Identity and investment in language education: an interview with Bonny Norton

Identidade e investimento na educação linguística: uma entrevista com Bonny Norton

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Interviewed: Dr. Bonny Norton

Bonny Norton (BN) is a Professor and Distinguished University Scholar Department of Language and Literacy Education (LLED) University of British Columbia, Canada. Her research interests are related to identity, power, and language learning. Her work has influenced not only us Brazilian researchers and language educators, but professionals involved with education worldwide. Her efforts to bring social justice and fight inequality through her research findings are endless, specially calling out attention to relevant issues as gender, ethnic and social class differences. Norton is a highly productive scholar, her publications include 5 books, 4 journal special issues, and 125 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. Her current research addresses multilingual literacy for children in African, Canadian, and other global communities.

Interviewers

Christine Nicolaides (CN) is a professor and researcher at Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, and her research interests are related to language learning based on the Vygotskyan sociocultural theory, more specifically she discusses and analyses the concept of sociocultural autonomy, originally brought up by Rebecca Oxford, in different language learning environments.

Caio Mira (CM) is a researcher and professor at Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, and his research concerns oral narratives, identities, discourse and social interaction, conversation analysis in institutional contexts and interactions in the context of Alzheimer illness.

Driven by her will to promote social justice and believing that education can have an effect in social change, Norton's research on identity and investment in language learning has influenced a whole generation of applied linguists. Norton's concept of investment is based on the cultural capital construct originally proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), referring to the collection of symbolic elements such as tastes, postures, ways of behavior, etc, which creates a sense of collective identity and thinking in the context of a socially unequal word. This way, Norton has introduced new conceptions of identity to the field of language education, which sees language closely related to power and identity, especially concerning multilingual contexts, in which some languages are more valued than others. Above all, issues related to race, ethnicity, gender, social class, among others are seen to have a direct impact in opportunities to learn a language or claim "the right to speak".

Among her efforts to spread out her research findings in a way that not only researchers, but teachers and educational policy makers around the world can have access to her findings, Norton has made available several channels of communication. Among them, we can highlight her own YouTube channel (2013), her seminal papers published in well-known journals, as well as her books, as *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2013) and her article *Identity and a model of investment in applied linguistics* (2015) in *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* with her colleague Ron Darvin.

CN and CM: *What inspired you to work in the field of language education?*

BN: Although I am a Canadian citizen, I was born in South Africa, which is a multilingual country with a history of inequity, based predominantly on race. I was aware at a young age that some languages were considered more powerful than others. Because of this, I became interested in learning how language can be used to promote democracy, rather than perpetuate inequality. I started my profession as a high school teacher, and then proceeded to more advanced degrees in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics.

I have seen the field of language education and applied linguistics grow enormously. Applied linguistics as a field is 40 - 50 years old, and I was in the second generation, learning from those who had established the field. The field of applied linguistics and language learning has multiple dimen-

sions, which can be seen partly though the increasing diversity of academic journals, and the growth of impact of these journals. I have always been interested in language as a social practice, and the ways in which identities get constructed through language practices and policies.

I've been very privileged to be an academic because I have been able to pursue the questions I am passionate about. The connection between theory and practice is very important to me, and the link between them is often research. How does practice inform theory and how does theory inform practice?

CN and CM: *You have been a keynote speaker in many parts of the world, including Brazil. What do you learn from your travels?*

BN: I have immense curiosity about the world, and find that professional invitations to speak in different countries provide a wonderful opportunity to gain insight into a country and its people. Before I arrive in the country (and on long plane journeys) I always read about the history of the country I'm visiting, the different groups in the country, its political structure, its cultural practices, its languages. This helps me to understand the people I meet and the educational practices I observe. I also read novels from authors in the host country, and I'm particularly interested in learning about struggles for greater social justice and educational opportunity.

I have visited many different parts of Brazil, and was reminded of South Africa, where there are great disparities between rich and poor. I remember well my visit to beautiful Gramado, for example, which was so different from other regions of Brazil I had visited. In Rio, for example, I jumped on a local bus and visited a favela on the outskirts of the city. The poverty in the favela reminded me that Brazil remains a country where extreme wealth and extreme poverty co-exist, with disturbing consequences for educational opportunity.

CN and CM: *Why is it important to talk about identity?*

BN: Identity in language education and applied linguistics is best understood with reference to changing conceptions of the individual, language, and learning. These changes are associated with broader trends in the social sciences, and represent a shift from a predominantly psycholinguistic approach to language learning, characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s, to include a greater focus on sociological and cultural dimensions of language learning.

