Identity: Socio-Political, Sociological, Humanistic and Poststructuralist Perspectives

Fredy Orlando Salamanca González
Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia
fredyo.salamanca@gmail.com

Abstract

Identity has multiple definitions and is related to many fields and theoreticians. It iscommonly believed that each person possesses one single and personal identity, but several perspectives have proposed multiple dimensions for it. This article presents some dimensions about what the term identity involves from the socio-political, sociological, humanistic, social and poststructuralist perspectives. Despite identity is displayed by people, is perceivable, transmittable, influenced by many factors, defining identity can get anywhere depending on the path to follow. The only certainty is that motivation, desires, preferences, ideology, words, tones, interjections, and clothing are issues related to identity.

Resumen

El concepto de Identidad tiene muchas dimensiones. Comúnmente se cree que cada persona tiene una única identidad pero, varias disciplinas proponen conceptos que, dependiendo de su base teórica, hacen que la identidad tenga múltiples connotaciones. Este artículo expone algunas definiciones acerca de lo que el término identidad involucra desde las perspectivas socio-política, sociológica, humanística, social y posestructuralista. A pesar de que la identidad es proyectada, es perceptible, heredada e influenciable, definir identidad puede llegar a diferentes puntos dependiendo del camino por seguir. La única certeza es que las motivaciones, los deseos, los gustos, las ideologías, las palabras, los tonos, las exclamaciones, la vestimenta tiene relación con la identidad.

Introduction

There have been many relevant topics in English Language Teaching. Some of these topics such as learning styles, learning strategies, multiple intelligences, bilingualism, etc, have widened the perspective about what teaching a language implies. Many years ago, with the initial methodological proposals, it was thought that knowing a language had to do with the accurate application of grammatical rules. Later, language learning enlarged its scope and it was related to sociology, psychology, cognitive science and some other fields. Likewise, identity is an issue that has taken relevance inside language classrooms. The way a student behaves, thinks and relates to others is fixed to identity and teachers must be able to perceive that difference. A teacher has an identity and students have their own. Inside a classroom, negotiation of identities takes place. Each person plays his/her role and accepts the others' roles leading to coexistence. In that sense, identity has many connotations due to the many fields in which it is involved. Thus, the following sections will provide a presentation about what identity can mean from different perspectives.

Identity has been an extensive topic to discuss. Identity is a term that has many associations; for example, different authors relate identity from the socio – political, sociological, humanistic and poststructuralist perspectives. The authors provide a concept for identity based on their specific theory and focus. Generally, it can be argued that identity is born from experiences, from interaction, from belonging to a society and by means of sharing ideas. The fact that we have certain likes, preferences and ways of thinking is also a matter of identity. What does it mean when we say I AM..? What are the implications when saying *I am Colombian, I am from the coast, or I am a good person..?* Every single action, thought, behavior or idea that we express is tied to the way we think we are and how we show to others. I, you, he, she, we, you, they, everyone lives a past, experiments a present and expects a future that has to do with the way people project their own identity.

The Socio Political perspective for identity

There are several authors who have been working on providing a definition or concept for identity. Dr. Charles Raab is a professor in the University of Edinburgh and he provides a socio – political perspective in terms of identity. His chapter *Identity Difference and Categorization*, offers two dimensions for the word *identity,* "one path ends in commonality and in identity shared by the person with others as members of certain categories or collectivities; the other ends in individualization or uniqueness, differentiating one person from another" (Raab 2009, p. 227). Each person develops a common identity depending on their likes or preferences and at the same time, each identity is unique in terms of the way it is projected towards the others based on specific features (ideology, ways of behaving, manners, etc). Raab(2009) mentions that identity relates to two dimensions: a group of people that reflect a representation of themselves towards the rest of the groups and the unique features that each person has in relation to other individuals. Another theoretician proposes

two more dimensions for identity, "one derives from idem, the Latin word, meaning sameness, similarity and/or continuity; the other refers to the concept of ipse or self" (Ricoeur, cited by Raab 2009, p. 228).Thus, identity can be defined as the similarity that a person has in terms of a group and on the opposite, as the individual differentiate him or herself from the people who belong to the same multitude.

The two previous dimensions of identity have also a connection to society and to the transformation that identity can have through time. As it was already stated, identity can be based on two dimensions: as a unique feature in every single person and also, as a configuration of a personality that is shaped through time based on experience and interaction. These dimensions are interrelated and that is the reason why identity is dynamic and is not finally elaborated. Identity is shaped and reshaped according to what a person lives and in relation to the surrounded society. Uniqueness and personality are aspects that allow a person make sense of the world, of the events that happen in his/her life, house, neighborhood, city, country, etc.

