

Swain, M., L.-S. Huang, K. Barkaoui, L. Brooks & S. Lapkin (2009). *The speaking section of the TOEFL iBT™ (SSTiBT): Test-takers' reported strategic behaviors* (TOEFLiBT™ Research Series No. TOEFLiBT-10). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

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Lang. Teach. (2013), **46.4**, 563–567 © Cambridge University Press 2013  
doi:10.1017/S026144481300030X

## Group membership and identity issues in second language learning

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### Context

Language learning is inextricably linked to a social context, and this implies that context-related social variables, such as ethnicity or attitudes, can influence how language learning unfolds. Among the many group-engendered social factors, ethnic identity appears to have interesting consequences for language teaching and learning (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). Indeed, issues of personal and group identity often become important when individuals or groups come in contact with one another to learn a language. Briefly, ethnic identity refers to a person's subjective experience of being a part of an ethnic group (Ashmore, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe 2004). For second language (L2) learners, the two relevant groups are usually their primary (home) ethnic group and the L2 community. We report here on the research that we have been conducting at Concordia University in Montreal, as part of the Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance, with the goal of investigating the role of ethnic group identity in L2 learning.

### Ethnic group identity and L2 learning

The relationship between L2 learners' ethnic identity and outcomes of L2 learning is still relatively unclear. For example, some researchers have documented a negative relationship

between ethnic identity beliefs and L2 learning. For native French learners of L2 English in Quebec, Canada, a higher degree of perceived threat to the survival of their home (French) group was associated with lower L2 (English) proficiency (Taylor, Meynard & Rheault 1977). Thus, individuals may resist, either explicitly or implicitly, learning an L2 to avoid assimilation, especially if they perceive a viable threat to the survival of their group. However, others have uncovered positive associations between ethnic identity beliefs and L2 learning. For example, Russian and Hebrew learners of English in Israel who demonstrated a stronger sense of ethnic group identity were also those with higher L2 proficiency (Ellinger 2000). Thus, it appears possible for some learners to acquire a new language and culture without losing the sense of their native language and culture.

In our recent research, we have taken a closer look at the relationship between ethnic identity and L2 learning, targeting various aspects of learners' L2 proficiency. Our motivation was to uncover complex links between ethnic group identity and L2 learning by systematically studying such links in several contexts (Gatbonton & Trofimovich 2008; Segalowitz, Gatbonton & Trofimovich 2009; Gatbonton, Trofimovich & Segalowitz 2011). We have targeted ethnic group affiliation (EGA), which in addition to identification with an ethnic group includes an emotional component (e.g. pride and loyalty towards the group). These initial studies were conducted in Quebec, Canada, with a target population of 59 francophone learners of English, who responded to 21 statements focusing on various aspects of ethnic identity and social attitudes. We showed that four aspects of the EGA construct could potentially influence L2 learning outcomes. These included strength of identification with one's ethnic group, feelings of pride and loyalty toward one's group, importance of language in expressing group identity, and support for the group's sociopolitical aspirations.

We then explored whether these four aspects of the EGA construct were related to several measures of the learners' L2 proficiency. Our findings were complex, in that the same learners revealed both positive and negative links between their ethnic identity beliefs and their L2 speaking ability. More specifically, there was a strong negative association between several speaking measures and the political aspect of the EGA, such that the learners who expressed stronger political views (e.g. support for Quebec's independence from Canada) sounded more accented, less comprehensible, less fluent, and less proficient overall in their L2 English. In contrast, there was also a positive link between the strength of the learners' identification with their ethnic group and their L2 speaking ability. Those learners who had a double-positive orientation (that is, a positive orientation towards their own ethnic group and the L2 community) were considered by native listeners to be the most proficient in English. Overall, these initial findings have suggested that different aspects of ethnic identity can simultaneously have positive and negative associations with measures of L2 speaking. However, these findings also raised the question as to how context-specific the identity–L2 links are.

### **A perspective from Latvia: Results thus far**

Our work in progress centers on extending our research to both similar and different sociopolitical contexts. In an ongoing study, we have examined the relationship between ethnic

group identity and L2 speaking ability for ethnically Russian and Latvian speakers in Latvia. This context is particularly appealing because of its similarity to Quebec. In Quebec, the majority French-speaking group has coexisted with the minority English-speaking community, with language often being the focus of sociopolitical tensions (e.g. the 1977 Charter of the French Language defining French as the official language of Quebec and the 1980 and 1995 referendums on the sovereignty of Quebec). Similarly, in Latvia, the majority Latvian group (1,319,552 persons, according to Latvia's Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs 2012) coexists with a minority of ethnic Russians (603,125 persons, according to the same source). In the two decades following the post-WWII restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991, there have been considerable sociopolitical tensions surrounding language. Primarily, these relate to the status of ethnically Russian speakers, many of whom are among the 312,189 legal aliens with no citizenship and no voting rights (Latvia's Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs 2012), and to the ongoing education reform to transition all ethnically Russian schools to Latvian.