From the mid-1990s, when I was challenging essentialist views of the language learner and developing the theory of investment, I was centrally concerned with issues of power in language learning. I was excited by poststructuralist theory, associated with feminist scholars such as Chris Weedon, which takes the position that identity is multiple, changing, and a site of struggle. The work of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu was also compelling. It reminds us that the extent to which a language learner speaks, reads, or writes, is associated with the learner's perceived value in a given institution or community. In this regard, social processes marked by inequities of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation may serve to position learners in ways that silence and exclude. My research and reading led me to define identity as the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future.

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CN and CM: *Why did you develop the theory of investment?*

BN: In my early research with immigrant women in Canada, I observed that existing theories of motivation in the field of language learning were not consistent with the findings from my research. Most theories at the time assumed motivation was a character trait of the individual language learner and that learners who failed to learn the target language were not sufficiently committed to the learning process. In addition, theories of motivation did not pay sufficient attention to unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers. My research found that high levels of motivation did not necessarily translate into good language learning, and that unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers was a common theme in the data. For this reason, I developed the construct of "investment" to complement constructs of motivation in the field of language learning and teaching.

The construct of "investment" helps to explain the complex relationship between language learner identity and language learning commitment. Inspired by the work of Bourdieu and others, investment signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of language learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. I have argued that if learners "invest" in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic resources (language, education, friendship) and material resources (capital goods, real estate, money), which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. As the value of their cultural capital increases, so learners' sense of themselves and their desires for the future are reassessed. Hence there is an integral relationship between investment and identity.

CN and CM: *How is investment different from motivation?*

BN: While scholars such as Zoltan Dörnyei and Ema Ushioda have sought to accommodate theories of identity in new constructs of motivation, the construct of motivation remains a psychological construct with a quantitative orientation, while investment is best seen within a sociological, qualitative framework. Investment, which is centrally concerned with issues of power, seeks to make a meaningful connection between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language, and their complex and changing identity.

The construct of investment provides for a particular set of questions associated with a learner's commitment to learning the target language. In addition to asking, for example, "To what extent is the learner motivated to learn the target language?" the teacher or researcher asks, "What is the learner's investment in the language practices of this classroom or community?" A learner may be a highly motivated language learner but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community, which may, for example, be racist, sexist, elitist, or homophobic. Thus, despite being highly motivated, a learner could be excluded from the language practices of a classroom, and in time positioned as a "poor" or unmotivated language learner. Alternatively, the learner's expectations of good language teaching may not be consistent with the language practices promoted by the teacher in the classroom. The learner may therefore resist participating in the language practices of the classroom, with equally dire results.

CN and CM: *What are the features of the 2015 model of investment?*

BN: Ideas about language and identity are highly generative, and continue to respond to changing social conditions. In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the way advances in technology are impacting language learning and teaching, and the ways in which the forces of globalization are implicated in identity construction.

To accommodate these changes, I have collaborated with Ron Darvin, a former PhD student now at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, to develop an expanded model of investment. This 2015 model, shown below, develops more fully the ways in which investment in language learning operates at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology.

Figure 1. Darvin and Norton's Model of Investment.4
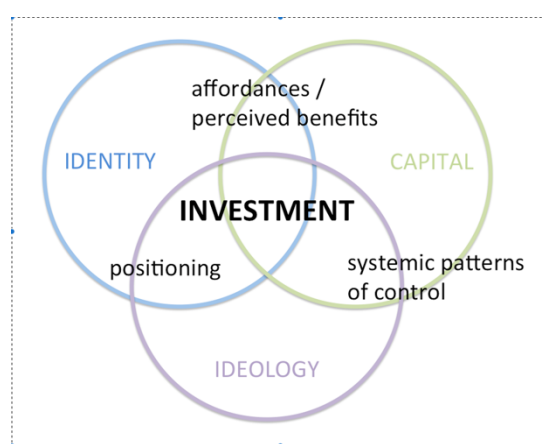
By providing a multi-layered and multi-directional approach to investment, Ron and I sought to explain how power circulates in society, at both micro and macro levels, constructing modes of inclusion and exclusion through and beyond language. In our model, the construct of ideology is drawn from the work of Bourdieu, who is interested in the way symbolic power imposes arbitrary constructions of reality as "normal" and "natural". In this view, ideology positions learners in multiple ways even before the learner speaks, inscribed by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and social class, and sexual orientation. Ideology thus invites a closer examination of the nature of capital and its role in investment. For Bourdieu, capital is power that extends from the material and economic to the cultural and social. The value of different forms of capital is a site of struggle as learners navigate and perform different identities. In terms of this model, learners invest in learning not only to advance their capital, but also to claim recognition for the capital they already possess. The valuing of capital is an affirmation of the learner's identity, and their right to speak in different learning contexts.