Each person has distinctive characteristics that make him/her different from the others. Acceptanceor rejection is also tied to the way the others are perceived, "situations vary along each path, and we have to negotiate the path's use with others. Thus, a person's individual identity may be accepted or rejected by others; it may be attributed to the person by others, and accepted or rejected by the person" (Raab 2009, p. 231).There are many situations that shape identity, religion, gender, likes, institutions,

personal background, etc, influence in a person's behavior, feelings, ideology. Identity is displayed in a double way: how I show myself to others and how others perceive the projection of my identity. A person might think about him/herself as a humble person, but the projection of his/her identity can be revealed to others as a selfish individual. In that sense, identity is related to someone and to the people around him/her.

One example that can illustrate how identity changes happen is when students are in the university.Studentsare pulled towards many situations that influence their thoughts and behavior; for example friends, teachers, the city and the way of living, demand a person to adapt and thus identity is transformed. Besides, during early semesters at a university, students look for a group in which they can feel identified. Then, this student can reject others based on what s/he would like to find in people:

> Our authorial selves can resist definitions imposed, if we find that that personhood jars with the sense of self we want to assert as our identity. When we declare adherence to collective categories such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, or religion, we are not necessarily surrendering to alien impositions, but are reappropriating or creating our identities. (Raab2009, p. 230)

Identity can be molded when making a decision about life. When external events touch the circle that a person is living, s/he evaluates options in order to make the best decision and choose wisely:

> Through self-inspection, self-

problematization, self-monitoring, and confession, we evaluate ourselves according to the criteria provided for us by others . . . Ironically we believe, in making our subjectivity the principle of our personal lives . . . that we are, freely, choosing our freedom. (Rose, quoted by Raab2009, p. 230)

Another dimension of identity that a person applies to decide what path to follow is related to subjectivity. Freedom will make a person moves among routes until the self identification fits into what he/she is looking for. From the socio - political perspective, Identity is related to the building of a self in relation to the people that are around. Besides, ideology, preferences and prospect outcomes are tied to what a person *is* and how s/he would like *to be*. In the educational context, students are constantly struggling in between the identity they display by means of their behavior and the identity that is perceived by others. The groups that students compose in high schools implicitly demand that their members possess some characteristics. These students must have the same hair style, music preferences, hobbies or any other feature that can reveal their affiliation.

The Sociological perspective for identity

Another perspective that refers to identity has to do with Sociology. Individual actions affect society and social relations are related to the identification of groups. In the same way, an established group can affect an individual; that is why some people tend to feel attracted towards a political party, a soccer team, a specific kind of girl/boy or look for a group to belong to, etc. Inside

social groups there are implicit functions (mother, father, son, friend, etc) or explicit functions (police officer, mayor, teacher, guardian, etc) that each person must perform:

A sociological approach to self and identity begins with the assumption that there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and society. The self influences society through the actions of individuals thereby creating groups, organizations, networks, and institutions. And, reciprocally, society influences the self through its shared language and meanings that enable a person to take the role of the other, engage in social interaction, and reflect upon oneself as an object (Stryker, quoted by Jan, 2003, p. 1)

Replacing roles make people get involved in an identity circle. When someone leaves a job or a post someone else comes to take this place. The newcomer changes the context with his/her own identity. A person with his/her way of doing things, ways of thinking and ways of relating to others makes the group change its identity. From the Sociological perspective, for being able to understand the identity of a society, it is necessary to pay attention to the identity of the units that compose the group. According to Jan (2003), each individual's identity depends on the larger society in which these individuals live, thus sociologists are concerned with understanding the nature of social structures, its development and transformation. Sociology wants to establish how identity is shaped in relation to each individual and the connection of that individual to the society:

Actors identify the things that need to be taken into account for themselves, act on the basis of those identifications, and attempt to fit their lines of action with others in the situation to accomplish their goals. From this perspective, the inference is made that individuals are free to define the situation in any way they care to, with the consequence that society is always thought to be in a state of flux with no real organization or structure (Jan 2003, p. 1)

The previous quote implies what a group can pursue as a unit. Despite each person has multiple desires and multiple ways to approach to life issues, a group as an entity go behind a common goal. Also, in relation to groups, identity is expressed based on common knowledge. Furthermore, identity has to do with how professionals are stereotyped. Identity, in this case, is expressed towards the way a person should be according to his/her expertise. "A scientist, for example, may act in ways that make it clear to herself, as well as to others, that she is careful, analytical, logical, and experimentally inclined. These are individual patterns of behavior and help us understand the individual scientist" (Jan 2003, p. 2). It is easy to generalize among groups, by judging one person in terms of his/her expertise. If the stereotype does not match the common one, then it is when the perception of the identity in relation to others changes. Scientists, generally speaking, should look like the person described above. The recognition about what a scientist *should* be and the new perception about him/her based on experience is what makes people think of other possible identities for the same person. That difference is what defines the borders of identity.

