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What kind of identity and personality for language learners?

Introduction

For many years, young people studying foreign languages at British universities have been required to spend a year in a country where the language they are studying is spoken, and is the (or a) national language. The unspoken main purpose of this period of 'the year abroad' is to improve language competence, but other expectations are often assumed too, such as it being an enriching experience or the extra 'soft qualification' that future employers will value. There may also be unexpected changes in identity. 'Lynn' was interviewed a few weeks after her return from France and said of her identity changes while being an assistant teacher in that country:

> I would say I was European rather than English. […] I would love to be French, but you can't. I can never be French because you have to be born French. I could be a European. I couldn't be French though. […] I've completely changed appearance, physical appearance. I've grown my hair […] in the idea of becoming chic and French-like. I've changed my style of dressing, becoming much more conscious of what I'm wearing rather than just putting something on in the morning. But that's all obviously an influence of being in France. […] So I mean I have changed physically an awful lot and people didn't recognise me when I came back. People just walked straight past.[1]

In this passage from her interview she demonstrates that she has her own theory of identity and, in particular, of national identity. On the one hand, she believes that national identity is a matter of birth ri ("you have to be born French"), even though she could imitate being French, both physically ("I've grown my hair") and sartorially ("I've changed my style of dressing"); and it was a success: "people didn't recognise me". On the other hand, despite not being able to be French, she can be European. Although she does not explain what she means by this, it seems to be an alternative to her national identity, an identity that one does not have to be born into, and which nonetheless marks a change from her existing "English" national identity. The change was a culmination of experience. Lynn had spent more than ten years at school and university learning French. She was a 'language person',[2] since language learning was potentially a first step in her future professional life.

When interviewed again, ten years later, Lynn was living in Belgium, was married to a Belgian and had a child. Her theory of identity had developed further. She described how she was "putting down

1 Quoted in Michael Byram: *From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2008, p. 117.
2 See: Colin Evans: *Language people. The experience of teaching and learning modern languages in British universities.* Milton Keynes: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1988g

roots" in Belgium by learning about Belgian history. At the same time, she had also joined the National Trust in Britain – an organization that looks after historical buildings and similar sites – because she wanted her daughter to have roots in Britain too. She herself will never be Belgian, she said, always English, and this echoes her earlier view that she could never be French. However, she has an enriched theory, saying that her daughter is "never going to be English and she's never going to be wholly Belgian", but she makes it clear that. from her present perspective, national identity is preferable to "European" identity. She justifies this by saying that a "mishmash of something European" is unsatisfactory because "you have to have the roots and that means all the differences".[3] Lynn's belief in national identity is supported by a preeminent scholar in the field, Anthony Smith, who asserts that "of all the collective identities which human beings share today, national identity is perhaps the most fundamental and inclusive".[4]

Like other collective or social identities, national identity is strengthened by comparison and contrast with the identities of similar and parallel groups. Lynn's own earlier experience emphasizes this as she contrasted being English and French. It is also evident in what she anticipates for her daughter: she contrasts and compares being Belgian and English. She also describes the possible effects of the contrast on her daughter: "she is going to be a mixture of the two, so there can be a different personality".[5]

Stimulated by our earlier research, in this article I want to consider issues in identity and personality which arise in language learning but also the implications for language teaching. My exploration will be somewhat speculative rather than empirical as there is little empirical research on which to draw.

Social identity, personality and names

Smith, quoted earlier, refers to "collective identities". Naomi Ellemers uses the term "group self" in her analysis of how "a (temporary) transformation of the conception of self from an individual to the group level" may explain societal issues such as religious or ethnic tensions.[6] Tajfel uses the term "social identity" and analyses intergroup relations.[7] Identification with a group may be both self-ascribed and other-ascribed. Individuals may gain higher self-esteem from identifying with a highly valued social group or, if categorized by others as belonging to a group with low value in a society, they may suffer the effects of stereotyping and prejudice.

In some traditions of language teaching, teachers would give children a new name from a foreign country when they began to learn its language. This was probably based on the idea that good

3 Michael Byram: From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship. p. 117.
4 Anthony D. Smith: *National Identity*. London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 143.
5 Michael Byram: From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship. p. 117.
6 Naomi Ellemers: "The Group Self". In: *Science* 336 (2012), pp. 848–852; Naomi Ellemers et al.: "Self and Social Identity". In: *Annual Review of Psychology* 53 (2002), pp. 161–86.
7 Henri Tajfel: "Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour". In: *Social Science Information* 13/2 (1974), pp. 65–93.

language learners should strive to imitate the native speaker. There was in this practice an element of other-ascription of learners, by the teacher, to the native speaker group, a high status group in the learning context. The demise of the ideal of the native speaker as a model for language learners may have led to a much lower frequency of this imposition of a new name, but is a useful starting point for analyzing questions of identity in language learning.

