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# The Construction of English Learners' Identity from a Social Perspective and the Effects on their Language Learning Investment\*

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Received: July 15, 2016

Rated: September 18, 2016

Accepted: October 5, 2016

## ABSTRACT

This case study examined how a group of seventh graders constructed their language learners' identity in an EFL classroom at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. Data related to students' behaviors and identity were collected through field notes. Also, students' opinions about their own social status as language learners were collected through a questionnaire and interviews. Data were analyzed in light of Norton's theory of *identity and investment* from a social perspective. Findings indicate that participants were reluctant English learners because of several social factors such as their socioeconomic situation, academic and family demands, and the imposition of power relationships in the classroom. Consequently, participants created strategic, unstable, and contradictory English learners' identities when facing those social conflicts in the classroom while invested poorly in the learning process.

**Keywords:** arte, política, Jacques Rancière, Nelly Richard, arte latinoamericano.

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\* This article is the result of a research project that was conducted through 2015 to 2016. It was sponsored by the Master Program in the Teaching of Foreign Languages at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional de Colombia under the code 412407. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15332/s1794-3841.2017.0028.05>

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## La construcción de identidad de estudiantes de inglés desde una perspectiva social y los efectos en su aprendizaje

### RESUMEN

Este estudio de caso analizó cómo unos estudiantes de séptimo grado construyeron sus identidades como aprendices de inglés de un colegio público de Bogotá, Colombia. Se recogieron datos de los comportamientos e identidades de estos aprendices mediante notas de campo y entrevistas. También se reunieron opiniones de los estudiantes sobre su estatus social como aprendices de inglés, mediante un cuestionario y una entrevista. Estos datos fueron analizados a la luz de la teoría de Norton sobre *identidad e inversión* desde una perspectiva social. Los hallazgos indican que los estudiantes fueron renuentes a aprender inglés a causa de varios factores sociales, incluyendo su situación socioeconómica, exigencias académicas y familiares y la imposición de relaciones de poder en el salón. Por lo tanto, crearon identidades estratégicas, inestables y contradictorias como aprendices de inglés para enfrentar dichos conflictos sociales, mientras que invirtieron poco en su proceso de aprendizaje.

**Palabras clave:** estudiantes de inglés, identidad de aprendices de inglés, inversión, relaciones de poder, aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera.

Recibido: 15 de julio de 2016

Evaluated: 18 de septiembre de 2016

Aceptado: 5 de octubre de 2016

## A construção da identidade dos estudantes de inglês desde uma perspectiva social e os efeitos em seu aprendizado

Recebido: 15 de julho de 2016

Avaliada: 18 de setembro de 2016

Aceito: 5 de outubro de 2016

### RESUMO

Este estudo de caso analisou como uns estudantes do sétimo grau construíram suas identidades como aprendizes do inglês em um colégio público em Bogotá na Colômbia. Coletaram-se dados dos comportamentos e identidades destes aprendizes por meio de anotações de campo e entrevistas. Também se reuniram opiniões dos estudantes sobre seu status social como aprendizes do inglês, mediante um questionário e uma entrevista. Estes dados foram analisados à luz da teoria de Norton sobre a identidade e inversão desde uma perspectiva social. Os achados indicam que os estudantes foram renuentes para aprender inglês por causa de vários fatores sociais, incluindo sua situação socioeconômica, exigências acadêmicas e familiares e a imposição de relações de poder na sala de aula. Por tanto, criaram identidades estratégicas, instáveis e contraditórias como aprendizes do inglês para enfrentar estes conflitos sociais, em quanto investiram pouco em seu processo de aprendizado.

**Palavras-chave:** Estudantes do inglês, identidade de aprendizes do inglês, inversão, relações de poder, aprendizagem do inglês como língua estrangeira.

## INTRODUCTION

*Identity* and *investment* are recent topics of interest in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education that aim at understanding language learning as a social practice. These concepts not only help to examine how human relationships are constructed in the language classroom, but also how social interactions influence students' academic performance. Thus, this case study attempted to analyze which English language learners' identities were constructed by seventh graders in an English class at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia, based on social interaction in the classroom, and how those identities influenced on their investment in the foreign language learning.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the main problems that we, English teachers, face in our classes is that many times we limit ourselves to prepare and teach language content, design evaluations, and grade students' language level as we believe that these duties are enough. Also, we often assume that students' poor academic performance is the result of their demotivated and irresponsible attitude to complete tasks and homework. However, we disregard which personal, social, and environmental factors can affect learners' identity and investment in the English class.

