

The Ethnic Group Affiliation and L2 Proficiency Link: Empirical Evidence

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With economic globalisation making second language (L2) learning inevitable throughout the world, understanding what factors facilitate success is a socioeconomic necessity. This paper examined the role of social factors, those related to ethnic group affiliation (EGA), in the development of L2 proficiency. Although numerous studies have documented an intimate relationship between language and EGA, few have examined whether and how this relationship shapes L2 learning. The participants were 59 adult French–English bilinguals from Québec who read an English text and completed a questionnaire assessing their EGA, including pride, loyalty and support for their ethnic group and its language. Results revealed a significant, albeit complex, association between EGA and L2 proficiency. Basic feelings of pride and loyalty towards the ethnic group had *no* associations with L2 proficiency. Strong support for the group's sociopolitical aspirations were associated with *low* L2 proficiency. In turn, strong ethnic group identification, coupled with a positive orientation towards the L2 group, was associated with *high* L2 proficiency. These EGA effects were found to be mediated by amount of L2 use, revealing a plausible link sustaining the relationship between EGA and L2 learning success.

doi: 10.2167/la464.0

Keywords: accent, amount of L2 use, ethnic group affiliation, identity, second language proficiency, social factors

Introduction

At no period in the history of language teaching has the need to learn second or foreign language been greater than now. Propelled by economic globalisation and technological advancement, multilingual groups normally kept apart from one another (by oceans in many cases) either now live in close proximity (Findlay *et al.*, 2004) or are about to do so. Often because these groups' only means of communicating with one another is through a language other than their own, they are compelled to learn this new language either on their own or through programmes offered by their communities, companies or governments. As millions of dollars and extensive human resources are spent on promoting foreign and second languages throughout the world, understanding what factors facilitate their learning is both a social and economic necessity.

Among the factors known to affect language learning, the most investigated have been those related to learner age of acquisition (e.g. Flege *et al.*, 1999; Ioup, 2005), aptitudes (e.g. Erlam, 2005), attitudes and motivation (e.g. Dörnyei, 2003,

2005; Gardner & Lambert, 1972), personality (e.g. Dewaele, 2005; MacIntyre & Charros, 1996), self-confidence (e.g. Noels, Pons, & Clement, 1996), and willingness to communicate (e.g. Clement *et al.*, 2003). Also investigated have been such factors as learners' amount of contact with a language (Dörnyei & Czier, 2005) and instructional variables, including teacher personality (Noels, 2003) and classroom dynamics (Dörnyei, 2005). However, because language is inextricably intertwined into the fabric of people's lives (Dorjee & Giles, 2005), language learning cannot (and should not) be isolated from its social contexts (Heller, 1988; Lantolf, 2005; Norton, 2000). Many researchers, therefore, have suggested that social factors such as those emanating from learners' membership in social groups – their home (L1) group and their second or foreign language (L2) group – may also play a role in L2 learning (e.g. Gardner, 1985; Lambert, 1967), shaping learners' explicit knowledge of language and their ability to use it.

With an overall goal of understanding L2 learners' social awareness of language learning and the impact of this awareness on language attainment and use, we report a study investigating the possible associations between one such group-engendered social factor, namely, ethnic group affiliation (henceforth, EGA), and specific aspects of L2 proficiency: fluency, accentedness and comprehensibility. Fluency is defined as the ability to produce speech smoothly and rapidly, without undue hesitations and pauses (e.g. Gatbonton *et al.*, 2005). Accentedness denotes the extent to which learners' L2 speech is free of segmental or suprasegmental features typically characteristic of their L1 (e.g. Gatbonton *et al.*, 2005). Comprehensibility refers to the degree to which L2 speech is actually understood (e.g. Munro & Derwing, 1999). EGA is defined as one's sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group, usually (but not necessarily) the group which one was born into or raised in. It entails *both* a desire to identify or be identified with an ethnic group (ethnic group identification) and an emotional attachment to this group, characterised, for example, by feelings of pride and loyalty (ethnic group loyalty).

Language and Group Identity

The hypothesis that EGA might influence L2 proficiency levels attained is based on the intimate relationship between language and group identity (Edwards, 1985; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982) documented in anecdotal and empirical studies (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Barring a few exceptions (e.g. Northover & Donnelly, 1996; Edwards, 1985), language is to most groups 'the pillar of ethnolinguistic identity' (Sachdev & Bourhis, 2005: 66), in other words, a symbol of who they are (Giles, 1967; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1990). Aware of this symbolic function, groups often pressure their members to behave in ways that ensure the maintenance and preservation of their language and protect their own existence.

The importance of language as a symbol of identity is especially felt at the level of the individual, where the identity function of language is called into constant play. Individuals possess multiple identities (e.g. gender, ethnic, professional) that they "negotiate" with lesser or greater vigour in daily interactions, often being consciously aware of doing so (Noels *et al.*, 1996; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In such day-to-day negotiations, individuals might manipulate either

language as a whole, for example, by choosing which language to speak (and to whom), or its specific features, for example, by choosing particular lexical items or by producing sounds in a particular way (Appel & Schoonen, 2005; Boberg, 2004; Doran, 2004; Kostinas, 1998; Shilling-Estes, 1995; Zuengler, 1989). Language choice as a strategy for negotiating identities is illustrated in Bailey's (2000) study of a Dominican teenager who code-switched from Spanish to Black English to emphasise either his Dominican identity or his blackness. The manipulation of specific language features for the same purpose is exemplified in the choice of vowel sounds by residents of Martha's Vineyard (a US island) to mark their identity as islanders and to indicate their rejection of 'mainland' values (Blake & Josey, 2003; Labov, 1972).

