IDENTITY ISSUES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to reflect on the importance and relevance of identity in the educational context and how the teaching of foreign language (FL) can contribute to the process of (re)construction of the student's identity; for this, we will bring a theoretical basis of identity, how it is constructed; the role of social relations in its construction from a socio-interactionist perspective and how this can contribute to FL classes. We know that identity is flexible and always changing, it is constituted from all experiences lived by the individual and their social relationships. Thus, the student already arrives in the classroom with a bag of identities, the teacher...
must then, from this collection, mediate a learning process that makes sense to the student, that is, it is necessary to know the existing identities in their class and take them into account in the development of classes.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity, Foreign Language, Education.

**RESUMO:** Este trabalho visa refletir sobre a importância e relevância da identidade no contexto educacional e como o ensino de língua estrangeira (LE) pode contribuir no processo de (re)construção da identidade do estudante; para isso, traremos conceitos teóricos de identidade, como ela é formada; o papel das relações sociais no desenvolvimento da mesma a partir da perspectiva sociointeracionista; e como isso pode contribuir para as aulas de LE. Sabemos que a identidade é flexível e está sempre mudando, é constituída a partir de toda e qualquer experiência vivenciada pelo indivíduo e suas relações sociais. Dessa forma, o estudante já chega em sala de aula com uma bagagem de identidades, o professor deve então, a partir desse acervo, mediar um processo de aprendizagem que faça sentido para o estudante, ou seja, é preciso conhecer as identidades existentes em sua classe e as levar em consideração no desenvolvimento das práticas pedagógicas em sala de aula.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Identidade, Língua Estrangeira, Educação.

1. Introduction

Education is a right for all, which can be observed in different documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil in Chapter II, Article 6: "Social rights include education, health, food, work, housing, transportation, leisure, security, social security, protection of motherhood and childhood, assistance to the needy, as provided by this Constitution" (New wording given to Article 6 by Constitutional Amendment 90/15). Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, throughout his career, advocated for education as
a right for all, as a revolutionary act, and as essential for the positive and free evolution of a society. He stated, "If education alone does not transform society, without it, society will not change either" (Freire, 2000, p. 31). From this, we can infer that the more knowledge a person acquires, the better their social development, participation, and contribution to society will be.

Therefore, learning a foreign language greatly contributes to the intellectual and social development of an individual. By learning a new linguistic system, one's communication possibilities double. Communication is essential for life, as it is through discourse that humans express themselves and exist.

Thus, learning a foreign language enables students to engage in different forms of socialization, access various texts, and gain diverse perspectives on employability. Language is a living organism, altered throughout history by its speakers and laden with cultural and identity-related features. Therefore, when teaching a foreign language, the language teacher should not overlook these cultural and identity-related aspects of the language being taught.

Learning the English language facilitates the creation of new forms of engagement and participation for students in an increasingly globalized and pluralistic social world, where the boundaries between personal, local, regional, national, and transnational interests are becoming more diffuse and contradictory. Thus, the study of the English language can provide everyone with access to the linguistic knowledge necessary for engagement and participation, contributing to the critical agency of students and the exercise of active citizenship. It also expands the possibilities for interaction and mobility, opening new pathways for knowledge construction and continuity in studies (BNCC, 2018, p. 241).

Similarly, according to Leffa (2012), every human being is constantly changing and (re)constructing themselves, as no one is neutral to the world around them. We are influenced by and connected to everyone we encounter. Identity is multiple and flexible, primarily due to survival and adaptation.
Throughout their lives, individuals constantly need to (re)define themselves to survive dangerous situations, relate to others, and adapt to their contexts.

When entering a classroom in the role of a teacher, it is highly valuable for the educator to consider the diverse identities present there. By doing so, they will contribute positively to the students' process of identity acquisition. In the following section, we will address the concept of identity and how it should be considered in the teaching and learning process in foreign language classes.

2. Defining Identity

Paulo Freire (1996) declares that we are cultural, historical, and unfinished beings. Thus, "Where there is life, there is unfinishedness" (Freire, 1996, p. 50). From this perspective, as unfinished beings, our identities are always under (re)construction and influenced by our environment. Therefore, in this work, we will use Leffa's (2012) theoretical concept of identity.

