

## **Classroom Participation as a Performative Act of Language Learners' Identity Construction**

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### **Abstract**

In the first part of this study, we briefly present different approaches used to define the concept of second language learners' identity. Then we introduce Butler's theory of performativity (1988) and we attempt to apply its main concepts as tools for describing L2 learners' identity. In the second part of the study, we try to answer the following question: What are typical performative acts of a good and a poor language learner in the language learning classroom? Our research suggests that performing a good language learner identity refers to the learner's frequent and repetitive participation in utterances whose content is related to the language classroom, regardless of the chosen communicative resources. As for performing a poor language learner identity, it appeared that it refers to the learner's repetitive and frequent participation in utterances whose content is not related to the language classroom, regardless of the chosen communicative resources.

**Key words:** theory of performativity; L2 learners' identity; good language learner identity; poor language learner identity

### **Introduction**

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA) various labels are used to describe language learners: basic / independent / proficient users, non-native speakers, multi-competent speakers, emergent bilinguals, good and poor language learners, successful and less successful language learners, powerful and not powerful enough language learners, autonomous learners, etc. All these terms depict researchers' positions on the process or the 13 aim of SLA, as well as the applied theoretical framework. However, it should be taken into consideration that researchers' and practitioners' positions are always reflected in their practices despite the fact that these positions are always partial, subjective, and context dependent. Therefore, one of our responsibilities as researchers is to try to

deconstruct the constructs of extralinguistic reality which influence the ways we conceptualize and conceive their meanings.

In what follows, we will first present a traditional dichotomy of a good vs. a poor language learner (LL) that is concerned with their psychological characteristics and their language learning behaviors. Then, we will briefly describe the new line of investigation in SLA that deals with LLs' identities as multiple and dynamic processes enhanced or restrained by the learning context. Next, we will introduce the theory of performativity, a framework Butler (1988) has proposed to describe the construction of gender identity, which will then be used as a tool to describe the performativity of LLs' identity.

### **The language learner: the good, the poor and the active**

The interest in LLs' labels, and in the meaning conveyed by these labels, has a long history in SLA. During the period of the psychological and socio-psychological approaches to research, which were in SLA typical for the late 70s, 80s and early 90s, the authors were mostly concerned with individual differences between learners that predisposed them to be good or poor(er) LLs. All the studies (see Rubin, 1975; Naiman et al., 1978; Rubin & Thompson, 1982; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre & Noels, 1996; Lightbown & Spada, 1997) have found individual differences to be consistent predictors of success in language learning. A good LL seemed to be endowed with a particular constellation of stable personality traits such as motivation, extraversion, a willingness to take risks, a lack of inhibition, tolerance of ambiguity, field independence, creativity, self-esteem and certain learners' beliefs. The authors were also interested in good LLs' practices and behaviors that lead to better results in language learning and use. The correlation between success in language learning and the use of a language learning strategy, such as guessing, monitoring, taking and creating opportunities to practice and to use language, has also been confirmed by the aforementioned studies. The representation of the personality of a good LL was also shared and supported by language teachers' common beliefs (see Lalonde, Lee, & Gardner, 1987).

The new line of investigation in SLA, typical for the late 90s and 21st century, was either concerned with psychological characteristics of LLs, but compatible with the process-oriented approach to SLA (see Dörnyei, 2005), or with the socio-cultural context of L2 learning and its dynamic relation to learners' active participation in these contexts (see Norton & Toohey, 2001). The authors researching language learning from the socio-cultural methodological approach (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), mostly inspired by the work of Vygotsky (1978), examine how "learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community" (Rogoff, 1994, p. 209) and how they learn through „repeated engagement in and experience with these activities with more competent members of a group" (Hall, 1993, p. 148). SLA researchers

positioning themselves as poststructuralist, just as the authors researching language learning from the socio-cultural stance, conceptualize L2 learning less as an individual and cognitive process, and more as a social activity. However, they take into consideration the LL's socio-historically constructed relationship with the language and the community that can provide more or less favorable conditions for his or her engagement. The attention was shifted away from a learner as an object with a stable identity to a learner as an active subject, with multiple and dynamic identities who can accept, resist or negotiate his identity positions<sup>1</sup> in language learning contexts. Unlike the traditional understanding of a learner's identity in terms of one's connection or identification with a particular social group, a LL's identity with regard to the poststructuralist approach is seen as „his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2000, p. 5).