Language can be manipulated not just to express strength of identification with a particular group but also to signal group loyalty. Thus, for instance, Gatbonton *et al.* (2005) showed that both French- and Chinese-speaking participants residing in Montreal attributed less loyalty to peers whose L2 speech (English) had little or no discernible L1 accent than to peers whose speech was more heavily L1 accented. Abrams and Hogg (1987) reported, among other things, a similar inverse relationship between L2 accent and a separation factor (e.g. favouring self-government for Scotland) that emerged from their study. This factor was negatively associated with the participants' ratings of peers using a standard British English accent (Received Pronunciation) but not when they were using an in-group accent (e.g. Glaswegian).

Although Gatbonton *et al.* (2005) and Abrams and Hogg (1987) did not directly show that their participants manipulated speech to negotiate identities in situational interactions, the intimate link that they found suggests that if loyalty to the ethnic group were challenged, it could be asserted through using a particular accent, albeit a regional one. This use of accent to express in-group loyalty is illustrated in Bourhis and Giles' (1977) study of Welsh participants who 'broadened' their English accent, adding Welsh features to it, upon hearing a British English speaker challenge their political aspirations regarding the preservation of Welsh. These participants used particular aspects of their speech to reveal their loyalty to the Welsh cause, distancing themselves from the speaker who they felt undermined it.

EGA and L2 learning

Whether recognised at the group or at the individual level, the intimate association between language, on the one hand, and group identity and loyalty, on the other, implies that EGA could influence L2 learning. In learning an L2, learners come into contact with another group that they could potentially become aware of, identify with, and show loyalty for, possibly at the expense of their loyalty to their home group (Frasure-Smith, Lambert & Taylor, 1975; Taylor *et al.*, 1977). Noels *et al.* (1996), for example, documented decreased in-group loyalty in Chinese immigrants in Toronto who were engaged in nurturing their Canadian identities. If, as this study suggests, L2 learners' L1 group allegiance can change, then there is basis for the hypothesis that L2 learning may be perceived as a threat (Taylor *et al.*, 1977), in response to which, at least hypothetically, groups may pressure (overtly or subtly) their members to curtail

their level of L2 proficiency attained or, in extreme cases, to cease L2 learning altogether.

While plausible, these EGA influences on L2 proficiency attainment have largely remained unexplored. One exception is Taylor *et al.*'s (1977) study of French-speaking Canadians that found that a high degree of perceived threat to the L1 group significantly correlated with low self-rated L2 proficiency. More recently, Ellinger (2000) reported a positive correlation between her Russian and Hebrew participants' strength of identification with their home groups and their achievement in English, as reflected in final examination grades and reading comprehension scores. Coupland *et al.* (2005) made a similar claim with English-speaking ethnically Welsh students whose strong personal affiliation with Welsh correlated with higher levels of L2 proficiency.

Measuring EGA–L2 proficiency link

Although the aforementioned studies have found a strong EGA–proficiency link, they have focused only on a few dimensions of EGA (e.g. strength of group identification and perceived threat). There are other EGA dimensions, however, that could be explored for their impact on L2 proficiency. Gatbonton (1975), for example, defined EGA in terms of group loyalty, as manifested in taking positions concerning contentious sociopolitical issues affecting the group (e.g. Québec's independence movement). Magid (2004) evaluated Chinese learners' reactions to accented English using a measure that included not just pride and loyalty to the group but also familiarity with the group's history and accomplishments, taking pride in displaying its symbols, and defending it. Coupland *et al.*'s (2005) personal affiliation (termed 'subjectivity') also included such components as engagement in activities that are Welsh (practice) and awareness of the 'presence and strengths' of Welsh in Wales (knowledge). To fully understand EGA's role in L2 learning, a range of possible EGA dimensions should be examined in relation to L2 proficiency. To achieve this objective, we developed many EGA measures, reflecting most of the identification and loyalty issues focused upon in these previous studies. We then explored how these measures related to one another in order to define the EGA construct, and then investigated the associations of the different dimensions of this construct with L2 proficiency.

Previous investigations of the EGA–L2 proficiency link have also mostly studied the effects of EGA on general L2 proficiency measured through self-ratings (Coupland *et al.*, 2005; Taylor *et al.*, 1977) or on language achievement assessed in classroom tests (Ellinger, 2000). To better understand EGA's role in L2 learning, we investigated its effects on other learning outcomes such as achieving fluency, developing an acceptable L2 accent, and making L2 speech comprehensible. We developed both self ratings and native speaker ratings of these aspects of proficiency and then examined them to determine possible EGA–L2 proficiency links.