CN and CM: *Is investment also relevant to language teacher identity?*

BN: Issues of identity and investment are as relevant to language teachers as to language learners. As I have noted in my work, every time a person speaks, reads, or writes, they are engaged in the

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4 Reprinted from "Identity and a Model of Investment in Applied Linguistics," by R. Darvin and B. Norton, 2015, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, p. 42. Copyright 2015 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

negotiation of identity. A teacher may not use the term "identity", but there is no doubt that a teacher's sense of self is implicated in all classroom exchanges. If students do not listen to a teacher, she will feel discouraged; if students are excited by a class exercise, she will feel happy and successful. Such feelings are all implicated in the teacher's sense of "self" and identity.

In my language teacher education classrooms at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, I have discussed the construct of investment with language teachers, many of whom wish to better understand the language learners in their own classrooms. If teachers are to promote learner investment in the language practices of their classrooms, what implication does this have for language teacher identity? If students have little investment in the language practices of the teacher's classroom, students may become bored, resentful, and resistant. A challenge for any teacher!

The central questions I ask in my classroom are, "What is the student's investment in the language practices of my classroom? How can I ensure that I structure classroom activities in ways that foster and encourage investment? A student's investment is integrally related to their identity - the way they relate to the world and their hopes for the future. Discussions about a student's relationship to the world, in the different domains of their lives (the home, the classroom, the playground, the workplace etc) all give me insight into a student's complex and multiple identity. That identity, of course, also changes across time, as students engage with new ideas and relate to different people.

CN and CM: *How can identity research inform the education of "non-native" English teachers?*

BN: It is important to note that the vast majority of teachers who teach English internationally are not native speakers of the language. Interestingly, it is often in western, English-dominant countries such as the USA and the UK that the "non-native" standing of English teachers is a topic of debate. In many countries in African communities, for example, the English teacher is an English teacher, and not a NNEST. Having said this, however, I am aware that in Asian countries like China, Korea, and Japan, many institutions give disproportionate value to the "native speaker," often causing concern and distress amongst local NNEST. The work of scholars such as Manka Varghese and Aneta Pavlenko has been particularly powerful in encouraging NNEST to consider themselves "bilingual teachers" rather than NNEST. Issues of power are central.

CN and CM: *How do you navigate your identity as a language teacher educator?*

BN: As someone who has taught for many years, and served as a teacher educator for the last 15, I am continually refining my own practice. My own learning has never stopped. Every class I teach offers a new challenge and a new set of possibilities. In mentoring new teachers, I reassure them that teaching is a journey, and that every class is unique. I make mistakes; I have lapses in judgement. However, what I try to do in every class is to learn more of each student teacher in the class, and seek to establish some kind of relationship with each of them, so that I can adapt my practice to student teachers' needs and investments. This is what I model for my student teachers. In every class with student teachers, I am constantly assessing how the student teachers are responding to my instruction, and determining if I need to adjust my practices. The mentor teacher serves as a model for student teachers, but also seeks to encourage the student teacher to find her own comfort level, and to build on her particular strengths.

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Clearly, student teachers have complex and multiple identities, with diverse investments in the language practices of their classrooms. These will likely relate to past experiences of learning and teaching, and their imagined identities as teachers. The mentor needs to seek to understand these investments and identities, so that the mentoring experience is rewarding for both parties. At the same time, the mentor teacher needs to be aware that some of the challenges a student teacher has may have little to do with preparation, energy, and commitment. Sometimes student teachers may be disempowered if their race and/or gender, for example, is not valued in the classroom. These issues relate to dominant social practices in the society at large.

CN and CM: *How do you see the connection between technology and language learning?*

BN: Through technology we can make language more accessible, and we can use digital systems so that people can learn languages by reading, by listening, and through other multimodal means. One exciting feature of technology is that computers are very patient; you can repeat the same exercise until you are confident of your understanding. For example, if children don't understand an audio digital story the first time, they can listen to it again, reflect on the illustrations, and discuss it with friends. This process is very learner-centred, builds autonomy, and helps children pace themselves. Teachers have limited time, so they can refer students to websites and materials for self-directed learning.

