
**Poststructuralist Perspectives on Language and Identity: Implications for English
Language Teaching Research in Pakistan**

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Abstract

Before the 1990s, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research conceptualized language as a system or structure that the language learner acquired and developed, mediated by the learner's motivation and his/her strategies learning a language. With "the social turn" in social sciences, the language came to be viewed from a social constructionist perspective as a socially situated practice influenced by various social, cultural, class, gender, and ethnic factors. This shift towards the social aspects of language learning marks the change from a psycholinguistic and structuralist theory of language to a poststructuralist one. This paper reviews the development of poststructuralist research foci in language and identity studies in applied linguistics. The paper argues that broadening SLA research purview is useful, for example, in illuminating how social class mediates access to learning powerful languages like English and how indigenous languages suffer shrinking of use domains due to the hegemony of powerful languages. The paper attempts to tease out the implication of this research body for English language learning research in Pakistan's multilingual context. It concludes with a few suggestions for more socially-oriented language learning research in Pakistan.

Keywords: Identity, Poststructuralism; Social Turn; Capital, Investment, Imagined Communities.

Introduction: Poststructuralist Turn in Language and Identity Research

Within the broad field of applied linguistics, the intersection between language and identity has been researched from different research perspectives (for example, Block, 2010; Blommaert, 2008; Darwin & Norton, 2015). The origins of this interest in the relationship between language and identity (and, by extension, between language and social structures) can be traced back to what David Block (2003) calls "the social turn" in applied linguistics and language and identity research. This interest in a more socially oriented SLA has its roots in the poststructuralist turn in social sciences in the 1970s. Before the social turn in SLA, the language was mostly viewed from a psycholinguistic perspective as a skill that the language learner acquired and developed under the influence of certain internal psychological factors and external environmental stimuli. The study of language remained the linguists' domain, whereas language teaching was considered to teach discrete linguistic items and structures (Kramsch, 2011). Therefore, a structuralist orientation towards language entailed a dichotomy between languages as a communication system on the one hand and the larger social and cultural factors under which language users interacted on the other.

Influenced by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), *structuralism* understands language as a system that provides a structure for the meaning of language signs. Meaning is considered rooted in the structure of a language and exchanged in a language community's practices. In this framework, language communities are distinct from one another, and each community assigns a particular value/meaning to linguistic signs through its "signifying practices" (Norton, 2011). Structuralism, therefore, entertains an essentialist and deterministic conceptualization of language communities and language users. It is essentialist because of treating every language community as internally homogeneous and externally distinct from other language communities; it is deterministic as the acquisition of language skills by the learner/user, or lack thereof, is understood concerning the acquisition of a pre-existing, innate language structure or system (Chomsky, 1972). However, a structuralist understanding of language cannot account for the diversity of social meanings assigned

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language signs within the same language community because structuralism treats language communities as homogeneous groups (Atkinson, 1999; Rassool, Heugh, & Mansoor, 2007; Ricento, 2005). Words such as /silence/, /courage/, and /feminine/ often have different meanings for speakers of the same language. Meaning is socially contested, and differentiated values are assigned to particular language items within a language community.

In the 1990s, Firth and Wagner (1997) published a highly influential article calling for a broadening of SLA research's perspective to accommodate social factors and challenge the unconditional acceptance of the Native Speaker/Non-Native Speaker (NS/NNS) dichotomy. Since then, SLA's field has taken a "social turn" (Block, 2003) based on a poststructuralist understanding of language and SLA. Poststructuralist perspectives in SLA have opened a range of research that examines language from various sociocultural perspectives (Norton, 2011). In social sciences, poststructuralist approaches signify a change in perspective that questions established "truths" and binaries. Duff (2012) thus understands *poststructuralism* as follows:

Poststructuralism is an approach to research that questions fixed categories or structures, oppositional binaries, closed systems, and stable truths and embraces seeming contradictions... Poststructural researchers examine how such categories are discursively and socially constructed, taken up, resisted (the site of struggle), and so on. (p. 412)

The above definition suggests that poststructuralism is a broad and flexible research perspective understood in various ways in different social sciences and by various social researchers. Concomitantly, the body of poststructuralist language research is highly diverse both in terms of its theoretical underpinnings and methodological approach. According to a poststructuralist view, signs of a language acquire meaning from signifying practices of a community, but these meanings are not fixed and shared across the community (Norton, 2013). Instead, language is a contested arena where claims of truth and power are challenged or negotiated. Language thus loses its innocence as just a benign medium of communication. Language is analyzed in terms of the different roles it plays in creating social meaning in an unequal world where the struggle over meaning and power intersect with social and cultural elements (Pennycook, 2000; 1994; Ricento, 2005; Tollefson, 2013). The following section reviews significant theorists in social sciences research that have been influential in the formation of a poststructuralist turn in language and identity research.