One hypothesis that could be made concerning the association between EGA and L2 proficiency is that EGA directly affects proficiency. This means that EGA hinders or promotes the attainment of L2 proficiency levels without the presence of intervening variables. Thus, one may find levels of L2 proficiency to be high or low depending on the degree of EGA shown. However, it is also possible that

the effect of EGA is not direct but mediated through other factors. One candidate mediating factor is amount of L2 use. A basic assumption in language learning is that use and willingness to communicate using that language contribute greatly to L2 learning success (Clement *et al.*, 2003). Thus, those who use or are willing to use their L2 are expected to improve and attain higher levels compared to those who do not use it. In this study, learners' reports of their L2 use were investigated to find out whether L2 use contributed to L2 learning outcomes and whether it mediated any effects of EGA on L2 learning.

To summarise, in the present study, different components of ethnolinguistic group affiliation were teased apart and their correlations with variations in fluency, comprehensibility and accent development, as measured through self-rating and native speaker rating, were examined. The following specific research questions were asked:

- (1) What are the dimensions that underlie the EGA measures used in this study?
- (2) How do these dimensions of EGA relate to learners' scores on different measures of L2 speaking ability (accentedness, fluency, comprehensibility, global ability)?
- (3) If EGA is associated with L2 proficiency, is the association direct or is it mediated by other variables such as amount of L2 use?

Method

Participants

The participants were 59 adult Francophones (22 males, 37 females) from Québec (mean age: 35.9 years, range: 18–72 years). All claimed to have Québec Francophone parents and have Québec French as their L1. Although two participants were born outside Québec, all reported having grown up in Québec (the two born outside arrived at the ages of 6 and 9 years, respectively). Prior to testing, the participants were asked to estimate their ability to speak, read, write and understand English on a 9-point scale (1 = *extremely poor*, 9 = *extremely fluent*) and to report their daily use of English on a 0–100% scale. Overall, the participants rated their English ability, averaged across the four skills, at 6.2 (range: 2.3–9.0) and estimated their daily English use at 26.8% (range: 0–100%).

Materials and procedure

A reading task and an extensive questionnaire were used to obtain several measures of the participants' L2 proficiency and to elicit their responses to several EGA variables. For all participants, the procedure was the same: the participants performed the reading task before completing the questionnaire.

Reading task

In this task, the participants were asked to read aloud a simple 440-word text (see Trofimovich *et al.*, 2007) and were recorded directly onto a computer using a Plantronics (DSP-300) head-mounted microphone. The recordings (one per participant) were first presented to a group of 10 native English listeners (mean age: 30.5 years, range: 24–56 years) recruited from a pool of ESL teachers

or teachers-in-training at a local English-medium university. These raters were asked to listen to each recording and to use a 9-point scale to rate each participant for degree of foreign accent (1 = *heavily accented*, 9 = *not accented at all*), fluency (1 = *not fluent at all*, 9 = *very fluent*), comprehensibility (1 = *hard to understand*, 9 = *easy to understand*), as well as ease of oral expression, ease in understanding English, the ability to read English and to write in it (1 = *has great difficulty*, 9 = *has no difficulty at all*). The raters heard each recording individually and circled the appropriate ratings on a response sheet before them.

Questionnaire

The Social Factors Questionnaire was designed to gather several sets of information about the participants. The Biographical Data section sought basic information about the participants' age, sex, educational backgrounds, occupation and the ethnic groups they belonged to. The Language Profile section sought information about the participants' language(s), their language learning history and their self-assessed ability in English. The Amount of English Use section asked the participants to estimate the amount of time they used English in general, in specific situations (e.g. in English courses), and with certain people (e.g. boss, classmates, neighbours). The Ethnic Group Affiliation section asked the participants to indicate the ethnic or social group that they belonged to and then to react to scales measuring their knowledge, pride, loyalty and support for this group.

Measures

Proficiency measures

A total of 12 proficiency measures were used. Five of these measures were self-rated, elicited through 9-point scales (self-rated measures). These included the participants' self-ratings of their degree of accentedness (1 = *heavily accented*, 9 = *not accented at all*) and their ability to speak, read, write and listen to English (1 = *not at all well*, 9 = *extremely well*). For the statistical analyses (see as follows), the participants' self-ratings of their speaking, reading, writing and listening skills were collapsed into one overall measure (self-rated global ability). A reliability analysis carried out prior to this yielded a very high intra-class correlation coefficient (0.93) for these four self-rated skills, justifying the use of an aggregate self-rated global ability score.

Native English speakers rated the participants on seven measures: fluency, accentedness, comprehensibility, ease of expression, ease in understanding English, the ability to read English and to write in it. For data analyses, the last four (which were considered equivalent to self-rated measures of speaking, listening, reading and writing, respectively) were also collapsed into one aggregate measure (native speaker rated global ability). The intra-class correlation coefficient for these four measures was 0.99, again justifying the use of an aggregate proficiency measure.