As part of this project, we surveyed 119 young adults, all students at a local university in a medium-size city in southern Latvia. The students self-identified as ethnically Russian (26 women, 11 men) or Latvian (40 women, 42 men) by birth and reported speaking Russian or Latvian as their native language. The students were similar in age (20.1 years on average for ethnic Russians and 20.5 years for ethnic Latvians) and all listed either Latvian or Russian as their L2s. All ethnic Latvians in our sample had been schooled in Latvian-medium schools. In contrast, three quarters of ethnic Russians (28) had either been schooled in Latvian or had attended Russian-medium schools, with several subjects (particularly in social sciences) taught in Latvian, which is consistent with the current government policies of gradual transition of Russian-medium schools into Latvian.

The students responded to an extensive questionnaire, printed in their first language, targeting their relations with, feelings for, and views and opinions about their ethnic group. Each item was presented as a statement to which students responded using a 7-point rating scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*). The students also provided several self-ratings of their language ability in Russian and Latvian. Of primary interest here are the 21 EGA items that were directly comparable to our earlier Quebec-based sample. These dealt with individuals' ethnic self-identification; familiarity with ethnic group accomplishments, history, and status; reactions to behaviors towards the group (e.g. defend the group, avoid criticizing it); pride for the group's history, status, and accomplishments; and political statements regarding the group (e.g. Latvian as the only official language, the only language of education, its use imposed in all spheres of daily life).

Preliminary analyses indicate that for the Latvian and Russian sample there are three clearly discernible aspects of the EGA construct. The first deals with statements about the role of language in identity (ethnic language positively marked for identity, L2 negatively marked for identity) and statements supporting the political aspirations of the group (Latvian as official language, Latvian solely used in education and daily life). The second EGA aspect concerns the role of L2 in identity and loyalty, with L2 learning linked to a loss of the native tongue and lack of loyalty for the home group. The final EGA aspect is related to the feeling of pride for the group and familiarity with its accomplishments. These preliminary results are thus far very encouraging because they suggest that the EGA construct is relatively

stable across the two contexts we have studied and that it entails an essentially similar set of factors.

One intriguing finding thus far is that the links between EGA and language learning appear to differ for the Latvian and Russian groups. For ethnic Latvians, correlation analyses show that a strong sense of ethnic identity and strong political views towards the Latvian language appear to be related negatively to their self-rated L2 (Russian) ability. In essence, the stronger EGA views these individuals espoused, the lower they rated their L2 (Russian) ability. This finding parallels our earlier results for ethnic French speakers from Quebec speaking L2 English. In contrast, for ethnic Russians, no such negative associations have emerged, suggesting that a stronger sense of ethnic identification through language is unrelated to their L2 (Latvian) ability. As a linguistic and political minority in Latvia, ethnic Russians may have preferred (overtly or covertly) not to associate their strong ethnic beliefs with the ability to speak the majority language, perhaps in order to both maintain a strong ethnic identity and also to gain access to the social and economic benefits associated with speaking Latvian. This finding appears to be novel in that it shows that the majority and minority ethnic groups, in contexts where such groups reside in close contact, may relate issues of ethnic identity to L2 learning in rather distinct ways.

### **Implications and agenda for future research**

One broad conclusion that cuts across the two contexts we have studied is that strong beliefs about ethnic identity and the role of language in defining ethnic identity – at least for the majority language group – appear to be associated with weak L2 ability. This implies that both language researchers and language practitioners may need to consider identity issues alongside cognitive, pedagogical, and linguistic factors in their conceptualizations of L2 learning. For language researchers, it would be interesting to examine the precise nature of this relationship. For example, language users holding strong beliefs about their ethnic group may avoid any contact with members of an L2 group, particularly in contexts with social and political frictions between groups, and may consequently not benefit from the opportunities to learn an L2 through social interaction. Alternatively, language users with an initially weak L2 ability may not be able to interact with an L2 ethnic group efficiently, which would not allow them to reexamine their orientation toward the L2 ethnic group. In our research, we have started to pursue these issues by investigating the identity–L2 learning links for other ethnic groups, not necessarily those that reside in contexts characterized by social and political tensions between groups (e.g. Chinese learning English in Quebec). And for language teachers, our initial findings suggest that matters of ethnic identity – construed within the broader sociopolitical setting and a narrower context of a particular learning situation – can have consequences for L2 learning outcomes. Indeed, it is plausible that at least some learners would not reach the desired levels of L2 proficiency because their language learning needs may clash with their sense of ethnic identity. Therefore, a fruitful area of future thinking in this regard would be to consider how language learning motivation, matters of ethnic identity, and classroom teaching practices interact to make language learning efficient and enjoyable for L2 learners.

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