

## **Chie Muramatsu: Portraits of Second Language Learners – An L2 Learner Agency Perspective**

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*Portraits of Second Language Learners – An L2 Learner Agency Perspective* is a volume of the SLA series published by Multilingual Matters. The author presents the second language (L2) socialization theory as a theoretical framework, in which she studies four advanced learners of Japanese in the USA, regarding their agency to pursue their language learning goals. The research itself deals with second language acquisition and foreign language education, and the three overarching themes of the book are L2 learners, L2 learning and the social community; and the main theoretical pillars of the study are second language socialization and L2 learner agency.

The writer of the book, being a language teacher of Japanese, turns to second language acquisition, and concentrates on the individual differences of learners. The author mentions the so-called ‘person-in-context relation view language motivation’ (Ushioda, 2009: 215), which gave her a theoretical testimony and a clear direction for her study. This view focuses on real people, rather than on learners as theoretical abstractions, and on the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling, human being, who has an identity, a personality, having their own goals, intentions and motivations. According to Pavlenko’s perspective of sociocultural theory (2000), each individual learner’s relationship to the social world is different. The author’s study is based on this theory, i.e. L2 learner agency is the force of L2 learners to navigate, control and take charge of their own learning processes in pursuit of their learning goals. Based on that, the study investigates L2 learners of the Japanese language who are situated in a social community of the Middlebury Language Schools in the United States, where L2 learners come to study their target languages by their own decisions. She presents a case study of four advanced L2 learners of Japanese. The goal of the study is to analyse the different ways in which L2 learners exercise their agency in pursuing the enterprise of learning an L2 by making deliberate choices, accepting or resisting, conforming or refusing. Another goal of the study is to contribute to a greater understanding of how individual differences of L2 learners engage in the community and how they overcome their obstacles.

When it comes to former literature on language socialization, we have to mention Chomsky (1965), who viewed language as a linguistic competence with which children are innately endowed while Hymes (1972) stated that language is a linguistic competence acquired through culture and in the society. Second Language Socialization is a dynamic process shaped by the L2 learner agency and the social communities. In L2 socialization, the social community (local communities, but also schools and L2 classrooms) plays a significant role as well.

Language learning does not take place independently of its social context, but it is situated in the local community.

The main focus of the book is the community. In Chapter 3, the author presents a description of the research site to take the readers into the community of the Middlebury Language Schools. She provides her analysis of the community to present what her students' lives are like. In the following chapters, detailed case studies of the four students in focus are provided. The author's aim is to describe and analyse the students' socialization processes.

The first subject of the study is Parker. He says that his studying a language in a group is important. If he has a question, he can ask other students, and other students can ask him if they have a question. He explains that one of the best aspects of the program is the other students. His language goal is to learn to speak in the same way as Japanese people do. He mentions a proverb 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do'. Parker's L2 socialization process can be viewed as an unproblematic process of emulation of the target language and culture. However, this is his second chance. He regrets not working hard enough for the first time and his driving force, energy and enthusiasm have led him to his self-transformation. According to Norton (2000), L2 learners learn an L2 with the understanding that the increase in their cultural capital (such as language skills) will bring them a better return in the future, so social community has a facilitative role in learning L2.

L2 learners' resistance is not a new phenomenon in L2 socialization research. Alison's socialization process, especially for the first five weeks, is viewed as a process of struggle and resistance. Alison had frustration and embarrassment about the fact that she was not able to express herself in Japanese. Furthermore, the lack of self-confidence became a barrier, which limited her opportunities to speak Japanese. By reducing the obstacles (her realization that she can express herself and her listeners understand her, assurance that her language skills are improving) L2 learners can gain confidence. In the end, her academic background in Japanology, and her deep knowledge about the Japanese culture have helped her to improve.

In Naiya's observation, silence is a key phenomenon, which is a form of resistance to the dominant communities. When these learners face unwanted linguistic situations, instead of exercising their agency to act against it, many learners apply silence. In the case of Naiya, silence is a form of resistance. She uses silence to exercise her agency not to take part in what she considers to be undesirable. One of the most common aspects of her resistance is the teachers' correction of errors. She considers error correction embarrassing, which also creates for her an emotional barrier.

Identity has always been an important area of SLA research. Being the oldest student in the Japanese School, in the case of Danielle, the fourth learner, we can identify resistance. She accepts and rejects her new identity as a Japanese

language student by relating to other members of the community. Previous studies have found that the reconciliation of L2 learners' identities is a site of struggle. Her learning is not a seamless process, since she has to face several struggles because of her age (she was in her early 50s). However, she never stops trying to achieve her goals. Danielle's main goal of learning Japanese is her aspiration for personal change. Due to the fact that she likes talking, she creates a lot of opportunities to speak Japanese and exercises her agency to improve her language knowledge. At this point, along with the case studies of Parker, Alison and Naiya, the author argues that L2 learners' efforts to learn an L2 may not be explained by the notion of investment alone.

As we go into the details of the descriptions of the four L2 learners, we may identify that each learner is different. In case of the first subject, L2 socialization is an unproblematic process. For other learners, it is a failure. Learning an L2 requires an extended amount of time, effort and commitment. It is important to highlight the degree of individual differences in the process of L2 learning, since every person is different. When it comes to the implications of pedagogy, we soon face the term 'success'. It is an ambiguous relative term, yet in the context of L2 learning and teaching it is often associated with how well L2 learners are able to use the target language. But this is not that simple. Success should rather refer to the acquisition of higher language skills and L2 learners' ability to use them in interaction with other people.

In Chapter 8, the author reflects upon the findings of the study, she draws the conclusions, i.e. what the stories of the four L2 learners of Japanese can tell us about L2 learning, and what implications we can make from them. All in all, the book provides a deeper understanding of what it means to learn a second language, in the theoretical framework of L2 socialization.

## References

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