EMERGING GENDER IDENTITIES IN STUDENTS'
SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE CLASS GROUP INTERACTION[i]

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Abstract:

The aspiration of this study is to provide a lens to students' emerging multiple identities, especially gender identities. The present study does not concern with the notion of typicality or representativeness but with the particularities and complexity together in the given context. Social media presents a fertile site for investigation of the discursive construction of emerging identities. In this study, one particular identity emerging along with L2 language learner identity through interactions is found to be gender identity. It was intertwined with other aspects of identity such as friendship and solidarity. The study revealed how social-community building of the students has been established through jokes, sarcasm and sharing by utilizing multi modalities in social media and foregrounding their gender identities.

Keywords: identities, learner identities, gender identity, social media

1. Introduction

This study arose out of a desire to examine construction and co-construction of identities of language learners who are more than just a recipient of input in the complex process of foreign language learning. At the junction of the social changes stands the new image of language learners who are recognized as social agents. In this line of thought, in its broadest sense, identity is defined as one's way of relating the self to the world. In this vein, the rise of identity can be seen as a consequence of macro-dynamics of the society. Geared towards this end, this study aims to explore

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understandings of socially mediated identities emerging in the class group page in the social media. We can see from the reviewed literature that although an individual holds several identities, not all of them are enacted to full degree in all contexts. Therefore, this study sees the need to expand on identity research by integrating social media site interaction of the learners to offer a broader picture of their identity development as foreign language learners. In this study, gender-related identity features emerged as impromptu cases where the interlocutors through footing aligned themselves in the flow interaction with a particular type of identity and in the same way assigned certain identities to each other. It is like a chess game, the statements made, the questions asked and the responses given, have consequences in terms of the shared community one builds, solidarity one establishes, multi-faceted identities one negotiates.

2. Literature Review

As Merchant (2005, p. 301) puts it "*we inhabit a social world in which identity is complex, no longer closely tied to place and territory, delineated by nationhood, nor simply created, as psychology suggests, through acts of identification*". Instead, according to him, it is produced by action and performance. In other words, the idea of doing identity and performing identity become salient. The term 'identification' turns identity from a noun to verb and treats identity not as a state but as a process (Ivanic, 2006). This idea suggests a way of looking at identity as a move away from fixed identities as we are endlessly engaged in twisting, moulding and redefining our identities.

Physical-geographical boundaries become more and more dissolved in the world of digital space and online communication networks. In light of these changes, today, the concept of identity is considered to be an important issue in exploring the processes involved in SLA (Second Language Acquisition). In a similar vein, that comes to mean learning a language or taking on new literacies in a particular social context can have consequences for the identities of its users.

A classroom provides a differentiated context with its own rules and circumstances where the expected relations of participants are linked in codified ways. Conventionally, a classroom is likely to have students who are positioned in a hierarchically organized relationship with the teacher. Taking these factors into consideration, students can highlight or downplay particular aspects of their identities in their classroom encounters. Although it does not mean that virtual environments are totally exempt from participants' roles and expectations, social media provides a relatively free environment with its multi-modal tools and interactive resources. Reviewed literature (Simpson, 2009; Darhower, 2002) indicates that the opportunity to interact primarily with peers and within a peer-centered communication environment

opens up new realms to perform new identities not traditionally associated with those of "student" in instructed institutional contexts. Students' opportunities increase in the social media to claim identity positions that vary, differ or deviate from the traditional ones they adopt in classroom settings, with potential implications for identity development. Also, social media takes the teacher out of his/her comfort zone, and makes him/her go through a personal on-line experience together with students. In this vein, social media creates interactional and interpersonal spaces where knowledge and meanings are shared and identities are co-constructed and negotiated.

