

English Language Teaching and National Identity: Suggestions for Future Research¹

Andrew Griffiths², Daejeon Education Training Institute, Daejeon, South Korea

Abstract

This article presents the argument that the intersection between a learner's sense of their national identity and their language learning experiences deserves more focus in English language teaching research. Drawing upon insights from different disciplines such as political science and international relations, this theoretical article first contrasts the differing emphases that these disciplines have given to national identity in contrast with English language teaching. This article presents a justification for suggesting deeper research in the intersection of learner national identity and English language teaching based on the need for worthwhile research that can bridge the gap between the differing views presented by these disciplines. It suggests what further studies could be carried out specifically in the field of English language teaching research to expand our own understanding of the issue. This paper suggests that a learner's perception of their national identity might have an impact on their learning. As such, further research into the topic is needed. Given the current high visibility of questions of national identity and nationhood in contemporary political discourse, this article argues that such research is pressing and necessary.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta el argumento de que la intersección entre el sentido de identidad nacional del alumno y sus experiencias de aprendizaje de idiomas merece una mayor atención en la investigación sobre la enseñanza del idioma inglés. Basándose en ideas de diferentes disciplinas como las ciencias políticas y las relaciones internacionales, este artículo teórico contrasta primero los diferentes énfasis que estas disciplinas han dado a la identidad nacional en contraste con la enseñanza del idioma inglés. Este artículo presenta una justificación para sugerir una investigación más profunda sobre la intersección de la identidad nacional del estudiante y la enseñanza del idioma inglés basándose en la necesidad de investigaciones valiosas que puedan cerrar la brecha entre los diferentes puntos de vista presentados por estas disciplinas. Sugiere qué estudios adicionales podrían llevarse a cabo específicamente en el campo de la investigación sobre la enseñanza del idioma inglés para ampliar nuestra propia comprensión del tema. Este artículo sugiere que la percepción que tiene un alumno de su identidad nacional podría tener un impacto en su aprendizaje. Como tal, se necesita más investigación sobre el tema. Dada la alta visibilidad actual de las cuestiones de identidad nacional y nacionalidad en el discurso político contemporáneo, este artículo sostiene que dicha investigación es apremiante y necesaria.

The Aims and Rationale of this Article

This article suggests future research that might be carried out in the area of the intersection between English Language Teaching (ELT) and national identity as an element of learner identity. It is a theoretical paper which will combine various insights from disciplines including political science and international relations following the guidelines for creating conceptual papers set out by Jaakkola (2020), particularly that of the need to give coherence to fragmented, incomplete bodies of knowledge across multiple academic streams. This has been done because there is a large body of research into national identity in those disciplines which may help identify where our own understanding in ELT might be broadened.

There were two reasons for writing this article. First, discussions of national identity, remain greatly relevant in current affairs and remain equally relevant to students, teachers and other stakeholders. Second, while there has been some research on the intersection between ELT and national identity as an aspect of learner identity, there is much that remains unexplored. This paper suggests why these areas are relevant to us as educators and how they might be researched.

National Identity—A Brief Overview

Defining what constitutes a nation and national identity is notoriously difficult (Anderson, 1983, Miscevic, 2020), for example drawing distinctions between nations and states (Lawson, 2017), or between patriotism and nationalism (Miscevic, 2020). Within the field of political science there are also competing theories to explain how nations and national identity came to exist (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021; Smith & Smith, 2013). It was suggested by Ernest Gellner that the concept of 'the nation' first emerged in 18th century France and America (Gellner, 1983; Smith & Smith, 2013). Gellner argued that nationhood and national identity were a consequence of modernity (Conversi, 2001; Gellner, 1983) and not an intrinsic fact of human life (Gellner, 1983; Lawson, 2017; Minogue, 2001). This was an argument echoed by the

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² andrewteacher@protonmail.com

noted historian Eric Hobsbawm (1996). However, Anthony Smith, another influential thinker in political science, argued that modern nationhood was built over pre-existing ethnic groups and identities, for example nations such as Korea, Japan, and China (Smith & Smith, 2013).

