Gender, Identity and the Affinity Space: A Qualitative Analysis of Foreign Language Learning Attitudes within an Irish Secondary School

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In light of current language learning phenomena in Ireland showing that Irish people report the lowest level of knowledge of an L2 among EU member states (RIA 2011), and that boys are less likely to study a foreign language at school level where a choice is provided (Department of Education and Science 2007), this project aims to deconstruct the binary-gender understanding of the language learning experience at secondary school. It investigates the relationship between practice-based, performative conceptualisations of gender and identity (Ochs 1992; Gee 2005) and the expression of foreign language learning attitudes and ideologies through discourse and practice at secondary school in Ireland. It employs the concept of the ‘affinity space’, or a space where ‘people relate to each other in terms of common interests, endeavours, goals or practices’ (Gee 2005: 225) in the framing of identity practices among secondary school students. Eschewing the traditional group ‘membership’, the affinity space focuses on the ‘semiotic social space’, rather than the group, in which such practices exist (Gee 2005: 214).

Ethnographic field research was undertaken in a west of Ireland, L1 English coeducational secondary school, St. Murtagh’s, which is in proximity to a Gaeltacht, or L1 Irish speaking region. Ethnographic research was conducted over a period of six months, and data collected includes classroom observation and interviews with pupils and teachers.

This poster will demonstrate how the concept of the affinity space is applied to this research, and will detail some preliminary findings of school-based foreign language attitudes and ideologies.

Keywords: attitudes, language learning, gender.