We all possess a number of identities, as Edwards (2009, p. 2) puts it "*the salience of which can be expected to wax and wane according to circumstance and context*". In an attempt to specify the co-existing, discursively negotiated identities that are shaped both socially and individually, types of identities are considered by different scholars. One of the commonly referred taxonomy in the field is the one proposed by Tracy (2002). Tracy (2002, p.18-19) differentiates identities into four categories with respect to "stable" (relatively unchanging) and "dynamic" (relatively changing) scale with close reference to the facets of identity as "person-hood" and the construction of identity via "social interaction". Tracy's (2002) framework comprises four categories of identity, namely master identity, personal identity, interactional identity, relational identity. According to her, the features of master identity such as gender, ethnicity, age and nationality are fairly stable but they can also be contested. There are also personal identities, the kinds of identities that are attributed to people on the basis of their attitudes and behavior toward some issue. While master and personal identities are fairly stable, there are other aspects of identity that are more dynamic and situated in specific interactions. These are conceptualized as interactional identity, namely, roles that people take on in interaction with other people and as relational identity, the agency that one can exert in performing an identity, the kind of relationship s/he enacts. In this sense, these types of identities are quite significant for analyzing the dynamic interplay among multiple identities students bring to classroom and their impact on the emerging identities in their social media interactions.

Tracy (2002, p.18) also points out; "*interactional identities are distinct from master identities but are not independent of them*". She further explains that "*to the degree an interactional identity is strongly associated with a master identity, whether it is gender, race, or age, that interactional identity takes on some of the master identity features with which it is associated*". On the basis of insights on multiple identities of learners, this study tries to show one facet of emerging identities of learners, that is gender identities, in social media environment.

3. Methodology

This paper is a small part of the doctoral dissertation research and qualitative in scope, the aspiration of this study is to provide a synoptic discussion of features relevant to emerging identity construction in social media sites. The present study does not concern with the notion of typicality or representativeness but as the scholars highlighted with the particularities and complexity together. As Kramp (2004, p. 105) notes; "*context enables the researcher to meaning where previously there was no meaning*". It is concerned with particularities as behaviors, events and actions gain meaning in context.

3.1. The Participants and the Setting

The context of the present study was the School of Foreign Languages at a state university, a highly competitive university pioneering in architectural and engineering education. This study was conducted with the participation of foreign language preparatory school students (n = 35, 23 male, 12 female) from social studies and civil engineering departments in the spring term in 2012. The students' age varied between 18 and 23. They had all graduated from a high school in Turkey. Ten of the participants were from Istanbul. The rest were from different towns in Turkey and had come to Istanbul to pursue their studies. Students who enter the degree programs are required to take a proficiency test in English. Depending on their performance in the exam, the students either attend preparatory English classes or continue with their programs at their departments where medium of 30 % or 100 % of instruction is English. Students who score a minimum of 60 out of 100 are considered exempt from the English preparatory school. Students who cannot pass the proficiency exam are obliged to attend the preparatory classes for a minimum duration of one semester or two where they are offered 32 week intensive course on English.

3.2. Data Collection

The researcher collected the data from two writing classes which she instructed for a term. When the researcher met the students at the beginning of the second term, most of them were at the pre-intermediate level and were expected to finish the term with intermediate level. The researcher met each class twice a week for writing and coursebook classes. The writing class was offered five hours a week and this course was given particular importance by the prep school students as it not only forms the basis for academic studies but also develops critical thinking skills. For writing lessons, two assessment types are used: sit-down examination in the midterms and portfolio assessment. As for the latter, one week is devoted to content- based instruction where the topic under question is explored in depth and in the following week, students get

their writing tasks under the invigilator of their own writing teachers. Students have to write about the given task and finish the activity in an hour. Then, the written works are evaluated by the teachers. Students, later, get feedback on their work and revise them. This portfolio assessment affected 5 % of their overall grades at the end of the term.

Data was collected from the students' and instructor's posting messages and comments on the class group page in social media for a period of four months and field-notes and memos kept during the process of data collection and analysis. Triangulation of data by means of observation notes, diary entries and memos assisted the researcher in identifying the students' reasons for the choices they made in their social media interaction. Some steps were taken to ensure the ethical standards in the main study. At the beginning of the study, the researcher informed the participants about the research and their consent was taken to become participatory in this project.