EGA measures

The Social Factors Questionnaire contained 21 nine-point EGA scales. Some of these scales elicited the participants' degree of preference for certain ethnic

or social labels (e.g. Québécois, Canadian, French Canadian, other; 1 = *does not describe me at all*, 9 = *describes me perfectly*) and their beliefs in the importance of language in defining personal and group identity (e.g. A person who does not speak French has no right to call himself/herself Québécois; 1 = *do not agree at all*, 9 = *agree completely*). Other scales elicited emotional reactions to the ethnic group (e.g. pride in its achievements, willingness to defend the group; 1 = *do not agree at all*, 9 = *agree completely*). The rest measured the participants' willingness to support French unilingualism in Québec, French schooling for immigrants, the use of French signs only, the right to display the Québec flag in international venues, and Québec's independence (e.g. Québec cannot realise its full potential until it becomes independent; 1 = *do not agree at all*, 9 = *agree completely*).

Of the 21 EGA scales, several were adapted from previous studies on language identity and attitudes (Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Coupland *et al.*, 2005; Lambert *et al.*, 1960; Taylor *et al.*, 1977). The political EGA scales were based on those used by Gatabonton (1975), all originally identified by a Francophone focus group to show strong pro-Francophone political sentiments. Most of the loyalty scales were derived from Magid (2004) who also surveyed a focus group (Chinese speakers in his case) for characteristics describing strong ethnic group loyalty. The remaining scales were constructed purposely for this study.

Amount of L2 use

The participants were asked to rate the amount of time they used English daily on a 0–100% scale, with 10 percentage point intervals (self-rated L2 use).

Data analysis

The obtained EGA measures were first subjected to an exploratory factor analysis to determine the dimensions underlying the participants' responses to the 21 EGA scales used. Then, the relationship between L2 proficiency measures and the EGA dimensions revealed by the factor analysis were explored using Pearson correlations. Because correlations focus only on associations between two variables and not specifically on differences between them, a series of *t*-tests was also conducted. These tests explored each of the significant EGA–L2 proficiency associations revealed by the correlation tests.

Results

Research question 1

The first research question was to determine the dimensions underlying the EGA measures examined in the study. To attain this goal, the participants' responses to the 21 EGA scales were subjected to an exploratory (principal components) factor analysis. Despite what may appear to be a small participant sample, the Kaiser–Meyer–Oklin value yielded by the factor analysis was 0.73, exceeding the required 0.60 for *sampling adequacy* (Kaiser, 1974). The Bartlett's test of sphericity was also significant ($p < 0.0001$), suggesting *factorability* of the correlation matrix (Bartlett, 1954). The principal components analysis yielded six components containing items with eigenvalues exceeding 1. However, an inspection of the scree plot (a simple line segment plot that shows eigenvalues

Table 1 Factor loadings for 19 EGA variables using varimax rotation

<i>EGA variables</i>	<i>Factor 1 Core EGA</i>	<i>Factor 2 Group ID EGA</i>	<i>Factor 3 Language EGA</i>	<i>Factor 4 Political EGA</i>
Familiar with accomplishments	0.79			
Familiar with history	0.72			
Proud to be born in group	0.70			
Proud of accomplishments	0.81			
Proud to show group's symbols	0.58			
Proud to be able to speak language	0.84			
Will defend group	0.79			
Language important to define personal identity	0.61			
Pride in group membership	0.70	0.52		
Prefer 'Canadian' label		0.79		
Prefer 'French Canadian' label		0.83		
Won't criticise group		0.63		
French important to define group			0.52	
Ability in French important to Claim <i>Québécois</i> label			0.69	
Speak like Anglophone			-0.69	
Québec must be officially French				0.64
French signs only				0.64
French schools for immigrants				0.52
Québec potential greater if independent				0.59

as a function of the eigenvalue index) revealed a levelling off after the fourth component; so it was decided to retain only the first four in further analyses, accounting for a total of 19 factor loadings. The final analysis (using a varimax with Kaiser normalisation rotation option) yielded the best four fit-to-data groupings available, which accounted for a total of 58% of the variance of the data. The factor groupings are summarised in Table 1.

As Table 1 indicates, nine items loaded onto Factor 1, four items each onto Factors 2 and 4, and three items onto Factor 3. The items loading onto Factor 1 had a common basic theme; namely, basic feelings towards the ethnic group (e.g. pride in knowing the group's history and accomplishment, in displaying its symbols and in learning its language, willingness to defend the group). This factor was labelled *Core EGA* to reflect its basic focus. Of the four EGA items loading onto Factor 2, two were about expressing willingness to be identified as 'Canadian' and 'French Canadian'. Two others were about pride in being

an ethnic group member and about refraining from criticising the group, even if deserved. The four items together seemed to focus on group identification, coupled with emotional reactions in being so identified. This factor was, therefore, referred to as *Group ID EGA*. The three EGA items loading onto Factor 3 were about beliefs in the importance of language in group identity. Two of these (i.e. knowing French is important in order to claim the Québécois label, French is important for Québec identity) were concerned directly with this issue. The remaining item, belief in the importance of speaking like an Anglophone, was inversely related to the other two. This factor was labelled *Language-in-Identity EGA* (henceforth, *Language EGA*). Finally, the four EGA items loading onto Factor 4 shared a political theme (e.g. supporting Québec’s independence, advocating the use of French only for commercial signs, using French for immigrant children schooling). For this reason, this factor was labelled *Political EGA*.