In a needs analysis phase carried out in the first semester of 2016, the teachers leading this research study decided to observe several academic, behavioral, and social events related to seventh graders' investment in an EFL classroom in Bogotá. It was observed that students did not work hard

for academic success. They were constantly apathetic and resistant to study English and practice the four communicative language skills. They neither did homework, nor participated in class. According to the academic results in the first half of 2016, 85% of these students got low academic scores, while only 15% scored an average value.

With these first diagnosis, the researchers concluded that it was necessary to do further research through a more systematic and deeper approach in order to determine which particular social circumstances demotivated these learners to invest in their language learning and influenced the construction of their English learners' identity. A descriptive case study was conducted in the second semester of 2016 with these seventh graders. The main purpose was to collect and analyze data from learners' direct voices and opinions on how they saw themselves as language learners and which factors affected their level of investment. Therefore, learners' personal opinions constituted the core data for this study. The research question leading this study was: What does classroom interaction unveil about students' investment and identity construction as language learners in an EFL classroom?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Identity in EFL education

This research is framed into a poststructuralist perspective of the constructs *Identity* and *investment* as stated by Norton, an influential author in EFL/ESL education. The relationship between language, identity, and investment in language education is

still a complex topic of exploration (Norton, 1997) and can be understood from different perspectives and contexts. According to Norton (2000), identity is as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how this relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (5). Identity should not only be understood as a set of individual and personal features that each individual has, but also as “fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing, in particular historical and cultural circumstances” (Norton and Toohey, 2011: 419). Identity is never isolated, static, and fixed, but rather develops and changes from one context to another, and it involves ways of relating the self to the world and with other human beings (Lamb, 2011).

Norton’s (1997) views of language and identity are drawn from other theorists that have influenced her work, including West (1992) in the field of philosophy, and Bourdieu (1986) in the field of sociology. West (1992) claims that identity relates to human desires for social recognition, affiliation, security, and safety, which cannot be considered in isolation from the distribution of material resources in society. Social changes and relations established by economy permeate a subject’s desire to gain a well-prestigious identity (Norton, 1997). On his part, Bourdieu (1977) understands identity from two concepts: *Cultural/symbolic capital* which refers to the accumulated assets that promote mobility in a stratified society by gaining prestigious benefits to improve humans’ conditions, including education, language learning, knowledge, and social recognition. The other concept is *Economic capital*

which involves how money, real state, and material possessions define identity.

## Investment in EFL education

The distinction between *symbolic capital* and economic capital inspired Norton’s work on the notion of *investment* in the language classroom. She defines investment as the way a language learner actively spends both symbolic and material resources in the language learning process to increase the value of his/her cultural capital and material capital. In other words, a learner does not only learn a foreign language for the sake of it, but also to gain intellectual prestige and social recognition (symbolic capital). Likewise, a learner studies a foreign language because he/she plans to increase economic capital and improve his/her living conditions. The learner understands that he/she will achieve a wider range of symbolic and material resources in his/her social sphere, which will ultimately increase social power.

However, investment in the foreign language can be significantly affected by relations of power in the classroom and, in consequence, influence language learners’ identities. Norton (1997) argues that “the right to speak intersects in important ways with a language learner’s identity” (411) because the way a language learner invests in his/her learning process and how she/he practices the target language is determined by social and historical relationships constructed in the context he/she learn. In other words, if language learners are victims of others’ oppression and abusive power in the classroom, their investment and identity as language learners can be deteriorated.

Based on Cummins (1996) distinction between coercive and collaborative relations of power, Norton (1995) takes the position that power can serve to empower or disable the set of identities that language learners can negotiate in their classrooms and communities. When language learners speak another language, they whether impose oppressive relation of power or establish collaborative relations of power. Hence, language learners' identities are influenced by the relations of power (whether imposed or negotiated) constructed in the context they learn the language (Dornyei and Ushioda, 2009).