Along with this conceptualization of identity, two notions new to SLA were introduced in the field: learners' agency and learners' investment. Within the poststructuralist framework, the authors often refer to agency as to a learner's capacity or inner power to act, engage, participate and position in those contexts, to resist imposed positions if needed, and to change their habitus despite the fact that their choices are always partially constrained by the context (i.e. interlocutors, school curriculum, classmates, teachers, etc.). Duff (2012) defines agency as „people's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals” (p. 417). This notion reflects the view that learners are not passive LLs but actors capable of making deliberate choices with regard to language learning, despite partially being constrained by social circumstances. Another notion, investment, was introduced by Peirce (1995) to put forward the idea that one of the reasons for LLs' sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice the language could be related to the learners' socially and historically constructed relationship to the target language. Norton-Peirce argued that the proficiency of the good LL is not bound up only by his or her motivation, but both by the possibilities that the communities they are engaged in offer, and their personal cost-benefit analysis of learning a new language. Norton's work was largely influenced by the work of Bourdieu (1977), and Weedon (1997), a representative of poststructural feminism, a branch of feminist theory which engages in insights from poststructuralist thought. Another theory that fits that branch of feminism, Butler's theory of performativity, still has not been examined as a possible tool to describe LLs' identity.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms subjectivity or positioning are sometimes used instead of the term identity as they describe the new conceptualization of identity better.

In the following paragraph, we will present a brief review of the theory, and we will try to relate it to LLS' identity.

### **The theory of performativity and its possible use in the field of SLA**

The theory of performativity (see Butler, 1988) was proposed to describe the role of society in the construction of gender identity. Its central concept is performativity and its relation to gender. According to Butler (1988), gender is „a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 97), a repetitive preformation, done “invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (p. 109). It is performed and constructed through repetitive discourse. More precisely, it refers to one's own repetitive performance of gender-like behaviors, both verbal and non-verbal, which have been previously set up by society. The premise that can be read out from the aforementioned explanation is “I perform, therefore I am”. What emerges from her theoretical approach is Austin's (1970) theory of performative utterances, uses of language which do more than merely inform or describe – utterances that are themselves a kind of action and that bring about some result through the very process of their enunciation. However, while uttering a performative sentence for Austin is not just saying something, but doing something as well, for Butler, uttering any sentence is a performative act per se. However, any performative accomplishment is performed within a highly rigid regulatory frame and compelled by social sanctions. Only performing in accordance with all, or a sufficiently large subset of these rules, counts as being a good representative of a particular gender, or, in our case, of a particular type of LL. Her concern with the influence of the external rules on speech acts is similar to Searle's (1969) approach to speech acts defined as a use of language as a social operation which is characteristically performed by uttering expressions in accordance with certain rules, regulative rules, that regulate antecedently existing forms of behavior, or constitutive rules that create or define new forms of behavior. Therefore, according to Butler, in order to be a woman a person has to imitate the dominant social conventions of that particular gender: to dress as a woman, to put on make-up as a woman, to sit as a woman, to laugh as a woman, etc. The acts that one performs are, in fact, expected acts because they are embedded in the culture of the respective country or region in which the person lives, or is raised, and implicitly regulated so that the actors themselves believe in their performances and rarely question the existing confines. That brings us to the following conclusion: each performative act is in its nature both free and individual, social and constrained. It is individual because it is performed by an individual; it is social because it is performed in the social context and because the acceptability of the particular act for the particular identity is embedded in society; it is constrained because the person is expected to act in a particular way without questioning his or her behavior; and it is free because of agency, every individual's

ability that allows him or her to resist socially acceptable behavior. In other words, every human is free to engage in a series of individual acts and practices, in being or becoming, but while doing so he or she supports rules that have been previously set up by the society and actually enacts and reproduces socio-cultural structures. As Butler (1988) puts it “My acts, individual as they are, nevertheless reproduce the culture”, despite “an agency which is understood as the process of rendering such possibilities determinate (...) these possibilities are necessarily constrained by available historical conventions” (p. 99). Thus, a person is both a social subject of constitutive acts, as he or she shapes social reality through language, and a social object of constitutive acts, as he or she is shaped through language. According to this view, the identity can be defined as a dynamic relation between a person and a culture, the active process of embodying a set of possibilities conditioned by cultural conventions or resisting them.