Although modern scholarship tends to favor the modernist thesis, a common criticism of these discussions is that they are overly Eurocentric and fail to account for wider descriptions of what nationhood might consist of, for example other aspects of identity such as racial characteristics, or religious or tribal affiliations (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021). Recent scholarship has also focused on the importance of whether civic or ethnic forms of national identity matter more. For example, whether being a 'British citizen' is defined more by a person being ethnically British or by embracing the civic values espoused by British society (Kiss & Park, 2014).

For the purposes of this paper, we shall define a nation as 'a territorially-bounded sovereign polity' and national identity as the sense of national belonging in 'citizens who identify themselves as part of a nation' (Feinstein, 2020, para. 1). For example, we shall take national identity to encompass anything from an acquiescent identification of oneself as 'a citizen of this nation' to a vociferous propensity for patriotism or even nationalism.

One of the most influential figures in the discussions of nations and national identity is Benedict Anderson, who posited nations as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). 'Imagined' means that the members of a nation can never know each other in their entirety, but experience life as perceived members of that national community. These imagined communities are both limited, meaning that members experience a sense of what is part of their community is as well as what it isn't, and sovereign, meaning these communities are self-governing and self-determining. Anderson argued that print capitalism—with its ability to facilitate mass communication—was critical to the creation of a national identity and that history was often re-written to be compatible with the characteristics of that identity.

Anderson also commented that in contemporary society national identity was taken as a given and that it maintained a central part in social and emotional life—drily mentioning that while dying for one's country was imaginable, dying for the Labour party wasn't. He also critiqued Gellner's (1983) argument that because nations were created in the modern era, this entailed that they were essentially illusory. In fact, the very real political and social effects of national identity were evident to see in everyday life; regardless of a nation's origins, participation in an imagined community of a nation was in fact a lived experience that citizens of a nation perceive as being real and authentic. Indeed, in contemporary discussions it is commonly argued that national identity is one of the central pillars around which personal identity is shaped (Edensor, 2020; Kiss & Park, 2014; Mylonas & Tudor, 2021).

Anderson's ideas remain enormously influential (Chandler & Munday, 2011), and the experiences of national identity that he described as both real and authentic can be seen in contemporary life. It has been noted that the Covid-19 pandemic led to the closing of national borders and numerous images of national leaders making speeches in front of their national flags, which remind us that the nation state is still the most influential force in global politics (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021). National identity is also often mentioned in present-day political discussions, for example with regards to Brexit in the UK and 'America First' in American politics (Holtug & Uslaner, 2021). In the field of international relations, it has been argued that the questions of national interests versus international interests have replaced left-right wing dichotomies to become the key pillar around which political debate is framed in contemporary times (Fukuyama, 2018), particularly with the needs of the nation being posited as in opposition to the ideals of globalization (Feinstein, 2020).

We can thus see the relevance and importance attached to nations and national identity by those working in political science and international relations. In order to understand how national identity as an aspect of learner identity has been explored by those working in ELT, it is important to first understand the importance of identity generally within that discipline.

Identity in ELT

There is a considerable body of research into the role of identity in second language learning (Block, 2007; De Costa & Norton, 2016; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Discussions of learner identity are often conducted using post-structural frameworks similar to Anderson's (1983), who remains highly influential in discussions of learner identity (Pavlenko, 2003, Pavlenko & Norton, 2007), which argue that language has no inherent meaning except during acts of communication (Norton, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011). During communicative acts, power is rarely shared equally, with some speakers deemed as 'illegitimate' users of

the language and as such finding difficulty in assuming the position of 'a second language speaker'. For example, a budding Spanish learner of English might find themselves questioning their identity as 'a second language speaker' if they are laughed at or criticized by those with greater language proficiency (and thus 'legitimacy') during their attempts at communication. Identity, then, is not perceived of as an essence but as a positioning (Weedon, as cited in Norton & Toohey, 2011) which is created by acts of communication which involve a learner being both subject to and of relations with other actors. This positioning affects our ability to gain access to these 'imagined communities' of language users; while we have some power to define the social world around us (and thus our identities within those worlds), we are also subjected to power from other sources (Norton & Toohey, 2011) which can adversely affect our perceived identities.