Research question 2

The second research question asked what relationships, if any, existed between the above four EGA factors and the different L2 proficiency measures used. To answer this question, the participants’ responses to all EGA items loading onto each factor were averaged to derive a single score per factor. These mean scores, along with the measures of the participants’ L2 proficiency, were then subjected to Pearson correlation tests (two-tailed) in order to examine the relationships between EGA factors and L2 proficiency measures and, when significant associations were obtained, to *t*-tests to determine the differential effects of these EGA factors on proficiency.

The results of correlation analyses are summarised in Table 2. Table 2 shows that Factor 1 (*Core EGA*) did not correlate significantly with any of the proficiency measures used. Factor 2 (*Group ID EGA*) correlated significantly only with self-rated global ability ($r = 0.44$; $p < 0.001$). Factor 3 (*Language EGA*) and (*Political EGA*) correlated significantly with all native-speaker-rated measures and with self-rated global ability ($r = -0.42$ to -0.48 , $p < 0.0001$, in each case). No

Table 2 Pearson correlations between four EGA factors and proficiency measures

<i>Proficiency measure</i>	<i>Factor 1 Core EGA</i>	<i>Factor 2 Group ID EGA</i>	<i>Factor 3 Language EGA</i>	<i>Factor 4 Political EGA</i>
Native speaker rating				
Accent			-0.42	-0.42
Fluency			-0.45	-0.45
Comprehensibility			-0.48	-0.48
Global ability			-0.43	-0.43
Self-rating				
Accent				
Global ability		0.44		-0.47

Note: All correlations are two-tailed, $df = 57$, Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha = 0.002$.

Table 3 Summary of the *t*-tests exploring the effects of EGA factors on L2 proficiency

	<i>Factor 2</i> <i>Group ID EGA</i>	<i>Factor 3</i> <i>Language EGA</i>	<i>Factor 4</i> <i>Political EGA</i>
Native speaker ratings			
Accent			
Fluency			$t = -3.03, p = 0.003$
Comprehensibility			$t = -2.89, p = 0.005$
Global ability			$t = -3.26, p = 0.002$
Self-rating			
Global ability	$t = 3.55, p < 0.001$		$t = -2.97, p = 0.004$

Note: Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha = 0.005$.

EGA factor correlated with self-rated accentedness scores; so this measure was dropped from further analyses. All correlation coefficients were tested against a Bonferroni-corrected alpha of 0.002.

The participants' scores for each of the three EGA factors that correlated significantly with at least one proficiency measure were then submitted to a series of *t*-tests. In each test, the dependent variable was a proficiency measure: self-rated global ability and native-speaker-rated fluency, accentedness, comprehensibility or global ability. The independent (grouping) variable was two levels of each EGA factor in focus, determined by splitting the participants into two groups based on the median scores. Because several *t*-tests were conducted, a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha (0.005) was used for significance testing. These results are summarised in Table 3.

The *t*-tests revealed that *Group ID EGA* had a significant positive effect on the participants' self-rated global ability scores. The participants who scored high on the *Group ID EGA* estimated their global ability in English to be significantly higher than those who scored low on this factor (6.94 versus 5.39). Despite several significant associations between *Language EGA* and L2 proficiency measures (see Table 2), *t*-tests revealed no significant effects of this factor on any proficiency measure. However, there was a significant negative effect of *Political EGA* on four proficiency measures. Those who scored high on this factor (i.e. those who were supportive of their group's political aspirations) were rated by native speakers to be less fluent (4.20 versus 5.75), less comprehensible (3.64 versus 5.02), and to have lower global ability in English (5.52 versus 6.95) than those who scored low on this factor. Those scoring high on this factor also estimated their own global English ability to be lower than those who scored low (4.32 versus 5.83). To sum up, one of the four EGA factors examined here (*Political EGA*) had negative effects on four measures of L2 proficiency and one (*Group ID EGA*) had a positive effect on one measure.

In the next set of analyses, the positive effect of *Group ID EGA* on the participants' self-rated global L2 proficiency was examined more closely, taking into consideration the nature of the items loading onto this factor (see Table 1). Recall that three of these items dealt with strong ethnic group identification (high pride in being group members, having no wish to criticise the group,

willingness to be labelled as French Canadian) while the remaining one elicited orientations towards the participants' outgroup (willingness to be labelled as Canadian). Thus, the positive association between *Group ID EGA* and the participants' global self-rated proficiency may be reflective not only of a strong sense of ethnic group identification (as was shown in the previous analysis), but also of a strong positive orientation towards the outgroup (Canadian).

To examine this possibility, we reanalysed the global proficiency self-ratings of those participants who were either willing or unwilling to be labelled Canadian but nevertheless strongly thought of themselves as Québécois. (The Québécois scale did not load onto any factor, so it could be used as an independent metric of ethnic identification strength.) Of the 59 participants, 26 showed extremely strong identification with the Québécois label by selecting the highest rating (9). Of these, 11 expressed unwillingness to be labelled as Canadian (choosing a 1 or 2 on the scale) whereas 15 were willing to be identified as Canadian (selecting an 8 or 9). A *t*-test comparing these two groups' self-rated global proficiency scores yielded a significant difference, $t = -3.99$, $p < 0.001$. Those who could willingly accept both the Québécois and Canadian labels estimated their global ability to be significantly higher than those who could not (6.58 versus 4.09). This result suggests that *Group ID EGA* entails a double positive orientation (strong ethnic group identification *and* a positive disposition towards the outgroup) associated with higher (self-rated) L2 proficiency levels.

