

# Understanding Second Language Learning Through a Sociolinguistic Lens: A Comparative Analysis of the Variationist and Identity Approaches

Lini Xiao

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge  
lx236@cam.ac.uk

Received: December 2016

Accepted: March 2017

Published: September 2017

## Abstract

The past two decades have witnessed the growing momentum of sociolinguistic theory in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Contrary to cognitive approaches that focus on modelling language structures in the learner's mind, sociolinguistic approaches prioritise language use in context and seek to understand how social factors affect second language (L2) learning. This review aims to discuss the contributions of sociolinguistic theory to our understanding of L2 learning through a comparative analysis of two studies, which exemplify two major sociolinguistic approaches to SLA respectively: the variationist approach and the identity approach. Although both approaches address the social dimensions of L2 learning with a particular focus on language and identity, they represent two directions of theorising and methodology within the sociolinguistic model. The variationist study by Hoffman and Walker (2010) is a quantitative enquiry into the effect of ethnic identity on L2 variation, while the identity research by Chen (2010) is an ethnographic case study of how power relations affect an L2 learner's identities and learning opportunities. Through a comparison of how these two studies conceptualise language, identity, and learner agency, this review argues that sociolinguistic perspectives shed light on the social dimensions of learner language and offer rich characterisations of language learners and learning contexts. In particular, the variationist and identity approaches offer unique insights into how identity and agency affect L2 learning. This review concludes with a brief evaluation of the contributions of sociolinguistic theory to SLA research and calls for greater synthesis of cognitive and social perspectives in exploring the intricate relationships among mind, society, and L2 learning.

*Keywords:* second language learning, sociolinguistic theory, identity approach, variationist approach, language and identity

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Discussion

In 1997, Firth and Wagner argued that the predominance of cognitive perspectives had led to “imbalance” in second language acquisition (SLA) research and called for “enhanced

awareness” of the social aspects<sup>1</sup> of second language (L2) learning (p. 285). Their work triggered a heated cognitive-social debate in SLA and galvanised a growing body of research driving the “social turn” in this field (Block, 2003). One socially oriented strand that has made great strides is the sociolinguistic model. Within this model, multiple approaches have been proposed to explain L2 learning, including the variationist approach (Preston, 2000; Tarone, 1983), language socialisation theory (Duff, 1995, 2010), the identity approach (Norton, 2000, 2013), and conversation analysis (Firth, 1996; Seedhouse, 2004).

Contrary to traditional cognitive approaches that focus on modelling language structures in the mind, sociolinguistic approaches prioritise language use in context and the influence of social factors on the process of L2 learning. This process not only includes language acquisition and use, but also incorporates extralinguistic issues such as learning opportunities. Specifically, the sociolinguistic model seeks to address the three basic questions of SLA (Saville-Troike, 2005) from a social perspective: What do L2 learners know about language use in context? How do learners acquire this socially situated knowledge? What are the social causes that make some learners more successful than others?

## **1.2 Focus of the Essay**

The purpose of this essay is neither to weigh in on the social-cognitive debate nor to explicate every sociolinguistic approach to SLA. Instead, this essay aims to explore the contributions of sociolinguistic theory to our understanding of L2 learning through a comparative analysis of two studies, which exemplify two major sociolinguistic perspectives on SLA respectively: the variationist approach and the identity approach. Based on the Labovian paradigm of first language (L1) variation (Labov, 1972), variationist research in SLA shows a quantitatively-oriented interest in exploring how learner language is contextually constrained. The identity approach, on the other hand, is a relatively new strand (Norton, 2000) that employs qualitative methods to examine how power relations in learning communities construct learners’ identities and affect their learning opportunities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Firth and Wagner are by no means the first scholars that called for attention to social aspects of L2 learning. Social factors have figured in explaining SLA, such as the identification of interaction as a significant element in L2 learning (e.g., Gass, 1997). What was new in Firth and Wagner’s (1997) claims was a call for increased “emic sensitivity” (p. 286) and empirical focus on language learning and use situated in context, as opposed to the almost exclusive focus on the mental process of internalising linguistic structures.

These two approaches are selected among diverse sociolinguistic strands because they represent two fundamentally different directions of theorising within the sociolinguistic model and, as a result, different research foci and methodology. Furthermore, both approaches offer lenses through which to understand the social nature of L2 learners by addressing learner identity and agency, which constitute a distinct feature compared with traditional cognitive approaches. Accordingly, two studies are selected as telling cases of each approach. The variationist study by Hoffman and Walker (2010) is a quantitative enquiry into the effect of ethnic identity on L2 variation. In the study following the identity approach, Chen (2010) used qualitative methods to examine how power relations affect a learner's identities and engagement in learning activities.