Learner identity, then, is not to be perceived as monolithic (Norton & Toohey, 2011), and can be seen as changing across spaces and time (De Costa & Norton, 2016). The plasticity of identity is a critical element for both teachers and learners, as it has been argued that a second language can be a powerful tool with which to create a new identity, for example for women who can experience liberation through language learning (Higgins, 2010). Indeed, it is strongly suggested that teacher appreciation of learner identity is a key to success in language learning (Taylor et al., 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Identity is thus a critical aspect of success in language learning, albeit with the act of identity formation itself fraught with struggle.

Various aspects of learner identity have been explored in more detail, for example ethnicity and language learning (Reyes, 2010) and gender and language learning (Higgins, 2010). There has also been research into sexual orientation (Norton 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011), but markedly less on aspects of identity such as intersectionality between aspects of identity (for example, between gender and ethnicity), social class, teacher identity, and elements of the learner experience such as study abroad experiences (Block, 2007; Norton & De Costa, 2018); each of these has been identified as a useful prospect for future researchers to investigate. It has also been recommended that future research be carried out using an expanded toolkit of research methods including longitudinal study, narrative inquiry, ethnography, and conversation analysis (Norton & De Costa, 2018), as well as an acceptance that data regarding identity will often be 'messy' and defy easy definition into a single type (Norton, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Interdisciplinary study has been also suggested as a fruitful avenue for further research (De Costa & Norton, 2016; Norton & Toohey, 2011), along with the recommendation to explore how identity works in the face of globalization, for example in the movements of people across national borders (De Costa & Norton, 2016).

National Identity in ELT--And Other Curricula

How then has national identity as an aspect of learner identity been addressed in ELT research? It appears that there is less discussion of the topic in comparison to other aspects of learner identity, either in extant research (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Preece, 2016) or in recommendations for future research (De Costa & Norton, 2016; Norton & De Costa, 2018). Most of these summaries of research highlight the burgeoning—and of course highly valuable—levels of research in other areas, for example in gender and ethnicity, or highlight the pressing need for further research in other areas, such as social class or the intersections of these various aspects of identity; and indeed, there are compelling and decisive arguments to be made for further research in each of those areas as well. There is also extensive work on how transnational identities (identities where learners experience more than one sense of national identity, such as second-generation migrant families) affect learners (De Fina, 2016; Song, 2012). However, simple national identity—in its most basic form, which is experienced by so many citizens of so many nations globally—as an aspect of learner identity is mentioned considerably less.

Of the research that does exist on the interaction between learner national identity and ELT, much of it is useful, and utilizes the post-structural models seen in research of other aspects of learner identity (Clark, 2013), stressing that national identity is not an innate part of an individual, but rather an 'ongoing project, re-created daily through actions such as flag waving' (Block, 2007). Most empirical research has occurred at the level of single countries, such as Japan (Rivers, 2021; Turnbull, 2004), China (Liu & Turner, 2018), South Korea (Chang, 2018; S. H. Kim & Lee, 2021), and Malaysia (Mohd-Asraf, 2005). This is in line with recommendations by Fishman (as cited in Tsui & Tollefson, 2007) and other theorists (Taylor et al., 2013) that single-nation studies of the intersection between national identity and language learning were preferable to the temptation of employing overarching theories at the global level.

However, while some valuable works have been completed at a single-nation level, there has been scarce exploration of how these individual, basic experiences of national identity while learning English manifest

themselves when encountering language learners from other nations, who will in turn have had their own sense of national identity fostered by their own national curricula or other learning experiences. In short, there is research on how national identity is experienced by people within national boundaries, but little about how it is experienced outside those boundaries with people of other nations. More specifically, while there are useful studies on transnational identities which focus on related matters, such as diaspora studies or the experiences of immigrants, there is little account of what happens when people of different nations, with different national identities, learn English with one another.