## INVESTMENT VS. MOTIVATION

Norton (1997; 2000) asserts that *investment* complements the traditional notion of motivation. Traditional views of motivation have seen the language learner as an individual who should have the initiative and personal interest to develop his/her mental process to produce and reproduce language during the learning process without necessarily expecting the teacher to tell him/her what to learn. Even though motivation is a complex term, it seeks to explain "the fundamental questions of why humans behave as they do" (Dornyei, 1998: 117) and "determines the direction ... of a particular behavior or ... the choice of a particular action, the persistence with it, and the effort expended on it" (Dornyei, 2014: 519). Thus, teachers assume that learning a language mainly depends on the learner's intrinsic motivation who is often classified into dichotomies such as good/evil, motivated/unmotivated, dedicated/careless, or kind/rude, without considering how social

aspects and structures (fair or unfair relations of power and interaction) influence on his/her academic performance. This implies that language learning has historically been conceived as a process that mainly depends on learner's personality, learning style, and personal level of motivation.

On the contrary, the notion of *investment* regards the learner as an individual who learns the foreign/second language as determined by complex identities which are context and time dependent. It embraces the complex social relationships among language learners and their sometimes-ambivalent desire to speak the target language in the classroom. High or poor investment in the language learning process depends on the social interaction and relations of power created in the classroom because students not only exchange information to communicate in the foreign language, "but are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (Norton, 1995: 18). For this reason, conditions of power can be constructed in even or uneven manners in the classroom and can affect directly students' learning process.

Norton (1995) explains that although a student may be highly motivated to learn a language, he/she might not invest in that process due to the complex and contradictory identities that the learner constructs when relations of power (or disempower) are established. In other words, a language learner with a high level of motivation can invest poorly or invest nothing in his/her language learning process when he/she is socially, physically, and psychologically hurt by attitudes of racism, classism, homophobia,

misogyny, and other types of prejudice from classmates, teachers, and institutions. In this sense, unbalanced relations of power and social injustice not only affect learners' identity, but also damage their investment (academic performance and motivation) in learning a foreign/second language.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research type

This is a descriptive case study that examines a phenomenon within a particular context (Yin, 1994). It helps researchers to observe one aspect of a real-world problem in detail, such as a single individual, a group, or an event through different data collection instruments (Merriam, 1998). It is called "descriptive" because it aims at describing in depth a single phenomenon in the context it occurs. It does not require any pedagogical intervention or a plan of action to change the situation under observation. The researcher observes and analyses the situation rigorously, and once the observation phase is completed, he/she provides possible alternatives to improve or transform what has been observed.

Accordingly, this study identified the social factors that influenced a group of learners' investment and their construction of their language learners' identities in an EFL classroom at a public school. Researchers did not attempt to modify students' regular behavior and interaction. Researchers rather observed in depth students' behavior and performance in their regular classes without any external intervention or influence. The purpose was to analyze reality, meeting the requirements of a *descriptive* case study.

### Setting and participants

This study was conducted at a public school in Bosa neighborhood located in the south-east of Bogotá, Colombia, in the second semester of 2016. Bosa is considered one of the lowest socioeconomic strata in this city, and it is affected by social valence, insecurity, high density of population, and few opportunities to improve life conditions. Most of the students who go to this school come from impoverished and single-parent families. Coming to class is already a difficult challenge for them because they must deal with family problems and money issues. English is taught three hours a week, this being restricted time to have students practice it. English classes have adopted the communicative approach as its prominent methodology to help students develop communicative competence.

40 EFL seventh graders from the morning shift served as participants in this study. They were 13 to 16-year-old learners, 21 girls and 19 boys. The group was divided into three homogeneous subgroups. The first group consisted of 14 students (35%) whose level of investment was very low, the second subgroup was formed by 15 students (37%) whose level of investment was low or regular, and the third group were 11 fairly good investors (27%).

### Data collection instruments

Following Van Maanen's (1998) and Burgess (1991) suggestions, the teacher-researchers wrote field notes, supported by video-recordings, about participants' behaviors, interactions, and academic performance. When writing these field notes, the teacher-researchers considered the research



questions that led this study and the theory about identity and investment. 18 sets of field notes were taken, which corresponded to 50 hours of class observation, covering approximately 20 weeks.