3.3. Data Analysis

Grounded in the poststructural research orientation, the study seeks to understand identity construction as emerging in discourse and towards that end employs some key current qualitative research perspectives, analytic resources and tools available across the methodological spectrum. Not just content but also the salient aspects of discourse features helped the researcher to analyze how identities were constructed, negotiated and re-negotiated in the course of unfolding interaction. What is more, multimodal features such as pictures, videos and the interplay between visual, auditory and verbal modes were analyzed to understand the emergence of identity in a virtual environment. As for the classification of content for social media interaction in this study, the first step of the analysis was the familiarization with the data. Following the advice of Silverman (2001) and other qualitative researchers, all of the online interactions were read through numerous times looking for patterns in discourse which would help the researcher trace identity-sensitive points. The researcher started from data in order to create categories, a procedure referred to as coding. The process is quite different from standard content analysis, where the analysis is the frequency of occurrence of predetermined categories. Choosing the posting as the unit of analysis meant some postings that were quite lengthy could be categorized at multiple levels. The researcher read the interactions and tried to understand what was being talked about. The data was read repeatedly to identify emerging themes. At this point, it should be mentioned that the personal and theoretical experiences which the researcher may bring to the task can serve as material for the generation of categories. Referring to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) work on grounded theory, Alvesson & Sköldberg (2009, p. 57) point out that the researcher does not approach reality as a tabula rasa. S/he must have a perspective that

will help him/her see relevant data and abstract significant categories from his/her scrutiny of data. Likewise, Strauss (1987) highlights that when coding you usually have some codes in mind and are also looking for other ideas that seem to arise out of the data. Themes may come from reviewing literature or from the characteristics of the phenomena being studied. In this study, the analysis of data was not confined to certain pre-determined identity sensitive categories in the initial stages of analysis such as age, ethnicity, nationality but when those categories were found to be relevant in unveiling emerging identity sensitive discussions, such as the influence of gender difference in social media interaction, they were given due focus for the analysis and discussion of the findings. Such a projection was required for this particular research where a great majority of students from civil engineering department were male.

After multiple readings, a number of common themes and topics such as attitudes to English, peer support, asking for help, teasing, language learner identity, resistance and solidarity became apparent. Most of the entries had between one and five codes attached to them. Next, the data were arranged according to the codes and read at least several times. It was found that one piece of interaction might fit into multiple categories. The patterns of overlapping codes were as important to the analysis as were the individual codes. After deciding on a code to constitute a category, it was time to cluster them. The next stage after clustering the codes was defining them in order to identify major categories and attain preliminary meanings from the emerging themes. After deciding on the categories, the next step was to try to find interrelationships between them; thus, links between topics were checked. It became apparent in these interactions that students established and built up multiple identities. These emergent identities were as learner identities, interactional identities, gender identities and relational identities. In search of clues for these emerging identities, certain discursive elements in the data were analyzed to see how identities are constructed and negotiated. The focus of this article is on emerging gender identities of the students.

4. Results and Discussion

The preliminary focus of the research has been the L2 learner identities. Nevertheless, the data offered insight to various instances of gender sensitive identity concerns, especially in participants' social media interactions. Gender-related identity features emerged as impromptu cases where the interlocutors aligned themselves in the flow interaction with a particular type of identity and in the same way assigned certain identities to each other. This also showed that the participants sometimes preferred to determine the topics of communication and provide transitions from one topic to another.

The role of context in shaping our varying and shifting identities is important and provides a link to understanding how identities are constituted in language and discourse. Contextual and interactional dimensions of language use may impact the emergence of identities. In this study, in a particular social media context, the symmetrical relationship between the instructor and the learners contributed to the emergence of a community. The instructor as a participatory researcher tried to put herself as an equal member so that a more parallel power relationship can be established. It is evident that the learners did not always align with the instructor's opinions. They sometimes questioned them or even ignored them.

The following examples offer insight to different positioning taken up by learners. Relevant extracts from the data are used to illustrate the findings. However, the acts are unique, and therefore cannot be generalized to all students. The findings can be viewed as a 'snapshot' of participants at a particular point in time.