Interestingly, there is more research concerning the relationship between history curricula and national identity. There are several studies that observe how history curricula are appropriated for the purposes of engendering a sense of national unity, for example in Durrani et al.'s (2020) studies of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, three nations whose often-tumultuous histories reflect in combative attitudes toward one another in their history curricula (Qazi & Shah, 2019). This can also be seen in the South Korean context, for example, when identity is positioned against North Korean national identity (H. Kim & S. K. Kim, 2019). The focus on history curricula and national identity is perhaps unsurprising, given Anderson's (1983) thesis that reinterpretations of history into a national narrative were key in fostering a sense of national identity (Anderson, 1983).

It is obviously difficult to interpret the reasons for ELT's relative lack of focus on national identity as a part of learner identity; is it a case of not valuing it and finding it irrelevant to the learning experience, or is it merely a simple oversight—something that we, as an academic discipline, just have not got round to talking about yet? It is also interesting to note how those working in the fields of political science and international relations have placed such priority on national identity in comparison. This should not be seen as a challenge to either side over which perspective is correct. Instead, this difference in emphasis can be seen as an opportunity for those working in ELT to understand this aspect of identity more deeply. Is ELT missing something that those in political science and international relations have already found?

Whatever the answer, it is essential that any conceptual paper such as this one provide a compelling reason for further study (Jaakkola, 2020). It is not enough to merely find a gap in current understanding; it is also essential that the bridging of that gap result in useful, relevant information for theorist and practitioner alike. Can such a case be made for the interaction of a learner's national identity and their English learning experience?

In order to explore this matter, it is first necessary that both disciplines work with compatible theoretical frameworks in order to create a concordance in understanding and a common analytical language by which to communicate. Such compatibility already exists with Anderson's (1983) post-modernist models being so influential on current models of identity in ELT as well as in studies of national identity in political science and international relations. However, this is still not enough to justify further study. What is required is an issue that both academic streams count as both relevant for academic study and that impacts on the learner in the classroom as much as it does a member of a nation.

Fortunately, one such issue exists: that of globalization.

Globalization, National Identity and ELT

We can suggest that ELT naturally has an international bent—ranging from immigrants learning English having moved to a country foreign to theirs, to students from all over the globe gathering in a single language classroom to better their knowledge of the language, to public school students learning about foreign cultures in their English textbooks. The very nature of learning a different language implies a reach beyond the familiar, and in many cases of learning English, that reach stretches to the international. Internationalism, however, is not the same as globalization. Indeed, globalization is a term that is difficult to define (Block, 2004). Most theorists agree that it is defined by "time-space compression, interconnectivity, and the intensity and spontaneity of information transfer and interaction" (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007, p.1) and is often viewed synonymously with the global expansion of free market neoliberal policies, the domination of western (particularly American) culture, and the proliferation of information technologies, particularly the internet (Scheuerman, 2018). Globalization is also seen as a force which leads to a global interconnectedness and a supposed widening of economic and social opportunities for all—described memorably as the rendering of the world as 'flat' (Friedman, 2006). It has also been suggested that globalization has a historically unprecedented influence across the world (Lawson, 2017).

Globalization has been a key topic of discussion in the fields of political science and international relations. In recent times globalization has often found itself at odds with popular discourse—for example the focus of national interests over international interests stressed by political figures such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, and Recep Erdogan (Scheuerman, 2018), and it has been argued that despite the suggestion that the primacy of the nation would eventually be eclipsed by the forces of globalization, the nation continues to be very far from exhausted in her power as a political force (Blommaert, 2006; Holtug & Uslaner, 2021). As mentioned before, it is even argued that the question of the needs of the nation versus the needs of the global is the key political debate of contemporary times (Fukuyama, 2018).

It is also suggested that English is a driving force of globalization (Bhatia (2009); Bottery, 2000; Van Horn, 2009), and that as such ELT can be seen as inextricably linked with globalization. This is not to say that all acts of teaching the English language are by necessity connected to globalization; we might in fact argue that while English is necessary for globalization, globalization is less necessary for ELT. Nonetheless, we can see that there are many instances where a nation's drive towards better English proficiency is spurred by a desire to compete in the arena of a globalized world. For example, the aforementioned example of South Korea's drive towards better English proficiency in the face of globalization was a pattern that repeated itself across much of East Asia during the mid-1990s (Nunan, 2003; Park & Lo, 2012), and the topic of globalization has become a subject for much study as a consequence (Chang, 2018; H. Kim, 2004). Indeed, the impact of globalization has been suggested as an avenue for further study in the arena of learner identity (De Costa & Norton, 2016). Globalization, in short, has a seat at the table in ELT.