Based on Bernard's (1995) and Gubrium's and Holstein's (2001) explanation, the researchers also designed a 30-minute open-ended interview to collect data about participants' direct personal opinions and experiences on the problem being observed. The questions were about participants' relationships with other classmates, their opinions on why they studied English, how they felt when participating in class, and what it meant to be English learners. The interviews were held in Spanish and conducted in small groups, during the final stage of the data collection phase.

The third instrument was a questionnaire with close and open-ended questions that served to collect data related to students' personal experiences of being language learners and their level of investment in the classroom as it was done with the interviews. It was administered in one class session at the end of the observation phase.

## Data analysis approach

As stated in the theoretical background, identity is a dynamic and complex process because language learners, like every human being, never have a fixed identity. It is constantly changeable depending on social circumstances or relations socially rooted. Therefore, some of the factors that were considered to analyze the data from a language learners' identity perspective were the reasons these EFL learners had for learning the foreign language, how they

felt as language learners, and which social variables in the classroom influenced on or contributed with successful language learning.

Based on the research question, the grounded theory was used to analyze the data through three levels of coding as explained by Strauss and Corbin (1998): (1) In the *open coding*, the researchers read the data several times and, through close examination, divided the data into initial patterns of information in the three data collection instruments. This procedure guaranteed a process of triangulation and ensured that those patterns were consistent (Patton, 2002). (2) In the *axial coding*, the researchers grouped and stated pre-categories and categories. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define a category as a concept "that stands for phenomena" (101) while Glaser (1992) states that a category is a "type of concept" that is "usually used for a higher level of abstraction" (38). Thus, learners' experiences, beliefs, and opinions about their investment and identity were represented through concepts such as "reluctant," "strategic," and "to impress others." (3) In the *selective coding*, pre-categories were re-organized, refined, and integrated to finally state the central categories that describe the phenomenon being researched. Those categories were refined and finally stated into findings.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Students positioned themselves as reluctant English learners

Data analysis showed that 72% of the participants (29 learners) were reluctant to learn the foreign language, and this implied



that they invested poorly in their learning process. It was observed that most of the students were careless and hardly participative because they didn't like the English class. Learners thought that English was just an imposed subject at school and they resisted to learn it, showing lack of initiative and interest as these field notes show:

During the first sessions, most of students didn't do English homework, brought materials to work in class or reviewed language topics. They are indifferent toward teachers' advice to improve their investment; despite they know that poor academic performance would cause low grades. Besides, they speak in Spanish all the time despite the teachers encourage them to speak in English (Field notes, September 1, 2016).

29 learners were identified as being unwilling to invest in the English class when being encouraged to do it. Consequently, the teaching and the learning process was difficult. One recurrent reaction was that they ended up speaking in their native language and said:

"¿Inglés? ¿Eso para qué? Así estoy bien, en mi casa nadie habla inglés" (English? What for? I'm ok like this, nobody speaks English in my house) (Field notes, September 12, 2016).

"Profe, pero ¿por qué nos habla en inglés? si no sabemos. Además, estamos en Colombia. No nos hable en inglés." ("Teacher, why do you speak to us in English if we don't know it? Besides, we are in Colombia, don't speak to us in English"). (Field notes, September 22, 2016).

These data indicate that most of participants openly recognized that they resisted using the foreign language because they did not think that it was a salient content area that might have contributed with their personal and academic success. They thought that English was not an important subject for their lives and immediate needs; consequently, it was useless to study and invest time on it. That is to say, English did not represent any kind of *cultural capital*, namely intellectual knowledge, education value, or a meaningful life experience for these learners because it was not part of their life achievements.

One of the reasons for being reluctant English learners is that they had positioned themselves as socially marginalized, lacking opportunities to travel abroad in their future lives or speaking with people from the Anglo-Saxon culture or other English learners because of their low socio-economic level. They assumed that because they came from impoverished families and lived in a neighborhood with many social problems, it was not worthy to invest in the English learning process because they would never use it in real life:

"Profe, a mí no me gusta el inglés, además para qué lo voy a necesitar, si no voy a viajar nunca. ¿Con qué plata?" (Teacher, I don't like English. Besides, I will never need it because I will never travel abroad. There's no money" (Field notes, September 26, 2016).