At the same time – if you look at the work of Ron Darvin – we have to ask who is not part of this conversation? We need to be cautious about embracing technology unthinkingly. We need to understand what innovations works best, what some of the downsides are, and how we can use technology for democratic purposes. The human connection is always important and language is central to this connection. Even though we have technology, we still want to have human interaction as well. People want to be able to feel comfortable in the classroom, to go to a store and use the language. While the human element will always be there, technology is entering those conversations in multiple and diverse ways. We help our learners by teaching them language through technology. As the world changes, we must keep up with that changing world

CN and CM: *What is your current research and does it have relevance to Brazil?*

BN: I have in recent years become very interested in the potential of technology to address the lack of reading materials in poorly resourced communities, and to reduce inequities between communities and nations. According to UNESCO, 750 million youth and adults do not know how to read and write, and 250 million children are failing to acquire basic literacy skills. High illiteracy rates among children are partly due to a lack of appropriate reading materials in languages familiar to children. We know from research by scholars such as Jim Cummins that children learn to read best in their family's home language, which also establishes a strong foundation for learning any additional languages.

In response to this global literacy challenge, our team based at the University of British Columbia has developed the freely available literacy portal Global Storybooks (globalstorybooks.net). Key team members include Liam Doherty, a PhD candidate at UBC, and Espen Stranger-Johannessen, a former PhD student and now Associate Professor at the Inland Norway University of Applied Science. The Global Storybooks portal hosts customized sites with multilingual open-licensed books for over

40 countries and regions on five continents. Our vision is to help democratize global flows of information and facilitate language learning, with a view to promoting quality education, literacy, and multilingualism worldwide.

The origins of this digital storybook project are found in the African Storybook initiative (africanstorybook.org), which digitizes and makes freely available under an open license nearly 1500 original stories in over 200 African languages, as well in as English, French, and Portuguese. The South African organization Saide began developing this site in 2013, and I was active in the project from that time. Grounded in a shared vision of global literacy and open technology, our UBC team collaborated on the development of Storybooks Canada (storybookscanada.ca) the first of our Global Storybooks sites. It is built on a curated selection of 40 openly licensed stories from the African Storybook that have been repurposed for a Canadian and global audience, and includes translations with audio into 20 of the most common immigrant and refugee languages of Canada. Many of the translations and recordings, which are ongoing, are done by international graduate student volunteers with an interest in literacy and language learning.

As news of the Global Storybooks project has spread internationally, many scholars, educators, and community agencies have invited us to collaborate on the development of localized sites for their communities, based on the Global Storybooks platform. It is for this reason that we now have a Storybooks Brazil site, which we hope you will share widely in Brazil (https://global-asp.github.io/storybooks-brasil/).

The Global Storybooks project generates many questions for educational research: To what extent do Global Storybooks help to promote multilingualism? Can Global Storybooks help promote better home and school connections? Does the use of Global Storybooks promote language awareness in linguistically diverse classrooms? How well do stories travel from one region of the world to another?

CN and CM*: What advice do you have for those just starting their language teaching journeys?*

BN: Good language teachers are also good teachers. Language learners need to learn language as a linguistic system - the formal structures of the language - but they also need to understand language as a social practice - how to connect with the wider community. How can teachers expand possibilities for learners to engage more broadly, while learning the language? Teachers can help students develop a wide range of identities inside and outside the classroom, particularly in this digital age.

I encourage teachers to consider the talents of students beyond language proficiency, and to help other students recognize the multiple talents that their fellow students have. Students need to see that their peers are not just language learners; they are also musicians, artists, swimmers, and soccer players, with extensive knowledge of their mother tongue. This will help language learners connect with others, build relationships, and improve their language learning

I often talk about language learners being ethnographers of their communities who can bring their observations and questions back to the classroom. If students see themselves as ethnographers and not just language learners, they have more powerful identity positions in the wider community.

In a way, teachers are cultural brokers between their students and the social world, and are ideally placed to help students make connections between the classroom, the home, and the community.

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At the same time, there are many unexpected events in the classroom, and teachers must navigate the unexpected. Flexibility helps teachers find the best fit between pedagogy, curriculum, and the needs of individual students. I've been a teacher for 30 years and I am always learning, trying out new ideas, and continually reassessing my practice. This is what makes teaching such an exciting and rewarding profession. If I have a bad day, I can start again tomorrow!

CN and CM: *What publications would you recommend for emerging scholars interested in your work?*

BN: I try to keep my website updated with my publications for individual use, including the 2000 edition of my book, *Identity and Language Learning*. Please see the publication section of my website at the following link:

http://faculty.educ.ubc.ca/norton/

On the Storybooks Canada website, there are also freely available publications in the Resources section. Please see:

https://www.storybookscanada.ca/about/resources/

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