In that view, the formation of the LL’s identity can be seen as a dynamic performative process conditioned by social norms typical for the culture of schooling that they are embedded in and that are imposed by the school curriculum in its largest sense. LLs are not seen as social agents completely free to choose their identity, rather as social agents having at their disposal to put on, on their way to being and becoming LLs, just a limited number of performative acts that have been previously invented by society. If we take into consideration the previous body of work in SLA, what we argue here is that the selection of possible acts performed by a LL can be attributed to two categories: a good language learner and a poor language learner. Therefore, these two identities are only two possible identities that the LL can perform. Simone de Beauvoir’s famous quote, “One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman,” can easily be transformed to fit the language learning context: one is not born a good or a poor language learner, but, rather, becomes one. And the LL becomes one in the language learning classroom, or in other language learning contexts, through the repetition of culturally enforced performative acts or behaviors that are cultivated, policed and enforced mainly through the school curriculum and classroom practices. However, the behaviors that constitute that selection of performative acts, in Butler’s sense of the term, which can be related to those two identities have never been described before. Taking into consideration that the school curriculum reflects the values of the wider social context, it should be noted that the selection of acts related to one of these two identities could vary from culture to culture. Our intention in this article is to describe the acts that could be relevant for the western educational systems only.

### **Case study**

In this study we have analyzed the data collected for another survey that was conducted from October to April with eight 5th grade students studying French as

an L3, at an international school. For the purposes of this study we have chosen two of eight case studies, the ones that were considered to be the best representatives of two researched identities. The analyzed data consisted of two semi-structured interviews, one with the students and one with their French teacher, along with twelve video recordings of French lessons of a total length of approximately 480 minutes. With reference to the dichotomy of a good vs. a poor language learner, we have drawn on Butlers' theory to approach the following question: What are the performative acts of a good and a poor LL in the language learning classroom?

Learners' participation has been chosen as the unit of act and the unit of analysis because we have conceptualized language learning as learners' participation. Three criteria that we have chosen to operationalize learners' participation were: the chosen communicative resources (i.e. the target language – French, non-target languages – English and Croatian, translingual utterances), the origin of the incentive (i.e. self-initiated, initiated by another classroom member), and its content relatedness to the language classroom (i.e. related to the L3 lesson, non-related to the L3 lesson). Twelve different forms of participation were expected to appear:

- (a) in a non-target language, related to the L3 lesson, initiated by another classroom member,
- (b) in a non-target language, related to the L3 lesson, self-initiated,
- (c) in the target language, related to the L3 lesson, initiated by another classroom member,
- (d) in the target language, related to the L3 lesson, self-initiated,
- (e) in the target language, non-related to the L3 lesson, initiated by another classroom member,
- (f) in the target language, non-related to the L3 lesson, self-initiated,
- (g) in a non-target language, non-related to the L3 lesson, initiated by another classroom member,
- (h) in a non-target language, non-related to the L3 lesson, self-initiated,
- (i) in a translingual utterance, related to the L3 lesson, initiated by another classroom member,
- (j) in a translingual utterance, related to the L3 lesson, self-initiated,
- (k) in a translingual utterance, non-related to the L3 lesson, initiated by another classroom member, and
- (l) in a translingual utterance, non-related to the L3 lesson, self-initiated.

Only ten of the expected twelve forms of participation have appeared. We assume that forms (b) and (c) did not appear because of the level of the learners' communicative competence in the target language.

### Sophie: a good language learner

We can use different labels to describe Sophie as a language learner: she is a multi-competent speaker-hearer, a native Croatian speaker, a proficient English user, a powerful French language student, etc. According to her teacher, she is the most successful student in that language learning group:

*Sofia is an example of an excellent student. She is aware of her knowledge, an A student and a talented one, too. She is always ready to help others and positively influences other students. She does everything she is expected to do on time. She shows respect to me and to her fellow classmates.*

This statement describes this teacher's meaning of a good language learner. Sophie, on the other hand, labeled herself as a good French student, and supported it by the following statement and evidence:

*I think I'm a good French student, I'm learning a lot and I'm a fast learner.*

According to her, the teacher would describe her as a really good student:

*I think she thinks I'm really a good student ... she would probably describe me as someone who is learning a lot.*

If we compare the meanings of the label "a good language learner" conveyed by the teacher and by the student, we notice some differences. For this student, to be labeled "a good language learner", what matters is the talent, an individual characteristic, and the behavior - learning. A representation of "a good language learner" for this teacher refers to the learner's talent, and some personal qualities translated in behaviors.

The quantitative analysis of Sophie's participation in the L3 classroom (see Table 1) has revealed the forms of performative acts through which "a good language learner" identity is being constructed.