Literature review

Poststructuralist research on construction and negotiation of identity in language learning draws upon the works of Foucault (1980), Bourdieu (1992), Weedon (1987), Wenger (1998), and others to analyze power dynamics in contexts of language use and how these dynamics enable and constrain identity positions available to language users (Agha, 2007; Angel, Lin & Martin, 2005; Block, 2010). Foucault's (1980) work focuses explicitly on how *powerful discourses* normalize certain beliefs and practices to the extent that they seem "natural". Powerful discourses result in a transformation of *subjectivity* (the way we conceive ourselves) either by endorsing such discourses or resisting them. Thus our subjectivity is constructed continuously at the intersection of different socially available discourses that determine to some extent how we see ourselves as individuals and as members of a community. Instead of being governed directly, our daily conduct is regulated through our often willing participation in "governmentality" and "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1991). According to Foucault, this form of control and social cohesion is more powerful and pervasive than any direct coercive governance. This conceptualization of how people's identity is constructed through their often willing participation in dominant discourses has had widespread influence in language and identity studies over the last three decades.

Bourdieu (1992) theorizes about the *symbolic power* of language to conceptualize how identity is unequally invested in sociocultural contexts. Therefore, significance accorded to speech is related to the importance of the speaker's position in the broader social context. Our conception of identity is, therefore, constituted by, and negotiated within, social processes. Concepts such as social class, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and other social positions are implicated in negotiating power in the social structure. They play a constitutive role in identity construction and identity negotiation within a social group (Kramsch, 2011). For Bourdieu, *forms of capital* are unevenly distributed in a social context and play a significant role in social positioning. Forms of capital include economic capital (wealth, physical possessions); cultural capital (educational credentials, cultural artifacts); social capital (networks of social power); and symbolic capital (acknowledgment of the legitimacy of these

forms of capital). These capitals' value and distribution are ideologically structured and continuously negotiated in social sites of struggle (Darvin & Norton, 2017). Individuals are thus differently placed in social contexts in terms of possession of forms of capital and the social status that these capitals signify.

Weedon (1987) takes a complementary position on language, power, gender, and identity. Her work has been particularly influential in theorizing the concept of *subjectivity* from a feminist perspective. Norton (2011) identifies three aspects of subjectivity, derived from the ideas of Weedon, which hold importance for language education and issues of identity. These are: “multiple, non-unitary nature of the subject; subjectivity as a site of struggle; and subjectivity as changing over time” (Norton, 2011, p. 319). Weedon argues that individuals construct an idea of self through a range of language contexts at different points in time and space. Subject positions negotiated in various contexts through language give a person access or deny it to belong to powerful social networks. Therefore, the concept of subjectivity highlights the importance of identity research as learners may be differently placed in classroom discourses in terms of their *subject positions*. While some positions may be more restrictive in terms of the opportunities for learners to interact effectively in the class, others may be more conducive to provide possibilities for social interaction and human agency (Norton, 2011).

Wenger (1998) uses the term *engagement* to refer to the learner's actual contact with the community and how it is related to how they see themselves as members of that community. However, he believes that our idea of the self is not limited to actual engagement. *Imagination* enables us to reach out beyond the present reality into the current or future language communities with whom we might never have come into contact but whose presence we realize through imaginative engagement. For example, citizens of a nation-state may see themselves as part of a larger group of people (e.g., French, Pakistani, or Indian). However, the presence of these other members is realized only imaginatively. Norton (2000) terms these *imagined communities*. Like other community members, language learners are not only affected by the actual environment of the classroom and the learning processes taking place there but are also influenced by their imaginative participation in the present and future communities associated with the target language.

The above summary shows that a poststructuralist understanding of identity has broadened this construct's scope by encompassing socio-cultural aspects of identity and subjectivity and how power is implicated in identity negotiation over the last decades. Although based on structuralism to some extent, poststructuralist understanding of language is quite distinct. Significantly, poststructuralism conceives language as socioculturally contingent and a site of struggle in which speakers regularly negotiate identities. The following section provides a critical review of a few studies that operationalize this socially-oriented poststructuralist conception of language and identity in English language learning contexts (ELL).