Each expert and his/her science establishes boundaries in which someone's knowledge cannot trespass others' expertise. A languages expert cannot intrude into a doctor's knowledge, in the same way, even in terms of languages each expert has a focus (cognitive science, bilingualism, second language acquisition, etc.) in other words, an expert cannot provide information about something that s/he does not know. "The result is that their assertions about being scientists and their activities as scientists help to maintain boundaries between themselves and non-scientists, as well as to keep resources flowing to the groups and organizations to which they belong" (Jan 2003, p. 2). Identity is contained inside each individual and it is projected by means of actions. Those actions are evaluated, analyzed and judged by others, then each person is categorized in terms of what others perceive:

When you meet a person for the first time, what do we do? Very likely we would find ourselves (both consciously or unconsciously) trying to make sense of our experience by grouping these people into *categories*. We would try to identify them this way as these categories help us to distinguish them from other people, identity is essentially about differentiation. (Woodword, cited by Miyahara 2010, p. 3)

Sociology also implies that identity formation is a process. "Under the social paradigm, identity needs to be discussed in terms of two key elements: first, identity is the result of social relations and, second, that this socially constructed identity is dynamic, fluid, and multifaceted" (Blackledge&Pavlenko,

cited by Miyahara 2010, p. 3) Human beings select what they think is the best choice, what is socially acceptable and what can be beneficial for them. The way a person behaves or thinks is the result of a series of events that lead him/her to shape an identity:

> Humans have the ability to reflect back upon themselves, taking themselves as objects. They are able to regard and evaluate themselves, to take account of themselves and plan accordingly to bring about future states, to be self-aware or achieve consciousness with respect to their own existence. In this way, humans are a processual entity (Jan 2003, p. 4).

From the sociological perspective the self concept is also part of identity. The way people see themselves in the mirror of the society makes them reflect about their role, their existence and situations in relation to the others. Inside a person there are many societies, ideologies, ways of thinking, feelings and the display of all those features is called identity. Probably, it can be asserted that due to the extensive aspects related to identity, the term is complex to be limited to one single definition. "Defined the self-concept as the total summary of our thoughts, feelings, and imaginations as to who we are."(Rosenberg, quoted by Jan 2003, p. 5).Nevertheless, describing *who aperson is d*epends on how that person is perceived by many people. For example, my family, my friends, my colleagues, etc, can provide information about *who I am,*consequently, a person can perform many identities, this is because of the settings in which a person is involved and because of the way s/he is perceived by others. "Self as father is an identity, as is

self as colleague, self as friend, and self as any of the other myriad of possibilities corresponding to the various roles one may play. What does it mean to be a father, or a colleague, or a friend?"(Stryker, quoted by Jan 2003, p. 8). Identity needs to be perceived and accepted as such in order to establish relations.

Identity must be correlated in order to be meaningful to others. It makes no sense for a child if I approach to him/her talking as if I were talking to my university students. In the same way, a doctor cannot expose his medical jargon when talking to his/her hair dresser. The previous examples illustrate the correspondence that requires for being perceived and accepted:

> The husband identity is enacted as it relates to the wife identity, the teacher identity is played out in relation to the student identity and so forth. In each of these cases, there are things that are not talked about because they are not relevant to that identity, and there are things that are more likely to be talked about given the identity that is currently being claimed (Burke, cited by Jan2003, p. 8)

From the previous quote it can be inferred that identity is also related to interaction. It is common to activate multiple identities depending on the context and the participants in a talk. In sum up, sociology sees identity as a role played by a person in a given society, that is correlated to others and that is recognized as a participant.

Some sociological research studies have found particular aspects in terms of identity.

The research *The Hierarchy of Identity Control Systems and Identity Change in Identity Theory* divided the results of the study into two identity categories, Principle-level standards and Program-level Standards. "Principle-level standards are abstract goal states such as values, beliefs, and ideals. Program-level standards are more concrete goals that are accomplished in situations" (Tsushima & Burke, quoted by Jan 2003, p. 24).These researchers found that people used to privilege one of the categories depending on the expected results in a long time term, for example in the case of their siblings lives, some parents want their children to be loving or organized in their achievements. Applying the categories to a bigger population (bigger than a family) could make possible to understand the relation among multiple identities.