Leffa (2012) presents the concept of identities, which means that each person possesses multiple identities that are used as masks. For each situation, we choose and use the most suitable "mask." These identities are acquired throughout life. The range and variation of identities are constructed under the influence of the social, cultural, and historical context.

The word "identity" can be seen from two opposing angles, as emphasized by Leffa (2012). We can think of identity as something identical, meaning we are all the same, highlighting what makes us all human. Alternatively, we can think of identity as something identifiable, emphasizing what makes us different from others. Despite the modern society's notion that everything can be excessively multiplied, there are no two identical beings or objects. What exists are identities with distinctive traits.

Each person's identities are continuously acquired, as human beings are influenced by everything and everyone around them. Therefore, Leffa
(2012) presents three scenarios that directly impact the construction of identity: the geographic dimension, the historical dimension, and the dialectical dimension.

The geographic dimension highlights the possibility of spatial expansion and contraction of identity, as it includes in one direction and excludes in another. The historical dimension shows how the concept of identity dissolves over time, crumbling from a single rigid block into a cloud of residues that dissipate in the air. Finally, in the dialectical dimension, identity is seen in a game of confrontations constructed to legitimize who can and cannot be included in a particular group (Leffa, 2012, p. 59).

In other words, the geographic dimension establishes that we are influenced by the environment in which we live. A person may identify with their country, their state, or even the planet they live on. The point is that being in or living in a particular location will influence their identity. The historical dimension refers to the flexibilities that human beings have been forced to make throughout history. We can consider, for example, how women's rights and responsibilities have changed. It is the ability of human beings to adapt and reinvent themselves that has aided their survival. Finally, the dialectical dimension is related to the relationships and differences that develop in relation to others, including communication skills and means of overcoming conflicts.

Knowing that identity is constructed and impacted by different factors, it is correct to state that the school and everything that happens there, as well as all the participants, are part of the (re)construction of each student's identity and even that of each teacher. Identity does not have a limit to transformations. As Leffa (2012) states, "The individual does not even 'be'; they simply 'are.' Often, identity is built and rebuilt in real-time as the situation demands" (p. 76). When engaging socially, the linguistic system is the primary means used to express our identity. As Leffa (2012) points out, "It is a natural and easy process when it comes to the native language, but
it can become difficult and even painful when we enter the realm of a foreign language" (p. 76).

In this regard, Leffa (2012) argues that this difficulty arises from the non-acceptance of the fact that when we are using another linguistic system, we are not translating our identity, but rather using a new identity. He states, "Those who speak another language have at least two identities: the identity of a speaker of the native language and the identity of a speaker of the foreign language" (Leffa, 2012, p. 73).

Therefore, when learning a foreign language, the student will construct a new identity. Often, the challenges experienced in this process can lead to demotivation on the part of the learners. The teacher, on their part, can create a path based on the student's already constructed identity.

3. Identity and Social Interaction

Identities are constantly created and recreated, as we are influenced by the interactions, we have with the environment that surrounds us, the historical context in which we are situated, and the relationships we establish, such as family, friends, online/social media, religious institutions, among others.

Thus, the school environment is composed of different interactions. "Various phenomena, such as interaction, socialization, social practices, culture, communication, among others, in which the social aspect intertwines with language in the process, directly or indirectly activate identity" (Frank; Conceição, 2021, p. 13). The BNCC (National Common Curriculum Base) advocates that language education should aim to prepare students for various modes of interaction. An example of this can be observed in the field of FL (Foreign Language) through the approach adopted in textbooks, socio-interactionism, based on Vygotsky’s theory.
The sociointeractionist approach to FL teaching is based on the principles of interaction, negotiation, and mediation, as it recognizes that language is directly linked to social interactions and learning, and development occur through interaction with others. In this sense, a collaborative activity, such as a group or pair interview task, in which students need to negotiate with each other, can contribute to FL learning and the development of interpersonal relationships.

According to Paiva, echoing Vygotsky (1993), human beings only learn through interaction, whether with other people, culture, or any other influences that generate changes, as "from a sociocultural perspective, learning is seen as a process of participating in social practices, of becoming a member of a community" (Paiva, 2014, p. 138).