Analysis

Global studies on language and identity

During the last two decades, language and identity have received considerable attention from significant researchers, who approach the subject from diverse perspectives (Clarke, 2008; Day, 2002; Kramsch, 2009; Potowski, 2007; Schmidt, 2004; Toohey, 2000). Language and identity research received significant attention with the publication of the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* in 2002, edited by Ricento and Wiley. The journal has published a wide range of research on the interface between language, identity, and education. Similarly, apart from a dedicated issue focusing on the role of “investment” in the *Journal of Asian Pacific Communities* (Arkoudis & Davison, 2008), a significant number of research studies have emerged in language education research focusing on language and identity. These studies are strongly influenced by Norton's ideas, especially in terms of the two key constructs of imagined communities and investment (for example, Dagenais, 2003; Kanno, 2003; Norton & Kamal, 2003).

Using Bourdieu's theory of *forms of capital* (1992), Norton expands her analysis of language and identity and introduces the construct of investment. She uses *investment* to signify “the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton, 2013, p. 50). She thus argues that if learners are better invested in the target language and the *imagined communities* associated with it, it enhances their ‘desire to increase their cultural capital through acquiring both symbolic and material resources

afforded through the target language (Norton, 2011, p. 40). Comparing the construct of investment with *motivation* as a psychological construct (Dörnyei, 2001), Norton argues that investment provides a better sociological framework to conceptualise “a meaningful connection between a learner’s desire and commitment to learning a language, and their changing identity” (Norton, 2011, p. 322). She advocates for broadening the construct of motivation through the construct of investment. Norton’s conception is conducive for focusing research on second/foreign language acquisition in a broader sociocultural framework. Instead of asking how much the learner is motivated to learn the language, the researcher, working from an investment perspective, focuses on the learner’s investment in a particular classroom or community’s target language practices.

Kanno (2003) studied four schools to look into the effect of school policies on the identity formation of bilingual learners of English. She concludes that the schools provide the basis for unequal opportunities to access quality education. According to Kanno, educational inequity leads to the least privileged bilingual learners being socialized into the most impoverished imagined communities. Norton and Kamal (2003) studied Afghan refugee children in Pakistan in the wake of the “War on Terror” to see the effect of an English language development program on students’ present and future identity formation. For this investigation, they used the constructs of imagined communities and “politics of location” (Canagarajah, 1999). The students were asked to consider their literacy and English language skills to see themselves in the future. In conjunction with English language proficiency, the students saw their acquiring literacy skills as linked with technological advancement in their imaginary future world. The learners imagined a peaceful, Islamic, and technologically advanced Pakistan in the future and saw themselves as a part of it. Both these studies illustrate that learners’ present and future identity perceptions are constructed and negotiated within a contingent upon social aspects like religious, ethnic, economic background, social class, etc.

Language and identity research related to developing countries and postcolonial contexts has been very productive during the last two decades (for example, Ajmal, 2013; Canagarajah, 1999; 2004; Mahboob, 2015; Rahman, 2004; Ramanathan, 2005). In postcolonial contexts, researchers have adopted various theoretical perspectives within a poststructuralist paradigm to research English as a dominant language and class dialect contingent upon the colonial past on the one hand and the socio-economic processes of contemporary globalization. The studies often link these aspects to issues of social disparities and marginalization of smaller regional languages. This research body looks at language communities from a poststructuralist perspective as not homogeneous and consensual but as a heterogeneous arena of power relationships where identities are contested at the micro-level under the influence of broader historical, social, and political factors.

For example, Pennycook (1994) takes a broad view of the English language’s politics in the colonial world by placing it under the discourses of *Orientalism* and *Anglicism*. Drawing on Edward Said’s (1979) ideas, Pennycook attempts to uncover paradoxes and ironies in the English language’s roles in the “periphery”. For example, in the context of Singapore and Malaysia, he points out how English is met with ambivalence as the first language (the medium of instruction) but not as a mother tongue’ (the racially assigned language), a neutral medium of communication yet the bearer of Western values” (p. 255). Phillipson (1992) broadens this discussion by theorizing about “English as an international language” and traces its origin to the colonial expansion of the English language in the past and modern-day Anglo-American imperialism. Both works provide significant theoretical insights, a broad overview, and practical instances of how the English language dominance was historically established and subsequently maintained through discourses of progress, utility, globalization, and so on. Suresh Canagarajah (1999) brings this discussion down to the classroom level by studying how learners and teachers in the “periphery” (in this case, Sri Lanka) adopt subtle strategies to appropriate the English language in a manner that suits their needs while asserting their socio-cultural identity positions to resist linguistic imperialism. According to Canagarajah, “we must not fail to realize that English is getting pluralized in these students’ hands” (p.175). According to him, this pluralization of English at the micro-level needs to be given more attention by the researchers than it has received so far in discourses of postcolonial resistance to the English language’s dominance.