"No necesito el inglés en mi vida si siempre viviré en Colombia" (I won't need English in my life because I will always live in Colombia) (Field notes, October 6, 2016).

Influenced by their socioeconomic environment, learners considered they were already excluded from opportunities to go abroad because of their low social class and lack of money. In their minds, they had already created the precept that they were socially detached from full access to move up in social class, further their education, or interact with other people different from their community. Moreover, some good investor, 6 out of 11, mentioned that the English class wasn't going to be really useful in their lives, and that they only completed tasks because it was a school subject they needed to take.

Therefore, data show that these young language learners' identities were not only shaped by personal aversion to become EFL speakers, but also by difficult socio-economic circumstances. They saw themselves socially excluded and believed that they would never need English in their lives, not even to compete in the job market or to become more educated and intellectually prepared. To some extent, they had created a realistic definition of their underprivileged conditions, low financial status, and remote possibilities to go abroad. The understanding of their social exclusion as language learners coming from modest and humble backgrounds resonates with Norton's (2011) assertion that language learners' identities involve how individuals understand their relationship to the world and possibilities for the future. Therefore, the fact that they didn't expect a prosperous future as language learners, was a powerful factor that influenced on their poor investment in their English learning.

## 2. Language learners constructed unstable and strategic identities to impress others

Despite 29 learners (15 low investors and 14 regular investors) categorically recognized that they disliked the English language, it was found that they wanted to impress others (the school, teachers, parents, and friends) with their supposed academic success in the English class. This situation generated the construction of unstable and strategic identities because, although they recognized themselves as poor language investors, they wanted to show the people of their social circle that they were good learners. It was observed that learners behaved strategically to please the educational system, follow the English class requirements, and obey the teachers' rules as they developed the firm intention of passing the course. In fact, Darwin and Norton (2015) indicate that language learners' identity can be determined in part by the patterns of control imposed by institutions and organizations that establish an ideology and a set of rules that learners are expected to follow.

In this sense, these learners' identities became unstable and strategic when every evaluation period<sup>1</sup> started because they wanted to impress their teachers and parents with, at least, a score of 3.0 points. In their opinion, that score represented all the great effort they had made in their learning process despite the fact that they did not really care about improving their linguistic capital or enhancing their language competence. Their sudden interest in studying English and investing somehow in their

1 Public schools in Colombia give parents a report of their kids' academic progress and evaluations every two months.

learning during the evaluations weeks came about because they just wanted to have a passing grade. Strategically, they gripped to the very last moment to do and deliver English activities and study for evaluations because of convenience. Hence, the grade was the only motivating factor, their symbolic capital, that would ultimately allow them to make a good impression on parents, teachers, and friends, and avoid being seen as losers or irresponsible students (Field notes, September 29, 2016). The passing grade was, in West's (1992) words, their human desire for social recognition and safety in their context.

Their changeable and strategic identity from a reluctant attitude to a committed attitude as English learners equally happened at the end of the year, when those who had invested poorly in their learning process were concerned about passing the subject. Most of the learners had to do extra activities during the "Nivelaciones period,"<sup>2</sup> as these data show:

During the leveling activities period, many students asked: 'Profe, ¿Cuándo es la Nivelación?' (Teacher, when is the leveling activities?) '¿Qué temas cubrirán la Nivelación?' (What topics will the leveling period cover?) '¿Cuándo recibe la Nivelación?' (When do we start the leveling period?) (Field notes, November 28, 2016).

"Profe ¿Qué necesito para sacarme 3.0?" (Teacher, what do I need to do to get 3.0 points?). Teacher told this student: "don't think about the grade, just do the activity

to learn." He answered: "no, solo necesito pasar" (No, I only need to pass this course). (Field notes, December 1, 2016).