> If we think of an identity as the set of all meanings held for oneself in terms of, for example, a particular role, then an identity standard might be thought of as a set or vector of meanings. Strictly, each meaning is part of a separate control system, but conceptually it is easier to think of the set or vector of meanings of an identity as part of a single control system (Tsushima & Burke, quoted by Jan 2003, p. 24).

Multiple identities are needed to perform in any setting. A person must find the identity that matches to specific situations in order to interact. Society, implicitly, accepts o rejects the identity that a person is displaying. In another research, Burke and Cast cited by Jan 2003,demonstrated that parents' identities are altered when a baby is born. The husband feels more masculine and the wife feels more feminine. Also Kiecolt quoted by Jan 2003 affirms that identity changes occur when there is a shocking moment in a person's life. The identity suffers a crisis and people can decide whether changing the way they are and they believe that changing their personality can be beneficial for them and for the others. Identity from the sociological perspective implies the specific roles (mother, teacher, fan, boy, student, etc) that a person can display in relation to specific contexts, the way they are shaped under some conditions (empathy, acceptance, rejection, etc) and how personal identities can influence big and small groups.

From the sociological perspective of identity, in school, students are labeled depending on their performance. When a new teacher arrives to an educational institution, there are some other teachers that *warn* him/her. It is common to hear that the student X is dumb, lazy or less intelligent than the rest. Nevertheless, a student that is not good enough in a subject can perform very well in another; even some students can perform better in the same subject after the teacher is replaced. This phenomenon implies that some students are not lazy or dumb, maybe these students' identities did not match the teacher´s identity; when changes happen and identities relate each other, students and teachers can build a positive rapport and better human relations.

In the teaching field, writing can make students explore their identities. When writing students relate to meaningful aspects of their lives. People make sense of their lives by means of their experience. "Narratives are

related to people´s narrations about their life stories, lived experiences, biography, and important episodes of their lives. From narratives, feelings, thoughts, motivations, desires, purposes emerge to make sense to these human affairs" (Rodríguez, cited by Bolívar 2002, p. 40).

The teaching labor enriches when the teacher knows his/her students. Identity is fixed to writing. Narrations reveal who the students are. Consequently, it is impossible not to feel affinity towards apprentices. Writing is intimate and teachers must be able to recognize that the points of view or critics must be respected. By means of writing, students revealed their ideas, arguments and desires and this information is meaningful for the teacher. When the teacher knows his/her students, s/he can redesign classes and direct knowledge towards topics interesting to both the teacher and the students.

The Humanistperspective for identity

Another dimension about identity is displayed by Humanism. Humanism places identity inside some pre-established contextual situations. "Identities are anchored around a set of moral propositions that regulate values and behavior, so that identity construction necessarily involves ideas of right and wrong, desirable/undesirable, unpolluted/polluted etc" (Schöpflin 2001, p. 2). In any given society a person has the right to judge whether others actions are acceptable or not. A person adapts his/her behavior to be accepted in larger groups, otherwise segregation can occur. "A system of moral regulation is central to collective existence; the absence of it means anomie, fragmentation, desolation and, to counteract

it, collectivities will go to extreme lengths with the aim of recreating it" (Schöpflin 2001, p. 2). When fragmentation occurs, individuals look for a group to join in which their identities match and they can feel the group as their own.

In the universities, students come from different backgrounds and their identity is affected by the academic context. Their families and friends build an identity around a student. When this student moves to the university, ideologies, behaviors or ways of looking might seem attractive to him/her. This is the process when the student wants to be part of a specific group. Maybe, this person might like to study hard, to hang around, or to belong to the group of students that are against political parties.

People feel motivated to be part of certain groups, in that sense they are constantly moving between internal and external identities. Schöpflin (2001), divided identity into: internal and external. For this researcher, the external identity is defined by cultural classifications (nationality, race, religion and gender) as well as by societal characterizations (family, career, and position or title.) On the other hand, the internal identity has to do with strengths, capabilities, values and beliefs. The humanist perspective of identity implies the way someone projects or is revealed to others, also how a person sees him/herself from inside based on preferences, the people you like to meet and your desires. As mentioned previously, identity is re-shaped by experiences and interaction, also the equilibrium between the internal and external identity makes a person unique:

You are the totality of your cultural and societal classifications together with your distinctive physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual characteristics. When your identity is formed from both sources, you have a foundation for who you *are*, not what you *do* or what you *have*. (Schöpflin 2001, p. 2)

For the Humanist perspective, identity is more concerned about the knowledge that people have about themselves introspectively, and the knowledge about their role in culture. Schöpflin(2001) It also implies that knowing about oneself is a key factor for decision making. This author asserts that there must be a correspondence between the person you are, your values and thinking and what you want for yourself in a future:

The development of our identity is an evolutionary process. Since identity is a complex mix of our innate gifts, our predispositions, our hereditary personality characteristics, and the total summary of our experiences, it continues to develop over time as we grow and develop, expand our relationships, and have new experiences. The actions we take toward our vision must be consistent with our values, core beliefs and the essence of our identity if we are to be fulfilled and live our life to its highest purpose (Schöpflin 2001, p. 8)

As a person gets involved in social contexts, more ways of acting emerge. According toSchöpflin (2001) identity enhances and sets boundaries as the person grows and interacts. He proposes circles that a person builds through life. The first circle is about the self; in the childhood, identity is addressed towards our own basic needs. After, family and life style are included in the identity circle; also culture starts to be displayed by means of the personality. A third component that vitalizes identity is the school and extended family: classmates, teachers and relatives play the role of perceiving the person you are and influencing personality. The development of cognition and interaction with society affects the person in terms of acceptance; this struggle also has to do in the development of identity. Likewise, during the accepting process we evaluate ourselves in relation to our value and worth. The more contact with different societies (communities, cities or countries), the more our identity is re-defined. The figure 1 summarizes Schöpflin's(2001) point of view.
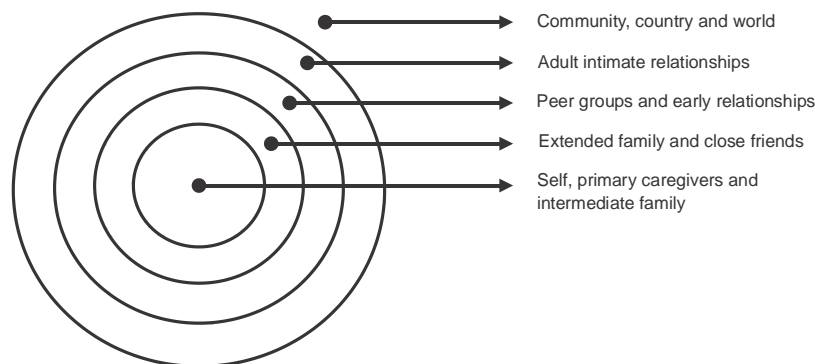

Community, country and world

Adult intimate relationships

Peer groups and early relationships

Extended family and close friends

Self, primary caregivers and intermediate family

Figura 1. Relationship Circles of Influence

The projection of identity towards others makes possible to think of another dimension. People perceive others according to the existent kinship among them. Identity can be classified as "Identity by Association, many of us have been known as some-one's child, as spouse, and/or as parent; and Identity by Possession, these people may be classified by their homes, cars, country clubs, adult toys, and their bank accounts" (Schöpflin 2001, p. 11). These identities are the image people have before others and that is defined by the role that people around are playing (alike the example of the scientist explained previously). Whether in a family there is a successful, rich, poor or intelligent person, that imagining or perception is transmitted to the other members of that circle. If my brother is intelligent, successful and good looking, the people that know him expect that his brothers or sisters are alike him. Likewise, if someone has an expensive car or a fancy house, it will look like s/he is coming from a wealthy family. In these perspectives identity is built based on the current state of that person and on others' insights.

Culturally speaking, identity is dragged towards many directions. For example, in the case of the educational contexts, students are frequently negotiating their identities in relation to their classmates. The current urban tribes carry within an ideology and a specific identity that is perceived by others. This perception can be positive or negative. Inside a school, students are asked to respect each other and this respect implies to accept the others no matter whether there is an affiliation or not.

The social perspective for identity

The relationship circle in which a person is immersed defines individuals. Within societies, small groups are defined and their members reflect their identities: teenagers, families, soccer fans, professionals, etc. Then, social identity is another field that has taken part studying identity issues. It can be said that a society shares a common ideology, language, nationality, race, behavior or laws thatdefines itas a specific group. Those commonalities are the characteristics of a specific social circle. Inside those common patterns there are subdivisions such as Cognitive, Emotional/ Motivational and Behavioral aspects. "Social identity has many more implications. Thus the category label can in a sense be considered the frame for a painting that is rich in cognitive beliefs, emotional associations, and behavioral consequences," (Deaux 2001, p. 4). Identity plays a two way role, the identity that is immersed within a person and the identity that is perceived by others.