Table 1 shows us that in the L3 classroom, Sophie most frequently participated in the target language, French, with utterances that were related to the language learning classroom<sup>2</sup>. The qualitative analysis has shown that she participated in French in order to:

- give feedback to other students on the (in)accuracy of their utterances,
- translate the teacher's words or utterances to the rest of the group,
- answer the teacher's questions for the group or for her personally, and
- answer other students' questions that were asked to the teacher.

She less frequently, but still frequently, participated in non-target languages, in her case in English, which is the official language at the school. What is obvious from the table is that she mostly participated on her own initiative in English:

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<sup>2</sup> The numbers presented in both tables show the mean value of the student's participation during one language lesson.

Tab. 1: Sophie's forms of participation in the language learning classroom

| Target language                     |                 | Non-target languages |                 | Translingual utterances |                 | Non-target languages                    |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|---|
| related to language learning lesson |                 |                      |                 |                         |                 | non-related to language learning lesson |
| initiated by others                 | self-initiative | initiated by others  | self-initiative | initiated by others     | self-initiative | initiated by others                     |
| 8.54                                | 20.83           | 0.875                | 13.54           | 0.208                   | 1.208           | 0.75                                    |
| 29.37                               |                 | 14.415               |                 | 1.416                   |                 | 0.75                                    |
| 45.201                              |                 |                      |                 |                         |                 | 0.75                                    |
| 45.951                              |                 |                      |                 |                         |                 |   |

- to translate or explain words, expressions or questions to the rest of the group or to an individual,
- to answer questions raised by the teacher to the whole class in French,
- to confirm her understanding of an assignment, and
- to point out her speed in solving tasks.

She rarely participated by using translingual utterances, but she did it mostly to clarify her understanding of the teacher's utterances. As it is clear from Table 1, her participation was almost always related to the L3 classroom. It appears to be that in the L3 classroom, verbal performative acts that constitute a "good language learner" identity refer to students' participation in language learning activities with utterances that are related to the lesson, regardless of the chosen communicative resources. A student frequently positioning himself as a teacher, when giving feedback to other students or answering their questions, actually engages them in a series of individual performative acts that seem to be representative of "a good language learner" identity.

### Peter: a poor language learner

As we did for Sophie, we can also use different labels to describe Peter as a language learner: he is a multi-competent speaker-hearer, a native Croatian speaker, a proficient English user and a basic French learner. We used almost the same labels as we did to describe Sophie. However, there are some major differences when it comes to their language identity that is performed in the L3 classroom. According to his teacher, he is the least successful student in the group:

*Hum...his results are not...the best. Mostly because he is just trying to have fun during lessons and to amuse others. And he never does his homework, often forgets his book... I am not even sure why he attends French language classes. Probably because his parents make him go.*

When he was asked to describe himself, he found that task particularly difficult and hesitated a lot:

*R: What do you think of yourself as of French language student?*

*P: ...*

*R: Do you think you are good student, successful...?*

*P: ... hum...okay.*

*R: Just okay?*

*P: ... yes. I have some good grades... But teacher would probably want me to talk less during lessons.*

What can be concluded from this short exchange with Peter is that he clearly understands what can influence LLs' labels: the results of the LL's work – school grades, and behavior, in other words, performative acts. In his case, repeatedly chatting with other students, seen as undesirable behavior in the L3 classroom that is not in line with classroom rules, is a way of performing his identity and performing that particular role in the L3 community. For the teacher, the label “not the best student” (and we can assume that she meant “a poor student”), implies behaving against classroom rules: being disrespectful to others and neglecting his learner's duties.

The quantitative analysis of his participation (see Table 2) has revealed the forms of performative acts through which a “poor language learner” identity is performed in the L3 classroom.

Instead of presenting his individual scores, we found it particularly interesting to compare Sophie's and Peter's participation. When we compared Peter's overall results presented in Table 2 to Sophie's, the difference was more than obvious: while he participated on average 25.072 times per lesson, she participated almost twice as much as he did, 45.951 times on average per lesson. These differences appeared to be the greatest when we compared their participation in the target language, French: she participated three times more than he did. A closer look has also revealed that in French she mostly participated on her own initiative ( $M=20.83$ ), while he participated more often when prompted by the teacher ( $M=9.33$ ), and very rarely on his own initiative ( $M=2.25$ ). She participated more frequently than he did even in non-target languages with content related to the language lesson. On the other hand, as it was expected, he outperformed her, if we can put it that way, in frequency of participation non-related to the language classroom. However, what has to be noted here is one particular category of participation that, unfortunately, due to the technical limitations of the study,

could not be analyzed, and thus could not be included in the results – it is whispering. Despite the aforementioned technical limitations, for the researcher it was easy to notice that Sophie did not whisper almost at all, and when she did, the whispering was initiated by another student and in these situations she seemed to be distressed. Peter, on the other hand, whispered very often on his own initiative, and the researcher had the impression that his comments were not related to the language lessons because his comments would make other students laugh.