The power of names is considered in a review in the 1980s by Kenneth Dion who concludes that research until that point suggested "the existence of psychological connections among names, identity and self" but that more research was necessary.[8] Name change is a potential source of understanding of the connections he mentions. Voluntary name change may have various purposes, including breaking with or re-affirming a connection with the past or a religion, but it can also have social costs.[9] The decision to change a first name – in France a complex legal process – may have numerous, interrelated reasons[10] but is nonetheless a choice.

The imposition of a name by a teacher is a related but different matter. It has not been empirically investigated, but the impact is strikingly described from personal experience by Hoffman, an immigrant from Poland to Canada at the age of thirteen. She describes the first day at school for her sister and herself:

> This morning, in the rinky-dink wooden barracks where the classes are held, we've acquired new names. All it takes is a brief conference between Mr. Rosenberg [from her host family] and the teacher, a kindly looking woman who tries to give us reassuring glances, but who has seen too many people come and go to get sentimental about a name. Mine – "Ewa"– is easy to change into its new equivalent in English, "Eva". My sister's name – "Alina" – poses more of a problem, but after a moment's thought, Mr. Rosenberg and the teacher decide that "Elaine" is close enough. My sister and I hang our heads wordlessly under this careless baptism. The teacher then introduces us to the class, mispronouncing our last name – "Wydra" – in a way we've never heard before. We make our way to a bench at the back of the room; nothing much has happened, except a small, seismic mental shift. The twist in our names takes them a tiny distance from us – but it's a gap into which the infinite hobgoblin of abstraction enters. Our Polish names didn't refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can't yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. We walk to our seats, into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strangers to ourselves.[11]

That "seismic shift" and the entry of "the hobgoblin of abstraction" are telling phrases with remarkable power. The newly imposed names are to be used throughout the school and, at least in Eva's case, have become her lifelong name. It is a stark description and warning. Fortunately, Block reassures us

8 Kenneth L. Dion: "Names, Identity and Self". In: *Names* 31/4 (1983), pp. 245–257, here p. 255.
9 See Celia Emmelhainz: "Naming a New Self. Identity Elasticity and Self-Definition in Voluntary Name Changes". In: *Names* 60/3 (2012), pp. 156–165.
10 See Baptiste Coulmont: "Changing One's First Name in France. A Fountain of Youth?" In: *Names* 62/3 (2014), pp. 137–146.
11 Eva Hoffman: *Lost in Translation. A life in a new language*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 105.

that foreign-language classrooms are unlikely to have effects on learners' identities or the traumatic experience Hoffman describes,[12] but it is a situation language teachers need to be aware of, and which is related to their own identities.

Ultimately, language teachers are "language people" with professional identities and, often, aspirations to imitate native speakers as Lynn seemed also to have, even though she realized that there are barriers. Teachers make their choices for themselves, but they should be wary of imposing the native-speaker paradigm on their learners, either by giving names or by expecting identification with the language. In this context Block's reassurance is important.

The development of personality

If, accepting Block, we do not need to consider further the effect of language teaching on identity, we can turn to the question of "a different personality", as suggested by Lynn when talking about the future of her child, and here new perspectives open up.

Language teaching is often – and probably for the vast majority of learners – part of the experience of schooling, of general and (usually) compulsory education. Perhaps for learners themselves and for many others – such as parents and future employers – learning the language has above all, if not exclusively, instrumental value. For teachers and curriculum designers, however, it has other values too, not least those referred to as educational or humanistic. Curriculum designers state the purposes of language teaching in such terms. Two countries, which contrast in terms of size, geographical location and political persuasion, but with a common first foreign language – English – make similar statements. In China, the curriculum for "College English", which is the course for all university students whatever their major discipline, refers to communication ability but also to this other dimension:

> College English aims at intercultural education, helps students understand difference – the different outlook, values, thinking modes between China and other countries – cultivates the students' intercultural awareness, improves their social linguistic and intercultural communication ability.
> The College English course is part of the *humanities / liberal arts education* and it represents *both instrumental and humanistic features*.[13]

In a text on the purposes of language teaching in Norway – where language teaching is dominated by the teaching of English – we find:

> Foreign languages are both an educational subject and a *humanistic subject*. This area of study shall give opportunity for experiences, joy and *personal development*, at the same time as it opens greater possibilities

12 David Block: *Second Language Identities*. London: Continuum, 2007.
13 Chinese Ministry of Education *College English Teaching Guideline 2015* Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2015. p.11. Translation by Han Hui, emphasis added by M. B.

in the world of work and for study in many language regions.[14]

These are the formulations of curriculum specialists. Teachers tend to use more commonplace language and refer to wanting to 'broaden learners' horizons', but have the same intentions. There are hints in such statements that there will be an impact on personality, but this is largely implicit. Explicit declarations concerning the desired impact of language teaching on a learner's personality are less frequent. They are nonetheless present in one of the most influential documents of recent decades, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR).[15]

The analysis of personal identity is pursued in depth in Chapter 5. The section dealing with "'existential' competence (savoir être)" is crucial.[16] The taxonomy of aspects of existential competence comprises attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality factors, and it is suggested that the development of an "intercultural personality involving both attitudes and awareness" may be "an educational goal in its own right".[17] It is then stated that the pursuit of this educational goal raises "important ethical and pedagogical issues […] such as:

- the extent to which personality development can be an explicit educational objective;
- how cultural relativism is to be reconciled with ethical and moral integrity;
- which personality factors a) facilitate b) impede foreign- or second-language learning and acquisition;
- how learners can be helped to exploit strengths and overcome weaknesses;
- how the diversity of personalities can be reconciled with the constraints imposed on and by educational systems."[18]

Closer analysis also reveals the heterogeneous nature of the issues to consider and the responses to make. First, there is the question of whether personality development can (and should?) be an explicit objective. Personality factors are listed as: "loquacity / taciturnity; enterprise / timidity; optimism / pessimism; introversion / extroversion; proactivity / reactivity; intropunitive / extrapunitive / impunitive personality (guilt); (freedom from) fear or embarrassment; rigidity / flexibility; open-mindedness / closed-mindedness; spontaneity / self-monitoring; intelligence; meticulousness / carelessness; memorising ability; industry / laziness; (lack of) ambition; (lack of) self-awareness; (lack of) self-reliance; (lack of) self-confidence; (lack of) self-esteem."[19] It is assumed that some factors, but not all, are likely to facilitate or impede language learning. It is left to the users of the CEFR to decide

14 Utdanningsdirektoratet Læreplan I fremmedspråk – programfag I utdanningsprogram for studiesspesialisering (PSP1-01), at: www.udir.no/kl06/PSP1-01/Hele/Formaal (accessed 30.03.2018). (Literal) translation, emphasis added by M. B.
15 Council of Europe: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2001, at: https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97 (accessed 30.08.2021).
16 Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 105f.
17 Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 106.
18 Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 106.
19 Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 105f.

which. Users are also asked to consider how they can help learners to "exploit strengths and overcome weaknesses".[20] This presumably refers to language learning, but it is possible that it also refers to the general "educational objective".[21]

In addition to personality factors, there are "attitudes", including "willingness to relativise one's cultural viewpoint and cultural value system" and, perhaps the most challenging, users are asked to consider the potential tension between personality and the constraints of educational systems.[22] Here I am reminded of the de-schooling movement of earlier decades.[23]

It is the purpose of the CEFR to ask questions rather than answer them, and to encourage users to make their answers "comprehensive, transparent and coherent",[24] like the CEFR itself. To summarize the discussion of existential competence: users are urged to consider and, where appropriate, state whether – and if so which – personality features learners will need / be encouraged / equipped / required to develop / display. Through this first question users are ultimately deciding whether there should be an educational objective which entails personality development and what it should be. The user is then asked a question about pedagogy: how the educational objective should be reached (and it is noteworthy here that the more general phrase "learner characteristics" is used),[25] whether – and if so in what ways – learner characteristics are taken into account in provisions for language learning, teaching and assessment. These are extremely challenging questions, and it would be useful to know how and what teachers think about them, and whether they are considered in courses of teacher education.