As the following excerpt illustrates, a male student's posting on Women's Day, unexpectedly, triggered gender-related identity negotiation comprising assertiveness, chauvinism, resistance and solidarity. The posting received a negative response from another male student who accused his friend for being "a provocateur" and this response received approval from another male student who took a supportive stance by saying "you're my man". Instead of treating this posting as a simple congratulation note, the student seems to be reading the post as a threatening message to his gender identity. His response suggests that the way one sees a post is also determined by the meaning one brings to it. The following interaction shows how the actual construction of identities emerges through positioning in the dynamic flow of interaction.

Extract 1.

Student 1: "Happy day for my dea teacher and all of the women"

Instructor: "many thanks :) it's very very very kind of you :) *siz bu kadar çok 'very' kelimesini yan yana kullanmayın, yanlış bir kullanımdır, hoca kullanabilir vurgulamak için değil mi* :D) [(don't use the word "very" that much, it is a wrong usage, the teacher can use to emphasize, can't she? :D)]"

Student 2: "you are prowakator (ı don't know English form)"

Instructor: ":))"

Student 3: "you are my man student 2 :D"

The interaction also entails a challenge to the teacher's gender identity. Her expression of happiness upon her male student's kind remark is downgraded by another male student who chose to foreground his masculine attitude. His most extensive conversation was on Women's Day. After that day, he kept turning to this

topic. This particular student's gender identity appears to be self-evident in his other interactions with peers.

Extract 2.

Student 4: "There is no such thing as women's rights, because they always are right :)

Instructor: "Thanks :) Yes, good point :), women are always right :))) I am jokıng :P There are HUMAN RIGHTS, we should all agree on that…"

Student 3: "Student 2, what did he say? What do you think about him?"

Instructor: "Student 3, first give your opinion, then ask Student 2! :)"

Student 2: "Student 1 and student 2 ı don't want to see you again in my class find another one. I want to cry my friend we are slaves in the class. Instructors are presidents of class and finally men don't need women but women always need us sorry but it is truth :D hahahaaah"

In the above interaction, the same student assigned a role to himself and acted like the guard of the classroom. What is more, his discourse was heavily grounded on masculinity. By saying "instructors are presidents of class, we are slaves, men dont need women" the student is challenging the female authority. Data show that female students, few in number, were occasionally challenged by male students. The posting above triggered a series of negative comments in other interactions from female students along with other male students who distanced themselves from such chauvinistic attitudes. There are also other instances illustrating that this student kept the same positioning and sustained it throughout the term. His aggressive, face threatening turns at talk is evidence of his preference of "hegemonic masculinity".

Extract 3.

Student 5: "Midterm I *önceden duyurulduğu üzere 27.03.2012 Salı günü yapılacaktır. B/Bn/C/Cn kurları için sınav 10.00'da başlayacaktır. Daha bakamayacak olan varsa yazsın ben bakarım burdan arkadaşlar* [As announced before, the first midterm will be held on March 27 2012. For all levels, the exam starts at 10.00 a.m. If the others won't be able to check the classes they will have the exam, I can check from here, friends.]"

Student 3: "*saol Student 5 bide bu kızlar nie aynı sınıftalar sonrada ayrımcılık yok diolar hahahah* :D [Thanks Student 5, and by the way why are the girls in the class, then they say there is no discrimination :D]"

Student 4: "*öğrenci işleriyie alakalı bir torpilleri söz konusu sanırım* [I guess there is an issue about Student Affairs Office]"

Student 6: """*Student 3, naparsın işte ezilen biziz ya* :D [we are the ones who are oppressed]"

Student 3: "*adamsın tek güvendiğimsin Student 6* [you are a man you are the only one that I trust]"

Student 4: "*yapamayacağım* [I can't do]"

In the above interaction about the reasons why the girls are placed in the same classroom for the exam, they underlined their masculine stance. In this study, gender identity is intertwined with other aspects of identity such as friendship and solidarity. Solidarity building was achieved by the frequent use of masculine and intimate forms of address and the supportive responses to each other's comments.