Following with the categories proposed by Deaux (2001), shared identity is the first aspect to bear in mind in the Cognitive aspect. Due to identity and society are linked, the identity exhibited by a society is related to stereotypes and self stereotyping. "Because social identities are developed and defined within a social world, many cognitions are shared. Some investigators talk about self-stereotyping, suggesting that when one views the self in terms of a particular social category, stereotypes define that category" (Deaux 2001, p. 4). The shared cognitions are represented towards other societies. Each society distinguishes itself by means of specific characteristics; it is when a person

that is known as Boyacense can be defined as catholic, humble, hard working, naive and so on, characteristics that are built trough stereotyping and social representations. Going beyond, each social representation has its identity aspects, "the stereotype of woman is associated with the category of being emotional, kind, understanding, and helpful. Speciûc types of women, like businesswoman, feminist, or housewife, carry other associations" (Deaux 2001, p. 4).Despite of the previous categories for woman, a person does not take all the possible associations into that category; s/he only takes the definitions that are relevant and realistic to identify *her*. Peoplecreate the meaning for a particular person according to their cultural society. That is why the notion of *woman* varies depending on the context; for example, a woman placed in different countries: Afghanistan, China and America. The characteristics of that woman are the *same* anywhere in the world, but the way *she* is perceived in different cultures makes her look singular, consequently, her identification and stereotype change.

The second feature of social identity is the emotional/motivational aspect. This identity feature has to do with the ties people knit in relation to feelings towards a group. This kind of identity can be perceived, for example, in attachment to religious groups, football teams or political parties. Deaux (2001) mentions that depending on the goals to achieve or functions people want to perform, it is necessary to satisfy three general characteristics. One, the performed social identity can be beneficial and motivating and can lead the person towards a higher self – esteem. Two, by means of social identity people share the same likes, preferences and

goals, thus a group has a common orientation in relation to an activity. Three, social identification in terms of groups, make small societies define singular characteristics leading towards difference.Sometimes, the different factors that make people decide whether joining to any group, is a matter of identity.

The third aspect is the behavioral, it is related to acceptance from and towards groups. Behavior is immersed on identity; a person behaves depending on the groups that s/he belongs.Also, the behavioral aspect is related to the way a person can privilege a group more than the others, taking the own group as the best of all. "It takes very little to create a sense of identiûcation with one group and a consequent disfavoring of another group" (Deaux (2001, p. 5). That *pride*makes the person feels superior when accepted and when s/he belongs to a circle, that is to say s/he is motivated. This behavioral aspect can have big repercussions on peoples' lives. Choosing a mate, selecting an undergraduate program, working in a specific place, etc, are decisions tied to behavioral identity.

The Poststructuralist perspective for identity

Identity is a topic that has many connotations. Some people might feel that they are the same person wherever they are but, certainly each person has as many identities as contexts where they perform. The poststructuralist dimension implies that identity is socially constructed and changes overtime. The term identity refers to "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people

understand their possibilities for the future" (Norton 1997, p. 410). From this perspective a person is conditioned by the context to perform in a specific way in different settings impersonating multiple identities based on personal experiences and projecting a desirable identity towards the future.

When a person is accepted in a social group, s/he feels motivated and identified, that identification can turn into power or respect. Likewise, identity relates to desire, "the desire for recognition, for affiliation and the desire for security and safety" (Norton 1997, p. 410). People feel secure when they are in contact with whom they feel identified. There are some other researchers cited below that proposed more studies about identity, all of them following Norton's premises.

Identity has multiple dimensions. A person distinguishes him/herself in terms of his/her race, gender, social strata, etc. Social groups determine the dimensions of identity that a person can have. Also, in the professional field, identity is revealed by means of the science of expertise: there are teachers, engineers, doctors, etc. Identitytraditionally "was understood in terms of one's connection or identification with a particular social group, the emotional ties one has with that group, and the meanings that connection has for an individual" (Duff 2012, p. 12). Soccer fans build an identity around the team they like; the same soccer fans can display, in a different setting, their identity as workers, siblings, etc. Currently, other authors propose some other dimensions for identity.

Identity implies more dimensions that belonging to a group. Asserting that identity is attached to belonging entails that identity is fixed, homogeneous and common for everyone. From a contemporary perspective, identity is not similar among people that share the same values, believes or ideologies. Identity can be described as a dynamic and shifting nexus of multiple subject positions, or identity options, such as mother, accountant, heterosexual, or Latina (Pavlenko&Blackledgeas quoted by Duff 2012). From this perspective, identity does not depend on groups, but on the individual roles that a person can perform within those groups; also identity refers to the particular characteristics that a person possesses.

An example that illustrates the poststructuralist perspective of identity is proposed by Norton and Toohey (2011). These researchers worked on the research study: *Identity, language learning, and social change.* Norton and Toohey (2011) quote an example of an English language learner living in Canada. The researchers explain how Martina, a European immigrant struggles with language in order for her to understand and to be understood by native English speakers. That struggle is also perceived in languages students when are asked to write for their assignments. These researchers emphasize on the strong relation between identity and language learning, also these contemporary identity theories locate individual language learners into a larger social world. Students are often making an effort for working as well as possible in order to get positive academic results. In doing so, students' identity is affected because they follow teachers' guidelines and they, somehow, must change their voices and ideas when they write.