Those learners who had invested poorly in their learning, and who said that they did not like the English class hoped to have a last chance to pass the course because of two main reasons: First, they didn't want their partners to see them as negligent students and be punished for failing the class. Second, they did not want to separate from their close friends in case they were at risk of repeating the school year. As being influenced by their friendly bonds, students tried to improve their investment in the language classroom at the end of the academic year during the leveling period. They valued the groups of friends they hung around with so much, that they did whatever it was necessary to pass the course at least with 3.0 points in order to continue being with them the coming academic year. Hence, learners helped each other with homework, completed the required language tasks during the leveling period, and even begged the teachers to help them pass when they knew they had failed the course (Detected in the field notes and the interviews). Therefore, they were strategic to find ways to pass the course despite they didn't really value the English class for important symbolic or cultural capital, that is, personal growth and communicative achievements as non-native speakers. They only wanted to make a minimum effort to get a score of 3.0 points. Learners' identity was rather marked by values of friendship and mutual support, even though they invested poorly in their English learning. Although they didn't recognize the symbolic and economic value of the English language, they recognized

<sup>2</sup> Nivelaciones: are leveling activities that are offered at the end of the academic year in Colombian public schools to those students who are likely to fail the course. If they complete a series of activities and take some exams, they can move to the next grade.

friendship as a symbolic value to pass the academic year and the importance of impressing their family and close friends. To make a good impression on people, they resorted strategies they thought would work for their purpose, despite they were poor investors in the class.

### 3. Learners held contradictions between their poor investment and their ideals about learning English

Data equally showed that the identity of these English learners was unstable and contradictory in terms of the discrepancy between their investment in the classroom and their personal opinions about the importance of learning English for their lives. For example, 85% of the participants answered in the questionnaire and the interviews that they believed that English was important and useful to improve their life conditions:

**Teacher:** ¿Te gusta el inglés? (Do you like the English language?)

Si porque mi sueño es ir a estados unidos a trabajar y tengo que hablar el idioma (Yes, I like it because I dream of going to the United States to get a job there, and I have to speak that language). (Interview, November 24, 2016).

**Albert:** Para mi estudiar inglés es importante porque es una manera de progresar y avanzar en la vida, ampliar los horizontes (It's important for me to study English because it is a way to progress and improve my life, open new options in life (Questionnaire, December 3, 2016).

These data suggest that, although there was the precedent that they had openly stated

that they disliked the English language, they were influenced by the broad public opinion in Colombia that learning English could represent prestigious symbolic and economic capital, a sort of achieving the so-called American dream, including great opportunities to further people's education, get a good job, and improve life conditions in the distant future after much sacrifice and effort. However, in real practice, these students did not invest that much in the classroom to learn the language and take advantage of those promising opportunities. As young language learners, they contradicted themselves in thought and action. This contradiction seems to be consistent with the first finding as can be seen that, although these learners were aware of the advantages of learning a foreign language in the world, they didn't want to bother with investing on it, since they had positioned themselves as underprivileged learners who found it far-fetched to travel abroad, move up their social class, or need English in their lives. Part of the contradiction relied on the fact that they idealistically dreamt of going to study to the United States and get a good job, but they had equally created the deep-rooted idea that it would be difficult to make those dreams come true, so they would not trouble that much to take action.

Similarly, these EFL learners' identities were ideologically influenced by their parents' expectations for these kids to have better life conditions, financial stability, and social status. Participants knew that if they followed their relatives' ideals and advice on why to study English, they would increase their symbolic and economic capital:

**Jenny:** “Mi mamá me dice que si uno estudia inglés puede llegar a convertirse en alguien.” (My mom tells me that if I study English, I can be someone in life.)

**Researcher:** “¿Cómo así ser alguien?” (What do you mean by “being someone in life”?)

**Yuri:** “Es un decir de mi familia cuando se consigue un trabajo en el que uno gane bien.” (My family says that you are someone in life when you get a well-paid job.)

**Jenny:** “Si, entrar a la Universidad, tener una profesión, ganar mucha plata.” (Yes, when you can go to the university, have a profession, and earn a lot of money) (Interview, November 24, 2016).

Data analysis revealed how part of these participants' identity as language learners was strongly influenced by their parents' opinions about the possible results of learning English. Researchers noticed that these young learners just repeated what their parents said to them, since parents were hopeful about their children's future, and advised them on how to work their way out of poverty. One piece of advice was to study hard for the English subject. However, it was detected that these young learners did not really take such advice seriously because they were reluctant and uninterested to learn English. Their investment in their learning process did not show that they believed in the advantages of learning English, as inculcated by their parents. This contradiction led them to generate unstable and contradictory identities since; on the one hand, they valued the advantages of learning a foreign language when they identified with their parents' ideals and expectations for the future. On

the other hand, they disliked English and were poor investors since they didn't think that English was one of their priorities in life as their parents thought. These learners needed more guidance from teachers and school directors to reflect about their investment in their learning process and how that investment might improve their current lives.

