Conclusion: Second Language Identity Revisited

The main aim of this book has been to argue for and to develop second language identity as a usable construct in second language learning research. We have looked at the idea of second language identity from three different angles: in Part I from the perspective of theory and in the context of previous research on study abroad; in Part II from the perspective of evidence for second language identity development in students’ narratives of study abroad; and in Part III from the perspective of possible influences – related to programme type and individual differences in study abroad – that might have an influence on its development. In this concluding chapter, we will sum up what we hope we have achieved.

Identity in second language learning research

Our interest in second language identity has developed in the context of wider interest in identity in second language research. This interest in identity is, in turn, part of a broad ‘social turn’, which has led, somewhat paradoxically, to an intense focus on language learning in the context of individual lives (Benson and Cooker, 2013). Viewed from the perspective of individuals learning and using languages in a succession of social contexts that are ultimately unique to their individual life trajectories, it is clear that second language learning is somehow connected to identity. It seems, however, that we do not yet know exactly what the connection is. In some cases, it seems to be a matter of identity influencing language learning opportunities and processes, while in others it is language learning that influences identity. In both cases, language learning and identity are represented as separate constructs, which is, perhaps, a precondition for thinking about the influence of one on the other. The idea of language identity, on the other hand,
leads us to think of language learning as being integral to the development of identities, but language identity is often narrowly conceived in terms of affiliations or identifications with the languages that a person knows. While this view represents a step in the direction of a more integrated view of language and identity, it appears to overlook the sense in which identity develops simply as a consequence of learning, knowing and being able to use more than one language.

We began, therefore, with a working definition of second language identity as any aspect of a person's identity that is related to their knowledge and use of a second language. Broad as this definition is, it has the specific implication that a person's language repertoire is a fundamental condition of their identity. This implies a relationship between second language learning and identity in the deep sense that knowledge of a second language recontextualizes the person's knowledge of their first language. This is even apparent in the terminology: a language only becomes a 'first' language when a person has begun to acquire a 'second'. In this sense, a person who knows more than one language has a different kind of identity to a person who knows only one. It is this difference, which lies mainly in the specific kinds of identity work that learning a second language implies, that we are trying to capture in the idea of second language identity. In Chapter 2, we also linked second language identity to global mobility and the narrative construction of identity. From this perspective, narrative identity is a particular kind of identity that is replacing the older 'sociological' identities derived from relatively fixed positions in social and cultural space. The inherent potential for mobility in second language learning, therefore, has much to do with the identity work that goes into the development of second language identities. The stories that people tell about their experiences of second language learning and use are part and parcel of the construction of their personal and social identities as, actually or potentially, globally mobile individuals.

Our use of the term 'second language identity' is similar, in this sense, to Burck's (2005: 3) use of 'multilingual identities' in work concerned with 'examination of the differences languages make to individuals, and of the ways in which individuals construct their identities and relationships'. Burck's research was based on retrospective interviews with adults who had either grown up speaking more than one language or had moved to a second language environment later in life. It showed, above all, that multilingual individuals experience personal and social identity in ways that are intricately bound up with the roles of different languages in their lives. We have also seen a good deal of evidence of