CHAPTER 37

THE ADOLESCENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER:

Identities Lost and Found

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ABSTRACT
Theory and research on second language acquisition have long acknowledged the significant influence of learner identities—that is, how learners see themselves and are seen by others in relation to the target language and culture. Learner age has likewise been a central theme in second language acquisition research. These two important factors intersect in the case of adolescent language learners. Adolescence is regarded as a particularly malleable and difficult age in the development of social identity and conception of self, and even more potentially problematic for multilingual and multiethnic English learners. In this chapter, I first briefly outline current debates and cross-cultural research about adolescence as a unique developmental stage in identity development and suggest potential implications for English language learning. I then outline major strands of investigation on the role of social context and social identity in adolescent English language learning, including research in social psychology and intercultural communication; research in social psychology, clinical psychology, and clinical health; research in educational anthropology and sociology; and research on critical theory, cultural studies, and poststructuralism. The chapter concludes with a summary of current debates and directions for further research.

INTRODUCTION
Theory and research on second language acquisition (SLA) have long acknowledged the significant influence of learner identities—that is, how learners see themselves and are seen by others in relation to the target language and culture. Learner age has likewise been a central theme in second language acquisition research. These two important factors intersect in the case of adolescent English language learners (ELLs).

In SLA research, adolescence has been seen primarily as a developmental watershed in which the child’s neurological facility for learning languages is lost or altered (e.g., Scovel, 2000). At the same time, theorists have often portrayed maturing learners’ changing views of self and social context as an important factor in age differences in second language (L2) attainment (e.g., Krashen, 1981). Accordingly, this chapter reviews research and theory on societal images and self-perceptions of adolescent ELLs and their interrelationships with language and academic learning.
The modern notion of adolescence can be traced to G. Stanley Hall, whose expansive 1904 opus on the subject launched a century of research on adolescence as a unique phase of human development. Scholarship on the nature of adolescence has focused primarily on youth in the dominant, American middle class, white culture. The experiences of adolescents outside of this group are considerably less understood and researched (Arnett, 1999). This review addresses identity development in first-generation, adolescent migrants to majority-English speaking societies. However, because the literature frequently aggregates this population with second-generation and indigenous minorities under pan-ethnic labels such as Hispanic (e.g., Niemann, Romero, Arredondo, & Rodriguez, 1999), this review will necessarily include some of that work. Since there is no universally understood period of adolescence, I define it somewhat arbitrarily here as ages 12-18. Finally, this review focuses on scholarship over the past 15 years (See Giles & Johnson, 1987; Gudykunst & Schmidt, 1987; Gumperz, 1982; Phinney, 1990; and Tajfel, 1981 for earlier work.)

While widely varying in perspective and emphasis, theory and research on adolescent ELL identity address at least one of three interrelated foci: (a) individual psychosocial processes that serve to recursively organize and construct the self; (b) sociocultural, political, economic, institutional, and historical structures or discourses that convey group values and beliefs to the individual about identity and are in turn affected by individual actions and beliefs; and (c) interaction and day-to-day contact among individuals through which constructions of identity are constantly asserted, monitored, and altered. In practice, there is overlap among these foci as well as work in which a theoretical framework is underspecified or missing entirely (Phinney, 1990). Nevertheless, these foci can serve as useful ways to organize a discussion of English language learning adolescents’ experience of identity.

**INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOSOCIAL PROCESSES OF IDENTITY FORMATION**

Scholarship in this area spans several disciplines including social psychology, intercultural communication, counseling, and clinical psychology. Work in this area is typically characterized by the administration of Likert-scale-based multi-item inventories soliciting adolescent feelings, values, and self-reported behaviors relating to ethnolinguistic identity (see, e.g., Niemann et al., 1999; Phinney, 1992; Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001) and multivariate predictive models (e.g., Swanson, Spencer, & Petersen, 1998). Less common are in-depth case studies (e.g., Shih, 1998), focus groups (Niemann et al., 1999), and other psychometric measures (e.g., Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995).

In psychosocially oriented research, how adolescent ELLs see themselves in relation to the target language and culture is encapsulated in the notion of ethnic identity. Several facets of ethnic identity have been investigated, including how adolescents self-identify or self-label their ethnic identity, the relative strength of the bond with a self-identified group, how favorably youth regard the group, and the degree to which youth participate in the social life of their self-identified group through language use, friendships, religious organizations and practices, ethnic clubs or associations, political activity, and living in ethnic enclaves (Phinney, 1990; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1996). While early work (e.g., Giles & Johnson, 1987; Tajfel, 1981) highlighted the role of language choice and use in ethnic identity, recent