#### **4. Unfair power relations affected investment in the foreign language**

Another serious issue that joined learners' reluctance to use the foreign language and increased contradictory, strategic, and unstable attitudes, was that learners had to deal with power relations established in the classroom. Norton (1995) proposes a theory on social identity which takes into account the language learning context in which the language learner is immersed. She argues that the language learner is a subject who constructs a complex social identity, and this complexity must be seen in relation to social structures and relationships which are generally inequitable. Norton (1997) states that “relations of power can serve to enable or constrain the range of identities that language learners can negotiate in their classrooms and communities” (412). Thus, a crucial finding was that the 11 English learners with a good level of investment in their learning process were victims of unfair power exerted by the 29 poor investors who used to generate conflicts of inequity during class interaction. It is important to clarify that the conflictive situations of power presented here could be considered, at first sight, as just discipline problems. However, this analysis shows that what initially started

as an indiscipline issue later produced inequitable relations that promoted a tense environment in the classroom.

It was observed that abusive power was established by low investors when they used to ridicule good investors' efforts to learn the foreign language. Low investors, characterized for being careless, indifferent, and reluctant to speak in English, usually mocked, laughed at, and interrupted good investors when they were speaking. They imitated good investors' English-speaking production with the mean intention of making them feel inferior. These data illustrate how poor investors imposed unbalanced power in the classroom:

When Camila was answering a teacher's question about an important date, Daniel abruptly started to laugh at and imitate her English pronunciation. It was noticed that his intention was to ridicule her in front of the whole class because she was a good student. Several students enjoyed Daniel's mockery and whispered "eso le pasa por ser la ñoña del curso<sup>3</sup>" (That nerd deserves to be mocked) Camila stopped speaking and sat down quietly (Field notes, October 13, 2016).

**Daniela:** "Es "jarto" cuando molestan burlándose de uno, por que sueltan la risa y lo hacen sentir como un 'zapato' ... así quien va a querer arriesgarse ... Así le quitan las ganas de estudiar." (It's uncomfortable when they make fun of me, laugh at me, and make me feel like a "shoe" ... I don't want to risk myself speaking in class ... I

lost the motivation to study) (Interview, November 28, 2016).

These are two of the many examples of abusive power exerted by low investors. In the first sample, Daniel, who was positioned as a dominant student and who was supported by other partners' complicity, affected Camila who was a participant with a higher level of investment and proficiency in English. Although Camila initially positioned herself as a good and motivated student in the English class, she was forced gradually to decrease her active participation as she was positioned as a dominated subject by Daniel's power who ridiculed and labeled her as a "nerd." She preferred to be a silent and passive learner, rather than being the target of her classmates' jokes and cruel comments. A similar situation was reported by Daniela in the second example. She said that those students who incited verbal violence through mockery affected the way she invested in the class as she lost her interest in studying English. When she stated that she felt like "a shoe," she meant that her classmates treated her with no respect, as if she were inferior and unimportant. So, low investors positioned Daniela as a dominated person because they not only controlled the way she felt, but also the way she learned in class. When she expressed that she didn't want to take any risk to speak in class because she was afraid of being mocked, she confirmed that this kind of abusive power affected negatively the way she invested in her learning and decreased her desire to study.

In consequence, although both Camila and Daniela, who were good investors, were motivated to participate in the English class,

3 Ñoña/o: It is a derogatory word used by Colombian students to label a good learner as a "nerd."



they invested less in their learning process because they were victimized by powerful coercion inflicted by those who unfairly positioned as dominant students. These examples support the argument that language learners' identities are never fixed, but rather undergo unstable, strategic, and sudden changes due to unequal social relationships created in educative contexts. According to Norton (1995), inequitable relations of power not only affect social interactions among learners, but induce dominated learners to resist opportunities to speak the foreign language. For this reason, language learning and learners' identity are determined by collaborative or oppressive social situations developed in specific time and contexts. Thus, in this context there weren't collaborative, but imposed and coercive relations of power.

