Negotiating language use during residence abroad: relations between structure and agency

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Learner identity has recently attracted wide attention in SLA research (Benson et al., 2013; Mercer & Williams, 2014). This work favours a poststructuralist orientation and focuses on the fluidity of contemporary identity and learner agency in identity construction. Block (2013) however argues that the relation between social structure and individual agency requires further investigation if L2 identity is to be better understood.

This paper explores the relation between structure and agency, in the language practices of 57 Anglophone student learners of French and Spanish undertaking a one-year sojourn abroad. While the group was generally strongly motivated to acquire the L2, the widespread availability of English as a lingua franca, and the interest of locals in using/acquiring English, posed considerable challenges for their actual language practices. Evidence comes from a language use survey, plus an extensive corpus of interviews conducted in-sojourn, and an element of participant observation. We examine domestic settings (flats, residences, host families), daytime contexts for work and study, and leisure/travel settings, as well as the development of relationships with local and international peers, mentors and service personnel. Using a case study approach we show in detail how contemporary social structure promotes multilingual practices, and how some but not all sojourners maximised the use of the local language within those structures, through personal negotiation of activities and friendships. We draw conclusions concerning the scope of individual agency and thus contribute to the further theorisation of L2 identity.


Keywords: residence abroad, L2 use, L2 identity.