Research question 3

The third research question asked whether there were variables that could mitigate or enhance the association between EGA and L2 learning. Because it is typically assumed that more extensive L2 use benefits language learning (Ur, 1988), amount of L2 use was examined in relation to EGA. To this end, Pearson correlations were computed, first, to determine whether the four EGA factors were associated with the participants' amount of self-estimated L2 (English) use and, second, whether L2 use was associated with the different proficiency measures (Bonferroni-adjusted $\alpha = 0.01$). The goal here was to establish an empirical link, if any, between EGA and the amount of L2 use, and between the amount of L2 use and L2 proficiency.

These tests yielded no significant correlations between amount of L2 use and *Core EGA* and *Group ID EGA*. However, there were significant negative correlations between L2 use and *Language EGA* ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.005$) and *Political EGA* ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$). The negative correlations implied that stronger beliefs about the role of language in defining identity and stronger support for the group's political aspirations were associated with less L2 use.

Amount of L2 use, in turn, correlated positively with all measures of proficiency ($r = 0.37$ to 0.53). These positive correlations (see Table 4) suggest that more extensive L2 use was associated with higher L2 proficiency, highlighting the important role of L2 use in L2 learning.

The goal of the next analysis was to investigate the extent to which the obtained associations between EGA factors and L2 proficiency (see Table 2) depended on the amount of the participants' L2 use. To answer this question, first-order partial correlations were computed between EGA factors and the different

Table 4 Pearson correlations between proficiency measures and amount of L2 use

<i>Proficiency measure</i>	<i>Self-rated amount of L2 use</i>
Native speaker rating	
Accent	0.37 ($p = 0.004$)
Fluency	0.39 ($p = 0.002$)
Comprehensibility	0.37 ($p = 0.005$)
Global ability	0.37 ($p = 0.005$)
Self-rating	
Global ability	0.53 ($p = 0.001$)

Note: All correlations are two-tailed, $df = 57$, Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha = 0.007$.

proficiency measures, controlling for the amount of L2 use. If the significant associations held even after L2 use was controlled for, these associations would be seen to be direct and not mediated by use. The results of these tests showed, by contrast, that controlling the amount of L2 use eliminated all the significant correlations obtained earlier (Table 2). This finding implied that the association between EGA factors and measures of accentedness, fluency, comprehensibility and global ability (whether self-rated or judged by native speakers) were not direct. Rather, they were mediated in each case by the amount of time the participants used their L2.

Discussion

EGA as a complex construct

The main goal of the present study was to examine the relationship between EGA and L2 proficiency, set against the backdrop of investigating L2 learners' social awareness of language learning and the impact of this awareness on language attainment and use. Although previous ethnographic and empirical studies have documented an intimate relationship between language and identity (Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Gathbonton *et al.*, 2005; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), only a few have investigated whether this relationship actually impacts L2 learning. Thus far, the associations between EGA and L2 learning have been found in studies investigating only one EGA dimension, namely, strength of group identification (albeit labelled differently from study to study): ethnic identification (Clachar, 1997), ethnolinguistic identity (Ellinger, 2000), and personal affiliation (Coupland *et al.*, 2005). The first main finding of this study is that there are possibly at least four EGA dimensions underlying the relationship between language and identity that could influence L2 proficiency. One is *Group ID EGA*, which is comparable to or could encompass the strength of group identification studied before (Clachar, 1997; Coupland *et al.*, 2005; Ellinger, 2000). The three others were *Core EGA*, which reflects basic feelings of group loyalty (as manifested in pride in its history, symbols and accomplishments), *Language EGA*, which reflects the importance of language in expressing group identity, and *Political EGA*, which reflects support for the group's views on important sociopolitical issues.

Research on EGA issues has, to date, mostly focused on the effects of these (and other) EGA dimensions individually, without considering what they may have in common. The exploratory factor analysis conducted here revealed that the range of EGA elements already investigated could be reduced to four dimensions. At the outset, we defined EGA as comprising of only two underlying dimensions – the desire to identify with the group (*Group ID EGA*) and feelings of loyalty to the group (*Core EGA*). Two others – belief in the importance of language in identity (*Language EGA*) and support for the group's sociopolitical views (*Political EGA*) – emerged from the analysis as further dimensions of this construct. Future studies will show whether yet others could be added to the list.

EGA and L2 proficiency

The second main finding of this study is that there is a significant association between EGA and L2 proficiency but that this association is not uniform across the four EGA components investigated. *Core EGA* had *no* associations with L2 proficiency. *Political EGA* and *Language EGA* had *negative* associations with L2 proficiency (associations of *Language EGA* with L2 proficiency, however, proved to be weak in subsequent analyses). Those who had strong support for their group's sociopolitical aspirations were more accented, dysfluent, incomprehensible in English and were less proficient overall, as rated by native speakers and by themselves. *Group ID EGA* had a *positive* association with L2 proficiency. Those who espoused a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group rated themselves as having higher global ability in English. We discuss these various EGA–L2 proficiency relationships in detail as follows.