Through a comparison of how these two studies conceptualise language, identity, and learner agency, this essay argues that sociolinguistic perspectives shed light on the social dimensions of learner language and offer rich characterisations of language learners and learning contexts. In particular, the variationist and identity approaches offer unique insights into how identity and agency affect L2 learning.

In what follows, I first summarise the two studies. I then discuss how each approach establishes links between the social world and L2 learning through analysing the major themes emerging from the studies. This essay concludes with a brief evaluation of the contributions of sociolinguistic theory and suggestions for future SLA research.

## **2. Overview of the Two Studies**

### **2.1 Ethnic Orientation and L2 Variation: A Variationist Approach to SLA**

Situated in the multiethnic context of Toronto, Hoffman and Walker (2010) examine how ethnic identity affects English variation among Chinese and Italian residents. The two variants analysed in their study were (t/d)-deletion in word-final consonant clusters and the Canadian vowel shift. The 60 participants were stratified by ethnic origin (Chinese or Italian), immigrant generation (first or second/third), and sex (male or female). Twenty English speakers with British/Irish origins constituted a comparison group. Apart from using sociolinguistic interviews to elicit linguistic data, the authors implemented a questionnaire to quantify ethnic orientation (EO). The key findings are: (a) Degree of EO varied across and within ethnic groups; (b) patterns of variation, as indicated by rates of use, were associated with ethnic origin and degree of EO; (c) while the younger generation resembled the British/Irish group in terms of linguistic

conditioning, first-generation participants did not show such tendency. The authors conclude that language transfer exists in the first generation but does not persist in subsequent generations, and that ethnic identity plays a role in L2 variation. The authors further infer that ethno-linguistic variation “has less to do with imperfect acquisition of the majority language and more to do with the way in which speakers actively construct and express ethnic identity” (p. 59).

## **2.2 Power Relations and L2 Communities: An Identity Approach to SLA**

Situated in an American school context, Chen’s (2010) ethnographic case study investigates identity construction of an L2 learner in three communities. The focal student, 9-year-old Evan, was an English-as-a-new-language (ENL) student who just arrived in America. The research lasted a year and gleaned rich qualitative data from interviews, observation, and student journals. The data were analysed in three steps. First, Chen recognised communities of practice in which Evan participated: the mainstream classroom, the advanced math group, and the English language learning community. Second, Chen identified characteristics of these communities, featuring institutional, instructional, discursive practices, and power relations. Third, the author identified Evan’s identities corresponding to each community. The data indicate that (a) the unbalanced power relations in three communities shaped contradictory identities for the learner; (b) the constructed identities affected the learner’s engagement in learning to varying degrees. The study suggests that ENL students may encounter identity conflicts across different school communities, and that collaborative power relations are vital for building a supportive learning environment and maximising learning opportunities.

## **3. Social World and L2 Learning: Establishing a Link**

### **3.1 Language and Identity**

#### **3.1.1 The view of language.**

One assumption underpinning Hoffman and Walker’s (2010) study, and arguably most variationist-SLA research, is that learner language is a system in its own right (Selinker, 1972), and this system is inherently variable and malleable (Larsen-Freeman, 2012; Tarone, 2007). Some argue that such variability is merely evidence of developmental stages governed by

Universal Grammar<sup>2</sup> and L1 system (Adjemian, 1976). The main problem with this argument lies in its underestimation of the role of social context. In fact, research shows that social factors can sometimes “override” the abovementioned internal factors (Tarone & Liu, 1995, p. 123) to influence L2 variation and shape variable L2 knowledge.

In Hoffman and Walker’s (2010) study, L2 variation is related to ethnic identity. Take (t/d)-deletion as an example. Table 1 displays a multivariate analysis of social factors<sup>3</sup>. The statistics confirm the difference in rate of deletion between the Chinese group and other groups, suggesting that Chinese participants favoured deletion whereas the Italian and British/Irish groups disfavoured it. Moreover, within the Chinese group, the speakers with higher EO status<sup>4</sup> were more likely to delete t/d, with the first-generation Chinese (.77) followed by younger Chinese participants (.56 and .55 respectively).

Table 1  
*Social Factors Contributing to (t/d)-Deletion*

	Total N:	4,656	
	Input:	.507	
		%	N
<b>Generation, Ethnicity and Ethnic Orientation</b>			
Chinese, 1 <sup>st</sup> generation	.77	77	631
Chinese, 2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup> generation, high EO	.56	57	950
Chinese, 2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup> generation, low EO	.55	56	294
Italian, 2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup> generation, low EO	.47	48	379
Italian, 1 <sup>st</sup> generation	.45	45	510
British/Irish, younger	.44	44	728
Italian, 2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup> generation, high EO	.42	44	536
British/Irish, older	.30	30	628
	<i>Range:</i>	47	
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	.52	53	2,179
Female	.48	48	2,477
	<i>Range:</i>	4	

<sup>2</sup> Universal Grammar is a theory proposed by Noam Chomsky, who posits that language is an innate ability of human beings and that there are principles that all natural human languages share.