These acts of enforcing gender identity have received reaction from fellow female students. Interestingly, all gender-sensitive identity negation is fulfilled in English. Thus, we can see that through interactions, language learner identities are not exempt from master identities.

Extract 4.

Student 3: "internet homework is ending tomorrow do you know anything about it dear all?"

Student 7: "no original book, yes pirate book :D"

Student 3: "I want to kill myself because of you öfffff"

Student 7: ":D"

Student 8: "even ı know, I don't tell because you're enemy of the women :D"

Student 3: "haha definetly ı will kill myself after that sentence and you two are coming with me :D dont come tomorrow :D"

Student 8: "I will go and it takes only 30 minutes :D"

Student 7: "Student 8! You will not go to school because I am absent"

Student 4: "*şakalar komiklikler*:D [jokes, teasings] I believe I can tell you those in English :D"

Student 4: "Sorry it was i cant :D"

In the above interaction, one male student wanted to get some information about the due date of an online assignment. Instead of responding to his enquiry, a female student criticized his prior behavior by saying "even ı know, ı don't tell it because you're enemy of the women: D". The initial topic of the interaction changed. The topic (due date of online assignment) seemed to drift away from its content. One can see the dynamic negotiation of identities as learners, peers, friends, male, female in the given examples. Maybe, this relates to the need and desire to participate in an on-going

interaction. The on-going story does not seem to have much to do with academic life at school but is rather related to their social worlds. The humor that occurred in the above interaction contributed to intimacy between the participants and thereby nourished the community. Along with joking and teasing, there were many cases of sarcasm giving scope to their talk. It seems that students were in a playful mood during those interactions.

There were also cases of investment on female identity, and solidarity to be established among the teacher and the other female students.

Extract 5.

Instructor: "Happy Women's Day girls :)"

Student 7: "thanks my dear teacher :))"

Student 8: "thank you for your sharing, my teacher and I congratulate your day :)"

In the above example, this time the teacher posted a picture and expressed her wish for Women's Day and tagged the female students in the class. When you tag someone on Facebook, that person gets a notification on his/her homepage and understands that she/he should check the group page as there is something related to him/her.

Other multimodal resources such as cartoons were used to reinforce gender identity. For instance, a female student benefitted from the multi-modality function of the social media and without writing any comment, she posted a picture depicting a woman wishing for no housework, no cooking, no cleaning and in the end, that woman transformed to a man. While drawing attention to male-female dichotomy, she rejected the social roles attributed to women.

5. Conclusion

It is evident that learners negotiate different identities in different contexts such as educational and non-educational (Virkkula & Nikula, 2010) depending on inner and outer factors. Thus, every time language learners interact in the target language, whether in the oral or written mode, they are engaged in identity construction, development, and negotiation. Classroom context offers only a slice of possible identity positions adopted by the language learners. Therefore, this study tried to expand on identity research by integrating social media site interaction of the learners to offer a broader picture of their identity development as foreign language learners. It was observed that the participants highlighted or downplayed particular aspects of their identities during their interactions. The social media provided a more flexible context

where students could interact with the teacher as learners or as conversational partners. In social media, the participants were more prone to emphasize particular aspects of their identity, especially gender identity as this social media class group was male dominated, one could see the impromptu cases of gender identity. In other words, they tried to define themselves in alternative ways by distancing themselves from labels such as students, L2 users and they preferred to foreground other aspects of their identities.

Analyzing online interactions provides resources for interpreting how asymmetrical social relationships among the participants are established and negotiated during interaction while they are "becoming" a foreign language learner and user. Therefore, further studies regarding the construction of language learner identities in different age groups in social media could provide very important data for language teachers.

6. About the Author

Arzu Ekoç was born in Ankara, Turkey in 1983. She received her BA degree from the Department of Translation and Interpreting Studies from Boğaziçi University in 2005, and had her MA degree in ELT from Istanbul University in 2008 and completed her PhD in ELT at Istanbul University in 2013. She has been working as an English instructor at Yildiz Technical University since 2006. Her research interests are learner identity, discourse analysis, second language writing and reading.

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