrated greater caution in oral communication. These differences influenced how instruction was adapted to support individual learner needs.

The findings also highlighted the role of a theory-informed teaching philosophy in instructional decision-making. By applying Krashen's principles of comprehensible input and reduced anxiety, instructional tasks were adjusted to balance fluency and accuracy while maintaining meaningful communication. These adaptations suggest that effective instruction requires attention not only to linguistic input but also to learners' emotional and identity-related factors.

Although the study is limited by its small sample size and context-specific focus, it provides insight into how learner identity and theoretical frameworks can inform responsive teaching practices in EFL classrooms. The results suggest that teachers who understand learners' backgrounds, goals, and emotional needs can make more effective instructional decisions. Future research may build on this study by examining larger groups of learners or exploring similar instructional approaches in different educational contexts.

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