This finding headed to conclude that English teachers should foresee the possibility that unbalanced power relationships among English learners reduce significantly non-native speakers' investment in their language learning process and truncate learning achievements (Lightbrown and Spada, 2006). Norton (1995) also argues that when language learners speak, they not only exchange information, but also organize and reorganize a sense of who they are and how they relate to the context in which they interact and socialize. She claims that investment in the language learning process considers the dynamic and changing relationship of the language learner to the social world in which this learning process occurs, and how learners construct identities starting from this relationship.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Identity is a complex issue to be examined and analyzed because, as stated before, it is context dependent, transformative over time, and changes according to social circumstances and personal convenience from one moment to another. Hence, it was a little complicated to determine which personal and external aspects defined the identity of the participants. It required careful observation and reexamination of the data collected to come to conclusions. Being this a case study, findings should be understood in its particular time and setting. They do not represent a general situation of identity and investment in other EFL settings. There may be other contexts in which learners' language identity and investment may be different, having a more positive attitude towards the foreign language and the symbolic and capital resources that learning English represents.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This research study examined how a group of EFL Colombian students at a public school constructed their language learners' identities. 29 (72%) out of 40 EFL learners were particularly reluctant to learn the foreign language due to two main reasons. First, they positioned themselves as being socially and economically marginalized, and had already adopted the mindset of lacking life opportunities to actually use the English language in their future lives. Second, they thought that learning English was not only an imposed subject at school, but was useless for their practical life, since they were aware that because of their socioeconomic



level, they would never speak the language in real life. English didn't represent any capital or cultural symbols to improve their life conditions.

Despite their fixed reluctant attitude towards the English language, students developed unstable, contradictory, and strategic identities when they knew that the evaluation and the leveling periods started. They only wanted to pass the English class with a passing grade of 3.0 points because of convenience's sake, as they were concerned about making a good impression on parents and friends. Part of the contradiction was that, although 3.0 does not really represent a good grade, they thought it was enough to please and impress others.

On the other hand, these EFL learners were ideologically influenced by their parents' views on the financial advantages and employment opportunities if they learned English as a foreign language. However, these learners only listened to their parents' advice, but, in practice, they did not work hard to invest in their learning. This situation also caused contradictions in their status as language learners.

Finally, these learners' language identity was even more complicated because they coexisted in a context where unbalanced relations of power had been established. 29 low investors, who were most of the students, exerted power on fairly good investors, who were a minority (11 learners), through mockery, ridiculing, and psychological abuse. Abusive power created ambivalent feelings among good investors who not only felt shy to participate in class, but were unmotivated to learn the language

and reduced their investment in the learning process.

It is concluded that there were many socio-economic, family, personal, and academic factors that influenced these learners to understand who they were and the relationship they had with the world. Data showed that they were aware of few possibilities for their future as English learners. Their identity and how they saw themselves as EFL learners did not only depend on personal, individual, and motivational encouragement, but on how social and contextual circumstances affected their status as language learners. As a result, they reduced their investment and desire to learn the foreign language.

The participants involved in this study require stronger educational and occupational guidance from teachers and school directors to see the foreign language in more positive ways. More still needs to be done in regards to advising learners why learning a foreign language may help them succeed in life despite their socioeconomic status. English teachers need to understand that motivation and investment not only depend on learners' initiative, but also on tense and unfair environmental conditions in which students learn. The school and the classroom are generally sites where violence, abusive power, and inequality are established among learners, and English teachers cannot ignore such overwhelming reality. Therefore, EFL teachers still need to encourage learners to invest in their learning despite economic difficulties, social struggles, prejudice, and unjust power so that they can become better learners. Creating EFL learners' awareness

that they are worthy of succeeding in life and have the right to be part of a more inclusive, globalized, and interconnected world through the English language can help them shape a dignified identity and a more human status as language learners. As Norton (1995) argues, learners can have the opportunity to acquire a series of symbolic resources (language, education, knowledge, social status) and material resources, which will help them to increase their cultural capital and social status, and recognize themselves as potential agents to improve their human condition. This social awareness still needs to be created in the EFL classroom.

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