Determining identity from a poststructuralist perspective implies analyzing the complexity

that identity has. There is a "shift in the conception of identity which foregrounds the sociocultural rather than the psychological, and conceives of identity not as static and uni-dimensional but, following poststructuralist theorists, as dynamic, multiple, and a site of struggle" (McKinney & Norton 2008, p. 192). This different way of looking at identity provides more insights about the multiple settings and identities that a person must perform in order to fit into social groups. Social groups affect individuals, and individuals affect social groups causing the identity to change at a personal and collective level. Identity is socially constructed, it overflows social groups, identity is individually displayed, it is constantly struggling to transform and it changes over time:

> How a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future. Identity is understood with reference to larger, and more frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. (Norton, as quoted by Duff 2012, p. 13)

Identity is socially constructed, but it is individually exhibited. Social groups are composed by people for example, in a city there are universities. Those universities have undergraduate programs. Each program has groups or semesters and in each semester there are many students. Despite there is common city, a common setting to study, and a group of people gathered in a classroom, each individual is different. In the same case, a student changes his/her identity over time. The person that joined at the university in

first semester is not the same after four or five years. Ideologies, beliefs, thoughts and behaviors are interrelated to personal experiences, ways of seeing the world and ways of being part of it.

Another category for identity has to do with the multiple identities that a person must perform in order to fit into social groups. A single person must be able to set a specific identity depending on the context. For instance, a boy must exhibit different identities in his house, in his school or when he is with his friends. Different contexts demand different identities; Jiménez (2007) proposed an ethnographic case study about how the literacy practices in Latino women relate to their identities as mother, student and citizen. As stated previously, people display different identities depending on the setting in which they are. Students are perceived as learners while they are in the academia, but at the same time, they are fathers, sisters, husbands, employees, workers, etc. Each setting requires a specific identity in order to interact and consequently, other people can perceive the same person differently.

Despite people feel affiliation towards social groups, identity can also be related to how people see themselves or how they would like to be seen by others. Imagining identities are related to the way people feel identified by fictional characters or fictional situations. For example, in a research study entitled *Identity, Literacy, and English-Language Teaching,* Norton (2010) worked on imagined communities in three different settings: Canada, Pakistan and Uganda. Norton(2010) states that imagined communities are groups of people that are tangible by means of

imagination. The researcher continues arguing that, everyone coexists daily with real people, such as neighbors, drivers, teachers, families, etc. However, that the coexistence is not limited exclusively to real people. Learners can feel involved with characters that are present no matter time nor space, they can feel a sense of belonging to a community with people they have not met, even imagining future relationships that can be only possible in their imagination.

Identity from the poststructuralist dimension can be also associated to the educational field. Languages students' identity can be linked to their role as learners and how that experience is reflected in their lives. Gómez (2012) carried out a research study in a private university in Colombia. The study entitled *Language learners' identities in EFL settings: resistance and power through discourse* was intended to analyze and identify the identities that students can display when learning a foreign language, and the effect of those identities in their learning process. This research study revealed that students performed two identities, the student that uses his/her knowledge to understand teachers' inquiries and the learner that uses his/her life experiences to make sense of the information given. This research supports the idea that learners can perform different identities. Students discourse (oral or written) can reveal certain aspects or dimensions of identity that are worth to analyze. For example, teachers can research about students' identity as learners, as foreign language learners, as readers of academic texts, or identity as writers. In a similar research study, Rojas (2012) worked with pre-service teachers in a private university in Bogotá. The participants were female students. They were enrolled in activities such as debates and dialogues to analyze their discourses and the identities they could reveal. Analyzing pre-service teachers' discourse is meaningful because the results can expose their imagined identities as in-service teachers. For example, some pre-service teachers utter maternal words, show emotional support or on the contrary, they can demonstrate their knowledge by means of their discourse. Each person's words are unique and display one of the identities that a person possesses.

The poststructuralist perspective has been taken into account by other theoreticians. As mentioned previously, identity is subjected to change; it cannot be enclosed within a single dimension. Based on the poststructuralist framework, identity "is a dialogic phenomenon, constantly open to construction and reevaluation within and through communicative interaction" (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004, p. 1). Interaction affects identity and to the individual, it does not matter whether the identity a person exhibits is socially accepted or appropriated, groups define the specific identity which they are recognized and affiliated.