The above research studies show that research interest in intersections between language and identity has grown considerably over the last two decades. These studies associate English language and ELT with social, cultural, political, and economic aspects in different contexts. The following

section focuses specifically on Pakistan and reviews some research studies in terms of their theoretical approach and sociolinguistic implications.

Language and Identity Research in Pakistan

It is important to note that Pakistan has complex language ecology within the broader context of postcolonial developing countries. As Ayres (2003) argues, since its establishment in 1947 after the British colonists left the Indian sub-continent, “the state of Pakistan has been unable to formulate and implement policies to address the unabated tensions between the idealized, imagined Pakistan envisaged by the nation’s rulers and the reality of its diverse citizenry” (p. 51). According to Gordon (2005), there are 72 languages spoken in Pakistan. Ethnic groups in Pakistan speaking these languages identify their heritage language as a significant aspect of their identity. However, Gordon argues that the state frames Pakistan's national identity in terms of Urdu's monolingual policy as a marker of Muslim identity for the state. At the same time, English has designated the official language of the country. According to Rahman (2009), despite the great diversity of languages and ethnicities in the country, the state neglects local languages' development and revitalization. This reductionist ideological orientation towards linguistic diversity should be seen against the backdrop of the initial speeches of the founder of Pakistan, who declared:

...the State Language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead you is the enemy of Pakistan. Without one state language, no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function. (Jinnah, 2000, p. 150)

Other researchers have expressed similar concerns about the present state of neglect for the local languages in the country and worry about its effect upon the identities of the speakers of those languages (for example, Ajmal, 2013; Atta, 2015; Coleman & Capstick, 2012; Khan, 2016; Mansoor, 2004; Rassool et al., 2007; Shamim, 2011; Siddiqui, 2011). Rahman (2009) argues that education in Pakistan can be classified in terms of the medium of instruction, which corresponds to a socioeconomic class. English is the medium of instruction in privately owned schools, military schools and colleges, and universities. The government schools and religious institutions (madrassas) teach in Urdu and Arabic, respectively. Thus, Pakistan's education system provides a seeding ground for social disparity and class stratification, creating a national context that Mahboob (2002) refers to as one of no English, no future.

Putting language-in-education in the broader socio-political context of Pakistan, Durrani (2012) makes a strong case for advocating that the colonial legacy lingers on in postcolonial Pakistan in the form of marginalization of vernacular languages. She argues that by according prestige status to the English language at the expense of regional and ethnic languages, the state perpetuates top-down language policies in Pakistan that are reminiscent of colonial rulers' policies. Such policies contribute to socioeconomic inequality and issues of identity among ethnic groups in the country. Mahboob (2002) argues that if the student's cultural and linguistic background is different from that supported in the school, children face a situation of conflict that leads to developing negative attitudes towards their language and associated cultural concepts. In more recent work, Mahboob (2015) draws attention to the way identity is managed in the language contents taught in government schools in Pakistan. Through textual analysis of course contents for English teaching as a foreign language to students of Grade 10 (aged 16 years or above), he examines how identity management is motivated by ideological projects of the state. He also draws attention to how ideology is manifested in the teaching contents and how presentation and selection of contents in the textbooks.

Some recent research works are essential in highlighting issues related to English teaching in Pakistan and its relationship with students' and teachers' ethnic, linguistic, and national identities. For example, Ajmal (2013) focuses on the relationship between top-down language policies in Pakistan and bottom-up responses from students, teachers, and parents. Conducted in two English medium schools in the north-western region of Pakistan, the study found that due to the high prestige value accorded to the English language in the schools, attitudes of students, teachers, and parents are very positive towards English as a necessary tool for getting quality education as well as for high-paying jobs in the country and abroad. However, the mother tongue was seen as having no practical value in the speakers' schooling and imagined futures. His study found that while students accorded little value to their mother tongue in the formal domains, their attitude towards the mother tongue was more ambivalent and sometimes contradictory in the informal domains. They loved their mother tongue as a marker of their Pashtun identity and felt ashamed of it in specific social contexts.