Similarly, Hall (2015) asserts that our construction of identity is fostered within the social context in which we live, and this formation is evident within the individual who seeks meaning in the world.

The fact that we project ourselves onto these cultural identities, while also internalizing their meanings and values, making them "part of us," contributes to aligning our subjective feelings with the objective positions we occupy in the social and cultural world. Identity, therefore, stitches the subject to the structure (Hall, 2015, p. 11).

Since language is socially constructed, we believe that its learning should be promoted through interactions.

4. The Foreign Language Teacher and Their Influence on (De)Constructions of Identities

Language is the medium for interaction in all spheres of social life, and through these interactions, identity is constructed, as "The symbolic artifact present in language provides individuals with the opportunity to construct the world and their social relations, and it is in this context that identity is
formed” (Frank; Conceição, 2021, p. 14). Therefore, a learning process mediated by social practices will better prepare the student for real language use.

The language learner constantly manages diversity in their learning process and, consequently, revises principles, reorganizes their sociocultural connections, and reevaluates feelings about themselves and the world. Thus, the context of foreign language learning can represent a true and inherent (re)construction of identity (Brun, 2010, p. 77).

According to Rajagopalan (2003), identities are constantly being reconstructed according to the circumstances they find themselves in, so we can indicate that while students are in contact with a different culture and identity, they foster the (re)construction of their own.

Identities are all in a permanent state of transformation, in a state of boiling. They are constantly being reconstructed. At any given moment, identities are being adapted and adjusted to new emerging circumstances. The only way to define an identity is in opposition to other identities at play. In other words, identities are structurally defined. One cannot speak of identity outside the structural relations that prevail at a given moment (Rajagopalan, 2003, p. 71).

Therefore, the foreign language teacher should bear in mind that no language is neutral. In other words, any language expression is always imbued with history, culture, ideologies, etc. Hence, the importance of a critical-reflective teaching approach that considers the social context and the identities present therein and aims at a process of meaning-making during learning.

5. Authors Reflections Based on Classroom Experiences

Teachers of English and Spanish in the public education system of the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil, one from a peripheral school and two from schools located in a central region, we aim to reflect on our context regarding
how the identities present in a classroom can influence lesson planning, class development, and the teaching-learning process. It is important for teachers to consider this aspect when designing and delivering their lessons.

Regarding the reality of the peripheral school, it has a precarious physical structure, and the students mostly come from situations of social vulnerability. Regarding the language classes, most of the students show low motivation towards learning a foreign language. Some students even expressed statements like "they would never go to the USA anyway," reflecting a homogenizing conception of the English language as belonging exclusively to a particular country or territory. Another significant issue among the students is their financial situation, as many of them are in vulnerable social conditions and often arrive at school hungry or tired. Besides the lack of food, many students need to work to contribute to their family income.

Based on the assumptions above, the teaching experience in the classroom demonstrates that knowing each class and its individual members is extremely valuable in finding motivational factors that promote student engagement and participation in lessons.

After conducting a diagnostic period with activities, research, conversations, and observations, it was found that promoting lessons with practices that connected to factors outside the school environment awakened students' ownership of their learning process. This is of utmost importance considering the limited number of English language (LE) classes available in the basic education curriculum in the state of Mato Grosso. In the elementary school, there are two one-hour classes per week, while in high school, there is only one class of the same duration per week.

An event that exemplifies the relevance of considering the identities of each class occurred with the second-year high school students. Initially, a planning was developed for all classes, both in the morning and evening periods. However, after the diagnostic period, a significant difference in the
interests of the morning and evening classes was observed. Despite being in the same age group, the morning students showed motivation and interest in the culture of English-speaking countries, predominantly American culture.

Therefore, the prevalence of American culture is intensified primarily due to the massive media presence of movies, TV series, and music, which are part of students' daily lives. The morning students expressed interest in lessons that could somehow contribute to their integration into the job market, with many students stating that they "wanted to learn English to work".