No association

The absence of *Core EGA* effects on L2 proficiency was surprising. The items loading onto this factor (e.g. familiarity with the group's history, pride in its accomplishments) were the same ones that Magid (2004) found to be significantly linked to L2 accent. He found that those Chinese speakers who spoke their L2 (English) with little or no accent were seen by peers to be less loyal to the ethnic group than those who spoke with stronger accents. Based on this finding, Magid (2004) (see also Gatbonton *et al.*, 2005) speculated that at least one aspect of *Core EGA*, ethnic loyalty, would influence L2 learning. Yet, there was no evidence of this kind of influence in this study, a finding that we revisit below in discussing EGA's negative effects on L2 proficiency.

The fact that there were no *Language EGA* effects on L2 proficiency (as shown by *t*-tests) was also unexpected, considering that there were significant negative associations between this factor and four L2 proficiency measures (see Table 2). The trend towards an effect could, however, be seen for each of these measures in the scores of those who scored high and low on the *Language EGA* factor, although these differences failed to reach statistical significance when tested against the conservative Bonferroni-adjusted alpha. This finding suggests that *Language EGA* effects on L2 proficiency might be relatively subtle. Because these effects were seen only at the level of associations, not between-group differences, effects of *Language EGA* on L2 proficiency must be interpreted with caution and must be investigated further.

Negative effects

The main hypothesis of this study was that there would be an inverse relationship between EGA factors and measures of L2 proficiency. This is because in the context of our study (Québec), the participants' L1 (French) and L2 (English) are in a conflictual relationship politically (Bourhis, 1984). In this situation, L2 learning could be seen as a potential threat to the survival of the L1 (Taylor *et al.*, 1977). As a result, strong support for the group's sociopolitical views may tend to be associated with lower levels of L2 proficiency. The obtained negative effects of *Political EGA* on measures of L2 proficiency supported this hypothesis.

To understand why this EGA factor had negative relationships with L2 proficiency whereas *Core EGA* did not have any association at all, we examined more closely the items that loaded onto each of these two factors. This analysis showed that *Political EGA* addressed contentious issues that invited taking sides (see Table 1). A *Political EGA* item, 'Québec will never realize its potential unless it becomes independent', is a case in point. Indicating agreement or disagreement with this statement is tantamount to declaring a position for or against independence. Pro-independence individuals are likely to be fervent in defending the group and to show strong reactions against learning the language of the group they wish to gain independence from. On the other hand, those who do not favour independence may express the opposite sentiment and be willing to learn the language of the outgroup.

In contrast, asking participants to agree to a *Core EGA* statement such as, 'I am proud to be a member of my ethnic group', means simply inviting them to affirm a response (positive or negative) towards the group. In other words, some EGA factors (e.g. *Political EGA*) deal with polarising issues, reflecting opposing opinions that could easily translate into group action with respect to L2 learning (e.g. avoiding L2 learning or pressuring others to abstain from it). Other EGA factors (e.g. *Core EGA*) are neutral and do not invite much attention or action from the group and as such exercise no discernable consequences for L2 proficiency.

Positive effects

The results of the present study revealed that there was a positive association of *Group ID EGA* with the participants' self-rated global L2 ability. This association was likely due to a combination of strong group identification plus a positive orientation towards the outgroup. This obtained double-positive orientation, both towards one's ethnic group and the L2 group, echoes the findings of Ellinger (2000) and Coupland *et al.* (2005). Ellinger (2000), for example, claims that both Hebrew and Russian groups in Israel view English positively as a lingua franca. Thus, her participants have both a strong identification with the L1 and a positive orientation towards the L2 in the same way as those who scored high on *Group ID EGA* here do. The participants in Coupland *et al.*'s (2005) study were ethnically Welsh learning their heritage language. Because there is no reason to believe that their attitudes towards Welsh would be negative, it is perhaps safe to assume that they also have both these positive dispositions.

The finding that a double-positive EGA orientation may have consequences for L2 learning, at least as measured through self-reports, highlights an important dimension of L2 learning. A positive orientation to the L2 has already been

found to promote successful L2 learning in studies investigating motivational and attitudinal factors in L2 learning (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The findings of this study, combined with those of Ellinger (2000) and Coupland *et al.* (2005), not only support these previous findings but also extend them by showing that one can be positive towards both the ethnic group and the outgroup and that greater L2 learning success may depend, at least in part, on this combination. By contrast, a strong orientation towards one's ethnic group only (with no positive disposition towards the outgroup) likely leads to lower L2 proficiency levels. Both these scenarios attest to the complex nature of this EGA factor and to its intricate interplay with L2 proficiency. The *Group ID* EGA–L2 proficiency link needs to be examined further in future research, with a view of clarifying whether this EGA factor affects only learners' perception of their L2 ability (as was found in this study) or influences their real L2 attainment, as measured by objective means (Ellinger, 2000).

Amount of L2 use

The results of this study revealed that the strong inverse associations of at least two EGA factors (*Language EGA*, *Political EGA*) with L2 proficiency are not direct but are mediated by amount of L2 use. This result implies that those who believe strongly in an important role of language in defining their identity and those who support their group's political aspirations tend to avoid using their L2, thus missing the opportunities to practice their L2 and to improve their L2 proficiency. This finding points to a plausible link, even a mechanism, sustaining the relationship between identity factors and L2 learning success. Put differently, identity issues, including EGA, may affect L2 learning indirectly, preventing learners from seeking opportunities to use their L2, curtailing amounts of their experience with it, and therefore minimising their chances at attaining higher levels of L2 proficiency.