It is theoretically possible, then, that language classrooms might become places where national interests might collide with the international or even globalized aspects of the ELT experience. However, this would depend on two factors: whether a) the learner encounters something in the classroom that runs in conflict to their national identity, and b) if their sense of national identity is of sufficient importance for them to decide to engage in that conflict when faced with it. Much is dependent, then, on the degree of importance our learners attach to their sense of national identity. Are the beliefs mentioned in political science and international relations correct—that national identity is at the very center of identity, and thus potentially combustible with the international aspects of ELT? Or are such worries needlessly excessive?

These questions have a relevance that goes beyond the mere theoretical. We can already see evidence of potential problems in one specific example. The South Korean English curriculum mentions items that are politically volatile, such as the unresolved territorial dispute with Japan over ownership of the Liancourt Rocks (Korean: Dokdo; Japanese: Takeshima) (S. H. Kim & Lee, 2021), itself the product of a long history of enmity between the two nations (Jeon, 2021; Kanaya, 2019; Tudor, 2012). While Japanese authorities in the area unequivocally claim ownership of the islands as theirs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014), the South Korean English curriculum conversely states the islands as indisputably belonging to South Korea (S. H. Kim & Lee, 2021). Focusing on the South Korean position, this is a clear example of the expression of national interest expressing itself through the national curriculum, as the ownership of the Liancourt Rocks is a key marker of modern Korean conceptions of their national identity (Choe, 2008; S. H. Kim & Lee, 2021). However, the South Korean English curriculum also espouses the ideals of globalization (Chang, 2018; H. Kim, 2004), and promotes the idea of English proficiency as a 'national mission' (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007) to bring South Korean culture to the rest of the world (Chang, 2018; Vinal & Shin, 2019)—bringing smooth internal cohesion to both national interests (e.g., The Liancourt Rocks' inherent 'Korean-ness') and Korea's place within a globalized world (Korea as a contributor to global cultural richness through exporting its culture, including the Korean-ness of the Liancourt Rocks). However, despite the internal consistency of these values, the potential for conflict if, say, a Korean English learner and a Japanese English learner were to have to jointly complete a map of their respective countries in a 'study abroad' classroom, is wholly evident. Given that we have already noted that appreciation of learner identity is an invaluable ingredient to learner success, it is easy to imagine that if such a conflict occurred it might have a significant impact on the motivation, investment, and success of both learners.

It is globalization, then, that is a catalyst for the need for deeper research into how ELT and national identity might interact with one another. Nonetheless, it would be inappropriate to place the blame upon globalization alone for creating these potential conflicts; one might argue that so long as national identity exists and is important to our learners, then the potential for conflict will never be far behind, as the international aspect of the English language will so often bring them into contact with other people from other nations. Globalization is perhaps responsible only for bringing the matter into the spotlight in the

present day. Of course, it would be excessive to claim that conflict is inevitable, as countless happy friendships forged in ELT classrooms might attest. However, it is defensible to state that so long as national identity matters, and nations come into conflict, then there will be potential for conflict between our learners; and sadly, in today's political climate, there is international conflict enough to create such problems.