An "intercultural personality"

As noted above, the CEFR does not in general give answers to such questions, but it does use the phrase "intercultural personality" and this is linked to the educational objectives,[26] although little further detail is afforded. In another place in the CEFR there are suggestions that this notion of intercultural personality means "a learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture".[27] This is framed within the explanation and definition of plurilingual and pluricultural competence, which is the dominant phrase in the text, but in one instance, the text abandons the term "pluricultural" and refers to learners' "plurilingual competences" and "interculturality". The linguistic and cultural competences, it is stated, "enable the

[20] Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 106.
[21] Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 106.
[22] Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 105.
23 Ivan Illich: *Deschooling society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Education, 1973; Alexander Sutherland Neill: *Summerhill School. A new view of childhood*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998.
[24] Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 7.
[25] Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 106.
[26] Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 106.
27 Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 1.

individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences". This is then linked, briefly, to the ability to "mediate, through interpretation and translation, between speakers of the two languages concerned who cannot communicate directly":[28] a somewhat confusing description since it refers to "the" language, when presumably the two speakers use different languages. It is nonetheless useful to know that a mediator is one example of an intercultural personality.

The notion of mediation has been much developed in the *Companion Volume* (CV)[29] to the CEFR, and we might expect to see there a considered reflection on the intercultural personality. Unfortunately, the CV does not address the question of identities or personality; the mediator is described in the CV primarily in terms of the competences they have. It is nonetheless possible to discern some characteristics of the mediator in the descriptors of competences. The mediator "needs to have a well-developed emotional intelligence"[30] in order to have "empathy for the viewpoints and emotional states of other participants in the communicative situation".[31] At the highest level of competence, the mediator can take on "different roles, according to the needs of the people and the situation involved".[32] They can at lower levels "establish a supportive environment", "work collaboratively" and "show interest and empathy".[33]

Crucially, the mediator can "facilitate cultural space", which involves creating a shared space "between linguistically and culturally different locutors",[34] and this space should allow for positive interactions – the role of the mediator being to help others to gain deeper understanding of each other and avoid communication difficulties "arising from contrasting cultural viewpoints".[35] This competence is glossed as "the capacity to deal with 'otherness'", and is different from using their pluricultural competences to "gain acceptance and to enhance their own mission or message" which,[36] it is said, is later dealt with under "Building on pluricultural repertoire".[37] The phrase "gain acceptance" is a clue to how the authors understand the social identity/ies of the learner, since there is a possible implication that a learner would want to gain entrance to another social group, be accepted by the group, and acquire a new social identity. This is, however, my speculation since there is no explanation in the later chapter "Building on pluricultural repertoire" of what might have been meant by "gain acceptance". Progression up the scale of "Building on pluricultural repertoire" (an unusual

28 Council of Europe: *CEFR*, p. 43.
29 Council of Europe: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion Volume*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2020, at: www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages (accessed 30.08.2021).
30 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, p. 91.
31 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, p. 91.
32 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, p. 91.
33 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, p. 91.
34 Council of Europe: CERF Companion Volume, p. 114.
35 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, p. 114.
36 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, p. 114.
37 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, p. 123–125.

phrase without a definite or indefinite article before "pluricultural") is a matter of increasing capacity for explanation. One can further speculate that the competences of the mediator may imply certain personal characteristics, which not all users/learners necessarily have, but it might be argued that, rather than relatively fixed personal characteristics, these competences can be learnt (and taught).

Teachers and teacher educators reading the CV can merely engage in speculation, since they are discouraged from reading the CEFR itself. The CV distinguishes between two kinds of "users": those interested in "pedagogical use" and those who are "researchers".[38] The CV is presented to teachers and teacher educators, for pedagogical use, as "the updated framework" of the CEFR,[39] and is all they need because it is more "user-friendly". Researchers, however, "wishing to interrogate the underlying concepts and guidance in CEFR chapters about specific areas"[40] should consult the CEFR of 2001. This is very problematic because it cuts off teachers and teacher educators from the issues I have mentioned above, and presumes that they do not need a deeper understanding of concepts of personality and identity and the guidance the CEFR offers on these.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown here that matters of personality and identity are important in language teaching and learning and should be considered carefully by language teachers. This is surely an important topic in teacher education, especially in initial teacher education.

It is also an important topic for further research, which might take its inspiration from the CEFR, a document that raises many questions which are yet to be thoroughly addressed, and have not been developed in the CV.

Assuming that the CV will have a major impact on language teaching, as the CEFR has done, it is problematic that it tries to cut teachers off from the original thinking in the CEFR, especially from matters such as the ones I have focused on here. The CEFR, more than the CV, has a vision of language teaching as contributing to learners' education, to their *Bildung*, a concept hinted at – for me, at least – in the point cited above and worth repeating here: that an "intercultural personality" may be "an educational goal in its own right".

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38 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, preliminaries, n.p.
39 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, preliminaries, n.p.
40 Council of Europe: *CERF Companion Volume*, preliminaries, n.p.