Ullah's (2020) ethnographic study of two private schools in northern Pakistan argues that a focus on learners' subjective experiences and their multilingual identities is an essential missing aspect of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning research in Pakistan. The study investigated the language perceptions of six students (age 16 to 18 years) from two private schools belonging to high-fee (Global School) and low-fee (Ummah School) categories in the northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. Although both private schools claim English medium instruction (EMI), this study found that learning EFL is influenced by complex sociocultural factors related to how languages are perceived in the learners' multilingual context. Despite significant differences in terms of students' social class, school infrastructure, and quality of English instruction, both groups of learners struggled with a hierarchical perception of their linguistic repertoire (i.e., Pashto—mother tongue, Urdu, and English) inside and outside the school. Negative attitudes towards English in social domains restricted their functional use of the target language. Learners avoided practicing speaking English in social and domestic environments to maintain a positive face and avoid being viewed as westernized. However, school language teaching policy and practice solely focused on developing their communicative skills within the classroom. Social aspects of the students' lives thus had no penetration to the formal domain of the school.

Khan (2016) conducted a narrative, ethnographic study of primary school teachers' language perceptions and practices in government primary schools in northern Pakistan. He reports that teachers' perceptions and practices are influenced by their perception of the English language's instrumental and symbolic value. He argues that their preference for the language was emphatic about the future communities which they imagined their students might meet sometime in the future. Khan also focuses on how teachers try to gain agency in classroom activities by going against the official policy of using English as a medium of instruction. They switch to mother tongue in classroom instruction, which, according to the teachers, facilitates learning if used with discretion.

These studies illustrate that Language-in-Education Policy (LEP) in Pakistan has significant implications for the vitality of indigenous languages and speakers' self-perception. Due to exclusivist policies in favor of English and Urdu, local and indigenous languages suffer the loss of application domains, especially in literate domains like education institutions, offices, and law (Shamim, 2011). The shrinking of literate domains for indigenous languages in Pakistan results in an "ethnolinguistic dilemma" (Manan et al., 2017). Despite around 72 languages spoken in the country, LEP in Pakistan is exclusive in favor of Urdu and English. The speakers of indigenous languages in Pakistan see their languages as significant markers of their ethnic identity. However, except for Sindhi and Pashto, indigenous languages have no penetration into literate and institutional settings. This discussion shows that language teaching, linguistic identity, and social domains are mutually constitutive. Therefore, any meaningful ELT research in Pakistan needs to consider the country's multilingual ecology and its intersection with issues of learners' identity and protection of indigenous languages. The following section considers possible future directions for ELT and learners' identity research in Pakistan.

Discussion: Future Directions in Language and Identity Research in Pakistan

As the above studies show, following a global trend in SLA research over the last two decades, Pakistan's research landscape has broadened from experimental and correlational study designs towards a more socially oriented field of inquiry. The area of ELT research is getting pluralized as its focus shifts from investigations of acquisition of language as a structured system of signs towards a view of language as socially situated practice contingent upon diverse socio-cultural, economic, political, and historical factors. Studies have emerged that take a broad perspective of the relationship between dominant languages like English and Urdu and marginalized indigenous languages to advocate indigenous languages' protection at the policy level (Ajmal, 2013; Shamim, 2011; Ullah, 2020). Concomitantly, studies of language learning at the micro-level have appeared that help in a better-nuanced understanding of acceptance, resistance, and negotiation of macro-level policies. However, much needs to be done in terms of research focusing on what role learners' identity plays in the success or failure of pedagogic practice, how learners' subjectivity as speaker of English is constituted inside and outside the classroom, the role of learners' investment in ELT classroom, and significance of their imagined communities vis-à-vis English learning.

Range of identities in ELT classroom

Despite English teachers' best intentions and educational beliefs, actual classroom practices may encourage subordinate language learner identities among students. As Ramanathan's (2005) study suggests, if teaching practices in English classrooms fail to engage students as creative individuals participating in a meaningful learning experience, it instills subordinate identities. Instead of assimilating students into dominant and well-established western learning methodologies, students can be encouraged to see themselves as critical learners adapting teaching materials to their real-life needs and individual learning styles. Micro-level research focusing on the range of identities available in ELT classrooms and how students appropriate, resist or negotiate these identities inside and outside the classroom can be a fruitful future direction for ELT research in Pakistan (Canagarajah, 1999; 2004). Research along these lines can produce a nuanced understanding of learners' identities in actual classroom practices.