We can thus suggest that further research into the importance of national identity to our learners is a pressing matter for research. It is now important to understand what elements of this topic should be prioritized for study.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the ideas presented in this paper, the following can be suggested as useful for further research:

Understanding the importance of national identity to our learners and to the learning experience

It is vital to initiate cross-disciplinary research with academics working in the fields of international relations and political science to understand precisely why ELT has focused less on the matter of national identity in comparison to those other disciplines, and whether the ELT perspective needs rebalancing. The need for cross-disciplinary study has already been suggested by academics working in ELT (De Costa & Norton, 2016; Norton & Toohey, 2011). The questions that need to be answered are simple: How important is a sense of national identity to English language learners, and does it impact their learning experience? Connected to this, we might also investigate whether learner senses of national identity change over time or according to different learning situations, remembering that identity is both fluid and situated. In short, we require a deeper exploration of if and how a learner's sense of their national identity impacts upon the learning process. Longitudinal research and ethnographic study might be a worthwhile method of research and has been mentioned as a useful avenue for research into identity generally (De Costa & Norton, 2018; Norton, 2013). It will also be important to remember that any research results might vary from nation to nation and indeed from learner to learner while possibly being resistant to any overarching narrative of understanding.

Understanding single-nation national curricula more fully and identifying aspects of those national identities that might cause conflict on an international level

It is vital to conduct research at a single-nation level into how ELT curricular ideals interact with other aspects of students' national curricula, for example with history curricula. It would be myopic to view the English curricula in these situations as being in a vacuum, as that is not how a student will experience their learning. In this instance, expansion of existing single-nation studies would be exceptionally useful, as would cross-disciplinary research. It is also vitally important that such research also identify any potentially explosive topics or subjects that might in the future create conflicts at a global level, for example a Chinese English textbook identifying Taiwan as being a part of China rather than its own republic, and vice versa. In short, we need to answer the following: Are single-nation national curricula laying the groundwork for conflict at international level, and if so, how?

Examining interactions (and possible conflicts) of national identity in classrooms in order to design improved instructional practices

It is vital to carry out close research as to how curricular ideas of national identity experienced at a national level actually manifest themselves in classrooms at an international level. For example, what happens when a Korean learner who has learned that 'Dokdo is Korean' learns with a Japanese learner who has learned that 'Takeshima is Japanese'? As previously mentioned, much current research focuses on single nations, but it is not the case that language learners stay within the borders of their nation. What happens when a learner's national identity that has been cultivated nationally comes into contact with other learner's national identities in an international environment? It would be compelling to observe students in study abroad environments, and indeed, this has already been identified as a locale for further research (De Costa & Norton, 2016; Norton & De Costa, 2018). However, such data might again inevitably be 'messy'. It will also be of paramount importance that such research be carried out ethically (that is, not placing undue stress or deliberately placing students in 'conflict' situations), and that such research be done with the explicit aim to design better instructional practices to help prevent or at least ameliorate future conflicts. Such improvements in practice—'conflict toolkit' of sorts—would be of especial importance

to teachers working with students in such situations. In short, we need to answer the following questions: What is actually happening in the classroom, and if conflict occurs, how can we change our educational practices to more successfully resolve future conflicts?

These suggestions for research follow advice by Jaakkola (2020) that conceptual articles are justified not only by identifying gaps in research but also by making relevant recommendations for future study. Given the rising relevance of nationalism in contemporary political life, priority has been given only to the aspects of research which might help address this. For example, while attention could be given to how learners from certain countries interact with learners from other countries with whom they enjoy relatively peaceable relations (for example, Belgium and The Netherlands) it is the argument of this paper that our attention should be given to more volatile arenas where the potential for conflict is greater such as those countries and situations mentioned throughout this article.

Caveats and Conclusion

This article has reviewed current research regarding national identity and has found that there are several avenues that could—and should—be explored further in research. Given the large number of journals and periodicals devoted to research in these disciplines, it has been impossible to exhaustively review all works related to the relationship between national identity as an aspect of learner identity and ELT; nonetheless, the brief snapshot glimpsed in this article indicates that there is much further research ready to be carried out.

Any glance at the news in modern life carries mention of cases where nations come into conflict with one another, and all too often the source of these conflicts relates in some way to nationhood—over borders, territory, sovereignty, or identity. National identity, then, appears to matter. The extent to which it matters to our learners and the extent to which it creates conflict in our classrooms remains an open question. As such, it is incumbent upon us, as teachers concerned for our students' wellbeing and success, to understand more fully what impact national identity has upon our learners and the classrooms in which they learn—and indeed, what impact it might have on the wider world in which we all must live.

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