Pedagogical implications

The results of this study have interesting pedagogical implications. In general, these findings highlight the importance of awareness of social factors and of their consequences for L2 learning success, particularly those social factors that emerge from the intimate relationship between language and identity. More specifically, these findings suggest that EGA may have both positive and negative consequences for L2 learning. In some cases, L2 learners may not be achieving the desired or expected proficiency levels not because they are incapable of doing so but because EGA considerations may be restraining them, whether consciously or not, from attaining those levels. In addition, the finding that EGA effects are likely to be mediated by the extent of L2 use suggests that pedagogical innovation and curriculum design need not focus solely on making teachers and learners aware of the presence of EGA issues. Rather, what needs to be emphasised is finding ways of encouraging learners to create and take full advantage of the opportunities to use their L2, both in and outside a language classroom. Previous research has shown that willingness to communicate, understood broadly as a desire to engage into meaningful interaction in an L2, has a positive effect on L2 learning (Clement *et al.*, 2003). Understanding what

role EGA has in creating or bringing down barriers to learners' willingness to engage in meaningful L2 interactions should help teachers as well.

Limitations and Future Directions

The findings of this study are clearly not exhaustive. Because of a relatively small sample size used, caution needs to be taken in generalising from the results obtained here, particularly to populations of L2 learners in contexts other than Québec. In addition, of the many possible EGA issues that could have been used, this study included only a few. Among the EGA issues not focused are, for example, those associated with elements of practice (Coupland *et al.*, 2005), which involves the use of language for ceremonial purposes and for marking one's ethnicity (e.g. participating in ethnic tasks and traditions). Only two items used here, pride and familiarity with the group's history and accomplishments, are consistent with this construct; these are clearly insufficient to examine the precise contribution of this construct to L2 attainment. Other EGA issues that might be investigated in relation to L2 proficiency include the construct of knowledge, which involves familiarity with cultural traditions and customs (Coupland *et al.*, 2005), and the many dimensions underlying the ethnolinguistic identity theory (Clachar, 1999; Giles & Johnson, 1987; Hogg & Rigoli, 1996).

The finding of this study that EGA effects L2 proficiency may be mediated by the extent of L2 use (i.e. that social pressures may limit learners' amount of L2 experience and, as a result, may lead to lower levels of L2 proficiency than would otherwise be attainable) clearly needs to be replicated and extended. For example, future research should examine other possible factors that may mediate EGA consequences for L2 learning. Such factors may include, for example, comfort in using the L2 and willingness to communicate. Studies on the 'market value' of language (Bourdieu, 1991) have shown that deviations from the L2 'norms', however such norms are defined, can either enhance or impede learners' access to socioeconomic benefits (e.g. Derwing, 2003; Norton, 2000), including employment (Parton *et al.*, 2002). EGA issues implicated in this access to socioeconomic benefits (or lack thereof) need to be examined as well.

At least one contribution of the present study to understanding the relationship between learners' identity issues and their success in L2 learning relates to the use of measures of L2 proficiency other than self-reports or classroom tests; namely, native speaker ratings, which are ostensibly less subjective than participants' self-reports. In future research, one could go further by including even more objective measures of L2 performance, for example, temporal measures of speech fluency (e.g. speech rate, number and duration of pausing) and measures of segmental or suprasegmental speech accuracy. It would also be interesting to determine whether learners' L2 development (not just a single, cross-sectional measure of L2 attainment) may be predicted by EGA factors. Trofimovich *et al.* (2007) describe a framework of L2 phonological development that lends itself well to investigating EGA influences on L2 phonological learning and to documenting cases when EGA factors may be responsible, at least in part, for lack of phonological development.

Last but not least, the study focused only on participant reactions at one point in time, eliciting responses about EGA issues in a 'static' research situation.

Recent literature on ethnicity and identity has stressed the variable nature of these constructs, highlighting their manipulability by speakers to reflect moment-to-moment needs (Ricento, 2005; Schilling-Estes, 2004). To fully understand the relationship between EGA and L2 proficiency, and (on a larger scale) between learners' social awareness of L2 learning and their L2 attainment, we should follow participants learning or using their L2 over a longer period of time or at least at different points in time to see if the associations between EGA and proficiency are as stable as they appear. One intriguing possibility is that learners do strive to achieve the highest level of L2 attainment possible but develop ways to manipulate their L2, being able to sound more or less accented, fluent and comprehensible on a moment-to-moment basis, depending on particular situational needs. Whether our findings, in fact, reflect this flexible nature of identity and whether this flexibility impacts on L2 development remains yet to be seen.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC) grants to both authors. The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Melanie Barrière and Randall Halter in all aspects of data collection and analysis. Many thanks are extended to Dawn Cleary, Winnie Grady, Eva Karchava, Nootan Kumar and Josée St-Marseille for their help in various stages of this study. Norman Segalowitz and an anonymous *Language Awareness* reviewer provided helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

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