On the other hand, it may help teachers conceptualize transformative pedagogic practices that validate local ways of language learning and pluralize established learning/teaching methodologies. This form of pedagogy can turn classrooms into transformative spaces of cultural heterogeneity and linguistic plurality. Research along these lines of inquiry can contribute to highlighting the role of ELT policy and practice as not just oriented towards acquisition of a specific system of signs called English but as socially situated practice that is implicated in issues of social class, language shift of minor languages, and broader social justice and equity of opportunities for students from different strata of the society (Pennycook, 2001).

Beyond motivation: learners' investment in ELL

Since Norton's initial calls (Norton 2000; Norton Peirce 1995) for broadening of SLA research focus on individual motivation (Dornyei 2001) towards a broader sociocultural construct of investment, there has been a global explosion of research interest in this area, as shown in the current article. Studies from learners' investment perspective tend to look beyond individual interest in acquiring L2 and pay attention to dynamics of power relationships within and outside the classroom that mediate learners' trajectories and their sense of self/identity. Learners' investment in learning L2 is situated at the intersection of linguistic ideologies in the social context and forms of capital they possess or acquire over time. However, despite its relevance in Pakistan's linguistic ecology and colonial history, the construct of investment has not been operationalized in empirical and theoretical English language teaching and learning studies. Studies of investment can contribute to our understanding of ELLs' day-to-day struggles in Pakistan who bring differentiated capitals to the classroom, often mediated by their socioeconomic backgrounds.

Further, such focus in empirically-oriented studies in ELT can provide evidence that learners' motivation towards target language is not solely dependent on individual motivation but is negotiated in often conflictual social and classroom environments. Language learners' complex identity is spread across domains of learning and is often ambivalent and non-unitary. Studies oriented towards learners' situated investment in the target language would focus on different questions compared to studies focused on motivation. Instead of asking to what extent learners are motivated to learn the target language, investment-oriented studies would focus on the extent to which learners are invested in the teaching-learning processes of an ELT classroom and how their investment can be understood about social, cultural, economic, and historical factors.

Imagined communities in ELL

An expanding conception of language and identity entails that the desired communities associated with the target language lie beyond the classroom's immediate environment (Pavlenko and Norton, 2007). Learners associate learning their target language with historically situated or future imagined communities. Their desire to gain membership in imagined communities mediates their motivation and orientation towards the target language. However, language teachers and classroom practices may not align with learners' orientation toward imagined communities. Further, a disjuncture between teachers' and learners' imagined communities can alienate students from the target language and classroom practices. Learners' investment in the target language is thus mediated through imagined communities. This line of ELT inquiry in Pakistan can be explored to understand what imagined communities learners associate with learning English as a foreign language. Their investment in these communities mediates their identity. Learners' conceptual engagement with imagined communities can be researched according to their alignment with teachers' imagined communities and classroom practices. Further, studies of imagined communities in EFL classes in Pakistan can also provide

evidence about intersections between their imagined community and the learners' broader sociocultural context. Such studies bear upon educational possibilities in social contexts, inequality of access to languages, and access to material and non-material resources in L2 learning.

Conclusion

Studies reviewed in this article point to an increasing focus on identity research in language situations worldwide. Poststructuralist perspectives on language and identity research have opened up a flexible epistemological framework adapted to study cultural, political, ethnic, gender, or racial contexts within which languages are situated. Similarly, dominant discourses that link up upward social mobility and economic prosperity with particular dominant languages—such as the English language in Pakistan—can significantly affect the identity formation of language learners. From a research perspective, every language situation can be viewed as a unique context that is culturally and historically situated. If every language context is unique and complex, it is more fruitful to adopt poststructuralist perspectives in language and identity research, which can accommodate a diversity of research approaches as a sociocultural phenomenon.

For Pakistan, a social turn in language research is needed. Language can no longer be taught as an innocent and innocuous exercise in teaching verbal communication. It is a form of social practice that is historically situated, ideologically charged, and constitutive of the very social reality which produces it. Such a poststructuralist understanding of language is conducive to place language teaching in the broader social context. As language researchers, we should not rely solely on experimental, quasi-experimental, and correlational studies that provide objective results. Instead, it is more productive to conceptualize research in the broader social context. A qualitative understanding of language, underpinned by a poststructuralist worldview, can provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between language and social issues in Pakistan. This research line is more likely to bring language research out of the limitations of experimental, scientific language notions. It may help us bridge language research in a more meaningful way with the lived contextual realities of language learners as users of a symbolic and semiotic resource with far-reaching repercussions for their personal and social identities.

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