Given these circumstances, although all the students analyzed in this article are in the same grade, it was necessary to prepare two different lesson plans. This allowed the students to identify with the content and find meaning in the lessons, which, in turn, sparked their interest in learning the language. Therefore, despite the convenience of creating a single lesson plan for all classes in the same grade, as ethical educators with good judgment, we cannot ignore the identities present in the classroom. As Paulo Freire stated, "Respect for the students, their dignity, their process of formation, and their evolving identities cannot be achieved without taking into account the conditions in which they exist, without recognizing the importance of the 'knowledge gained from experience' with which they come to school" (Freire, 1996, p.64).

On the other hand, regarding the reality of central schools, it should be noted that although the school structures are relatively adequate, there are facilities that need improvement and others that need to be built. Regarding the students, we must emphasize the diversity we encounter, with some students coming from peripheral areas and having to travel long distances to reach school, requiring a great deal of commitment to avoid dropping out. Additionally, there are students who work in the commercial sector, and with the schools located in this area, they strive to complete their studies while generating income for their families. Furthermore, it is worth
highlighting the presence of migrant students from Hispanic regions, as they significantly impact Spanish and English as foreign language classes.

Based on the pedagogical practices developed in the foreign language classes, it has been proven through observations, diagnostic tests, and activities carried out in the language classes that the multiplicity of identities found in a classroom influences the planning and development of lessons. Trying to cater to all these individuals with very different identities in just one class per week is a challenging task.

Regarding Hispanic migrants in the foreign language classes, we have noticed that their presence significantly impacts the dynamics of the class. In classes where there were migrant students, their peers relied on them during Spanish lessons, which allowed the teacher to adjust the lesson plans to actively involve the migrant student and encourage their contribution to the class. It is worth noting the difficulties faced by migrant students in other subjects, primarily due to the language barrier, as a lack of proficiency in the Portuguese language hinders their overall development and contributes to their exclusion.

On the other hand, Brazilian students who are part of classes with the presence of Hispanic migrant students tend to be more motivated to learn a foreign language, as they realize the practical necessity of communicating with someone from outside Brazil.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance for the teacher to be aware of the diverse identities present in the classroom, as a failure to recognize this diversity will bring significant challenges to the development of pedagogical practices. Additionally, the school and the institution responsible for education should formulate and implement a welcoming project for migrant students, as these individuals require various forms of support, such as psychological assistance to address the traumas they have experienced, rather than solely focusing on learning Portuguese.
Contextualizing and giving meaning to the lessons will allow students to learn better, thereby fulfilling the social role of the teacher in shaping critical, self-sufficient students capable of effective communication with the world.

6. Conclusions

We understand that each human being does not have just one identity, but multiple identities. These identities vary according to social contexts, family, school, and so on. For each situation or environment, a person will use the identity that best aids in negotiations and necessary adaptations. Identities are always in (re)construction, shaped by the discourses in which everyone engages. Thus, individuals create or recreate their identities based on processes of identification or non-identification with the social environment.

Therefore, learning a foreign language also provokes this process of identification and directly influences a student's willingness to learn the language. For this reason, we argue that teachers should consider the factor of identity and commit to promoting a learning process in which students can identify themselves, enabling them to successfully construct their new identities.

Thus, when confronted with a vast variety of identities being constructed and reconstructed in the classroom, we conclude that the role of the teacher is crucial, serving as a mediator in the teaching and learning process.

Learning a foreign language provides individuals with broader possibilities for communication in the face of the textual and cultural diversity that exists in the world. Acquiring an additional language opens doors to new knowledge, information, and people. Moreover, teaching a foreign language to migrant students becomes a means of socialization and inclusion, as it
allows them to become protagonists in the language classroom and facilitates better integration with their classmates, resulting in successful school experiences.

To minimize the linguistic barriers encountered by migrant students, the Department of Education of Mato Grosso maintains a program called "Education for Immigrants," which aims to provide support in Portuguese language literacy to migrants arriving in Mato Grosso. However, this project is unable to accommodate all migrants as it is concentrated in certain schools. As a result, the students in the schools where we teach foreign language classes were not able to participate in this program.

Therefore, all educational institutions should consider implementing welcoming projects for diverse identities, including the production of specific materials and teacher training to effectively address the variety of students' needs. This is especially important considering the significance of foreign language learning for students who aspire to succeed in the world of work and academia.
References