Tab. 2: Peter's forms of participation in the language learning classroom

| Target language                     |                 | Non-target languages |                 | Translingual utterances |                 | Non-target languages                    | Translingual utterances |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|---|-------------------------|
| related to language learning lesson |                 |                      |                 |                         |                 | non-related to language learning lesson |                         |
| initiated by others                 | self-initiative | initiated by others  | self-initiative | initiated by others     | self-initiative | self-initiative                         | self-initiative         |
| 7.083                               | 2.25            | 2.33                 | 7.581           | 0.166                   | 2               | 3.1665                                  | 0.5                     |
| 9.33                                |                 | 9.911                |                 | 2.166                   |                 | 3.1665                                  | 0.5                     |
| 21.407                              |                 |                      |                 |                         |                 | 3.6665                                  |                         |
| 25.072                              |                 |                      |                 |                         |                 |   |                         |

Some major differences between Peter's and Sophie's participation were revealed by the qualitative analysis. In French, he participated almost exclusively to answer the teacher's questions. Participating in English and by using translingual utterances, apart from asking questions in order to clarify assignment requirements or the meaning of some word or expression, he was often showing his disinterest in the French lessons. Once, he took a plush toy from the teacher's table, hid it under his table and then asked the teacher:

*P: Teacher, where is the Schtroumpf?*

He participated in English also to resist some imposed positions, which is illustrated by the following example:

*T: Peter, calme-toi! / Peter, calm down!*

*P: But teacher, I am just handing over a paper...*

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the LL's identity is not something one is, rather something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts. Learners' participation has been chosen as the unit of act and the unit of analysis because we have conceptualized language learning as learners' participation. Our study has shown that performing as a good language learner refers to a learner's frequent and repetitive participation in utterances whose content is related to the language classroom, regardless of the chosen communicative resources (i.e. target language, non-target language). However, performing in the target language seemed to be a more important feature of the good language learner identity than performing in non-target languages. In other words, performing a good language learner identity means to behave according to certain rules that have been previously established through the language curriculum and policed by the teacher or student himself. It is important to note that these rules do not necessarily have to be explicit because they are embedded in culture, the general school curriculum and in the students' schooling experience. For instance, Sophie was repetitively participating on her own initiative, without being asked to participate. Obviously, in this cultural context, this repetitive behavior represents a positive one. Maybe, in some other culture, it would have been seen as negative behavior. As for performing a poor language learner identity, it appeared that it refers to the learner's repetitive and frequent behavior which goes against certain established rules, such as participation in utterances whose content is not related to the language classroom, regardless of the chosen communicative resources. Our participants' representation of a good or a poor language learner seems to be partially consistent with our stance. For the teacher, it refers to a certain combination of personal qualities, like kindness or respectfulness that is acted out through specific behavior – helping others and completing tasks within the deadline. For the students, it also refers to some behavioral indices, such as learning or respecting classroom rules, but also to the language learning results (i.e. a good grade). This view of the LL's identity does not pose a comprehensive theory about what the LL's identity is or about its construction and reproduction. Still, it offers an image, somehow deconstructed, of two well-known constructs and it gives insight into LLs' behaviors that are, in western society, related to those two constructs. We believe that these insights could be very valuable to both language learners and their teachers. They can reveal teachers' personal expectations of students' desired behavior and how their behavior is related to socially constructed

expectations and allow them to question these, and adjust them, if necessary. As for the students, these insights can reveal to them the teachers' expectations that can thus allow them to easier fit in desired identity, or resist it. In this study, we have chosen to analyze a good language learner's performativity and a poor language learner's performativity as they are the two most distant points on a language learner's performativity continuum. However, other LLs, as they represent the majority of the population, should not be left out of sight. In the future, it would be interesting to examine "how much" of a desired behavior is needed to be performed in order to be ascribed to a good LL or a poor LL and what do categories such as good or poor, being relative, mean in different language learning contexts.

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