Speaking about identity can lead towards many paths. There is no a single identity, each person can display many dimensions of identity when performing in different settings. Research has supported the poststructuralist point of view of identity. People change their perception about others and self through time, also people are not alike each other; experience, believes, ideologies and relations make every single person different; thus identity is individual.

Some Pedagogical Implications

The previous notions about identity can be directly related to students in a classroom. Research has already demonstrated that each person learns differently, that each student has better skills than others in terms of language learning. Identity can provide another aspect to analyze a teacher's role. For good or for bad, a teacher uses to plan a class based on what s/he thinks that students need to learn. On the one hand, the teachers' identity is related to his/her style of teaching. On the other, students face a class with their identity and all the aspects that identity involves. These two identities (teacher's and students') come to a class to interact. As mentioned previously identities are shaped and re-shaped and these changes must be lead towards positive relations. A teacher that is aware about identity realizes that each student has his/her motivations to be sitting in classroom. Probably, some behaviors deserve a talk or some people need to be heard. Identity makes people unique, and thus the universe that lies within each person makes them humans, students are not empty vessels that must be filled in with words, remarks, suggestions or grades, sometimes a class is not just theoretical content, it is a place to understand each other, sometimes a student needs someone who understands. Students influence teacher's identity in terms of human relations. A teacher that used to be permissive and tolerant can turn into a strict and demanding person. That change depends on the experience lived with students.

Conclusion

In short, despite identity is clearly displayed by people, is perceivable, transmittable, influenced by many factors, defining what identity is can lead us to many paths depending on the way we look at it. The only certainty is that motivation, desires, preferences, ideology, words, tones, interjections, clothing… everything that a person is and wants to be, comes from identity. The previous text is a small sample of some of the aspects to take into account when saying the word *identity*. Identity is displayed but unfixed, perceivable but unpredictable, identity is each person's truth and for the others is an ambiguity, is invisible but it can be felt, it is inside every person and at the same time, it is everywhere. Identity is constantly changing but inside, *I can feel the same* every single day. Identity, is like water, it intrudes into each minute fissure that life has… as once someone stated, "I am afraid to show you who I really am, because if I show you who I really am, you might not like it-and that's all I got" (Sabrina Ward Harrison (2009, 17).

References

Deaux, K. (2001). *Social Identity.* Encyclopedia of Women and Gender, Volumes One and Two. City University of New York.

Duff, P. (2012). *Identity, agency, and SLA.* In A. Mackey & S. Gass (Eds.), Handbook of second language acquisition. London: Routledge.

Gómez, J. C. (2012). Language learners' identities in EFL settings: resistance and power through discourse. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal, 14*(1), 60.

Harrison, S. (2009) *Spilling Open: The Art of Becoming Yourself.* Random house.

Jan, E. (2003). *A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity.* Handbook of self and identity. Department of Sociology Washington State University.

Jiménez, J. P. (2007). (I) literate Identities in Adult Basic Education: A Case Study of a Latino Woman in an ESOL and Computer Literacy Class. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, (9), 25-43.

Miyahara, M. (2010).*Researching Identity and Language Learning: Taking a Narrative Approach.* English Language Program International Christian University. Language Research Bulletin, 25th volume, ICU, Tokyo.

McKinney, C. & Norton, B. (2008). Identities in Language and Literacy Education. *The handbook of educational linguistics*, 192.

Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity, and the ownership of English. *Tesol Quarterly, 31*(3), 409-429.

Norton, B. (2010). Identity, Literacy, and English-Language Teaching. *TESL Canada Journal*, 1-13.

Norton, B. &Toohey, K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language Teaching, 44*(04), 412-446.

Pavlenko, A. &Blackledge, A. (Eds.). (2004). *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (No. 45). Cromwell Press Limited. Great Britain.

Raab, C. (2009). *Lessons from Identity Trail, Anonymity, Privacy, and Identity in a Networked Society.*Identity Difference and Categorization.Oxford University Press. New York.

Rodríguez, R. Vázquez, A. &Guzmán, N. (2011).*Exploring Writer Identity in Mexican EFL Students' Academic Writing.*IKALA vol 16 No 28 2011, 93-115.

Rojas, M. X. (2012). Female EFL teachers: shifting and multiple gender and language-Learneridentities. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal, 14*(1), 92-107.

Schöpflin, G. (2001). *The construction of identity.* Österreichischer Wissenschaftstag, retrieved from: http://www.oefg.at/text/veranstaltungen/wissenschaftstag/wissenschaftstag01/Beitrag_Schopflin.pdf

THE AUTHOR
Fredy Orlando Salamanca González is a teacher at the languages school at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC) in Tunja. He holds an M.A. Language Teaching. He belonged to two research groups in the UPTC and has published some essays and memories in Journals and newspapers.