


TALKING ABOUT LANGUAGE AND EMOTIONS AT HOME


Erasmus+ 2014-2020
 KA2 'Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices'

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Talking about language and identity: Why identity matters

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The language and Identity link

Language not only expresses identity but also contributes significantly to the development and fashioning of the identity process.

Identity is formed within a broader socio-cultural context:

"We live in a world where identity matters. It matters both as a concept, theoretically, and as a contested fact of contemporary political life."

Suzanne Romaine, Identity & Multi-Ungualism, in *Bilingual Youth: Spanish in English-speaking societies*, Edited by Kim Potowski and Jason Rothman (2011).

The distinction between 'own'/'native' and 'foreign'/'acquired' has no linguistic foundation, but is of a social and cultural nature."

Willem Frijhoff, Marie-Christine Kok Escalle and Karène Sanchez-Sommerer / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam (2017)


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The language and Identity link (continued)

How we support people to manage and potentially reframe these social and cultural distinctions will significantly effect the identity formation process.

At some level we are all bi/multi-lingual – within a complex series of factors that form our sense of self:

Garcia (2009) refers to *'translanguaging'* as a phenomenon where bi-linguals have constant access to their language repertoires, systems and discourse practices and use these resources to maximise their communicative potential.

De Nays Ibrahim, British Council (2013) refers to *'Transidentifying'*, being bilingual...multilingual identities.


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So, why does identity matter?

- Because language is part of a complex process of identity formation for individuals and groups.
- Identity is not a static notion and cannot always be linked to language or origin. People may also define their identities on the basis of religion, sexual preference, hobbies or politics for example.
- With growing globalisation, large groups of people are on the move and the link between place and identity has become less evident / more 'fluid'.
- As people are increasingly confronted with other cultures, they will also identify with certain aspects of their background. They may define themselves on the basis of cultural differences with other groups, therefore, language or religion can play a larger role.
- And because our (often complex and insecure) sense of 'self' is strongly linked to emotions, to a sense of where we belong and processes of change – our life history.


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How the tool helps us to understand the link between language, identity and emotions...

- *Understanding Who* we are and *where* we are – **our Avatar** – our sense of 'family' and role within that family
- Understanding *how* we identify with the languages we speak (or don't speak), how we perceive language emotionally and where we *feel* languages – the embodiment of language – **the Family Portraits**

How the tool helps us to understand the link between language, identity and emotions...(continued)

- Who am I? Where do I belong?

Where do you feel at home?

- “For people with a migration history, it can tell something about their level of attachment to their home country”
- “It says something about your dreams for the future”

The Timeline:

- Where were you born?
- What is your family history? Where have you been?
- What languages have you gained (and lost) along the way?
- How do you feel about this journey?

- **Guidance for practitioners:**
- The **timeline** allows participants to tell their language history: how skills and their interrelated emotions have evolved over time, often in the context of migration.
- For an individual family member this can be a moment of self-reflection, looking back to a sometimes difficult journey with changes in language use and learning. Explaining this to others, could increase mutual understanding.
- Step by step, they design their journey and mark the evolution of their language skills. Language loss, stagnation and learning are linked again with emotions. An overview for each language helps to deepen the reflections and explain this to family members.

An example of language and identity formation through time: Kamal's story...

Born in Kandahar and lived there until 2 years old with 2 brothers and an older sister – moved to Kabul and lived there until 5 or 6 – and then moved to Pakistan at age of 7 due to political uprising and war....then to the UK at the age of 8. Spoke Pashto, one of 6 dialects spoken in Afghanistan and continued into Pakistan where Pashto was widely spoken....

An example of language and identity formation through time: Kamal's story...

- The family were separated in this transition – this led to a strong sense of loss and “sadness” and “a big initial shock” that was “not considered that much at the time.”
- BUT this was mixed with excitement: “going to a new place...my first time on an aeroplane...I was overwhelmed by excitement”.
- He was also going to be re-united with his father and with other members of his family who he had not met before – adding to this confusing mix of emotions – leaving behind but also connecting and re-connecting.

“It was about leaving behind the safety of what you knew...and an amalgamation of excitement, sadness, fear and relief...”

An example of language and identity formation through time: Kamal's story...

- a strong feeling of “being very different” (in my first week in school in London I was in traditional Afghani clothes...) but it was the first time that he began to connect with his identity and to consider this as “the first test of who I was...”
- This was a **whole new world** – had his “first experience of pen and paper...and colour” on the plane journey to London - “in Pakistan it had been clay and a bamboo pen”

- **An example of language and identity formation through time: Kamal's story...**
- At this time he was confined within a family unit speaking mainly Pashto *"but only after a week and a half I became aware that there was another language spoken here..."* (including among relatives) which *"encouraged me to speak a new language...I was excited about it."*
- But was also reassured to hear his father speaking only Pashto.

- **An example of language and identity formation through time: Kamal's story...**
- All lessons at school were in English but had special support – was communicating in English at the end of the first year *"but reading and writing took a few years longer"*
- It was a very VISUAL experience – *"there was so much going on"*

- **An example of language and identity formation through time: Kamal's story**
- *"I was yearning for the people that I missed but I didn't want to go back culturally...I enjoyed life more over here...life had more purpose, it was more meaningful...I felt I had updated my previous life..." [from no doors to doors of opportunity]*
- *"for a long time I was feeling Afghani and I attended a mother-tongue school at the weekends" – wanted to hold onto the "mother tongue" but "nostalgia kicks in...I was still missing home" "I did for a while feel Afghani even when I changed clothes" at the age of 10 "I moved away a bit...was listening to Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer...was picking up and trying new things..."*
- *"I didn't feel patriotic but was reminded of my Afghani identity in my teenage years... but I was aware that I was constantly changing and I didn't want to change too much"*

The impact of life history and experience on language and identity:

WHAT DO YOU CALL YOURSELF?

Thank you!

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