<sup>3</sup> Due to interaction, Hoffman and Walker combined ethnicity, generation, and EO status into one factor group to obtain the best step-up/step-down run (2010, p. 60)

<sup>4</sup> First-generation Chinese participants were reported to have the highest EO status, a point to which we will return.

Source: Hoffman & Walker, 2010, p. 51, Table 3

To further verify language patterns, the authors conducted multivariate analyses of linguistic factor groups (see Table 2). The results show that for the British/Irish, the phonological effects were much stronger (range=45 and 48, compared with 12 for morphological status). In contrast, for the first-generation Chinese, the preceding phonological context was not selected as significant and the effects of the morphological status were stronger. Thus, the first-generation Chinese did not have similar linguistic conditioning with the British/Irish. However, analysed in the same way, younger Chinese participants resembled the British/Irish in linguistic conditioning to a large degree. This suggests that language transfer existed in the first generation but did not persist in younger generations. Therefore, it can be argued that variable (t/d)-deletion cannot be traced to incomplete acquisition or language transfer straightforwardly, which makes ethnic identity a plausible explanation for variation across and within ethnic groups. This study thus strengthens the case for the role of social factors in L2 variation.

Table 2  
*Linguistic Factors Contributing to (t/d)-Deletion*

	British/Irish		Italian			Chinese		
	Old	Young	1 <sup>st</sup> Gen	2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup> Gen		1 <sup>st</sup> Gen	2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup> Gen	
				High EO	Low EO		High EO	Low EO
Total N:	628	728	510	536	379	631	950	294
Input:	.255	.404	.450	.416	.466	.782	.577	.576
<b>Preceding Phonological Context</b>								
Nasal	<b>.67</b>	<b>.68</b>	<b>.56</b>	<b>.64</b>	<b>.68</b>	[.55]	<b>.59</b>	<b>.73</b>
Sibilant	.42	.46	.50	.46	<b>.58</b>	[.43]	<b>.56</b>	.46
Stop	.34	.25	.43	.28	.21	[.49]	.33	.21
Lateral	.22	.13	.35	.32	.14	[.50]	.18	.16
Range:	45	55	21	32	54		41	57
<b>Following Phonological Context</b>								
Consonant	<b>.77</b>	<b>.70</b>	<b>.62</b>	<b>.72</b>	<b>.69</b>	<b>.57</b>	<b>.64</b>	<b>.70</b>
Pause	.40	.30	.47	.37	.43	.38	.36	.32
Vowel	.29	.33	.38	.34	.30	.45	.38	.34
Range:	48	40	24	28	39	19	26	38
<b>Morphological Status</b>								
Monomorphemic	.53	<b>.60</b>	.41	<b>.56</b>	<b>.55</b>	.54	<b>.56</b>	[.55]
Past	.41	.27	<b>.78</b>	.38	.38	.29	.31	[.39]
Range:	12	33	37	18	17	25	25	

[ ] = Factor groups not selected as significant.

Source: Hoffman & Walker, 2010, p. 52, Table 4

The view that learner language is variable and socially conditioned contrasts starkly with the generativist view of linguistic knowledge as categorical (Chomsky, 1965). Chomskyan researchers in SLA assert that variation in response to social factors is part of performance, which is separate from the underlying linguistic knowledge (i.e., competence) (Gregg, 1990;

Long, 1998). In response to this claim, variationists in SLA present a strong counterargument that the L2 learner's mind is not impervious to social context; instead, it "processes L2 data differently in response to different social variables" (Tarone, 2007, p. 839). Numerous empirical studies have shown that the variable acquisition and production of L2 is related to a range of social factors, including the learning context (Charkova & Halliday, 2011; Tarone & Liu, 1995), characteristics of interlocutors (Li, 2010; Young, 1991), and characteristics of learners (Drummond, 2012; Sharma, 2005).

This counterargument is further strengthened by Preston's (1996, 2000) psycholinguistic model of L2 variation. In this model, the cognitive mechanism of L2 variation is compared to the toss of a weighted coin<sup>5</sup>, and the likelihood of "landing on" one side over another depends on a confluence of social (Level I), linguistic (Level II), and temporal factors (Level III). Preston's model implies that grammatical representations in the mind have variable strengths reflective of variable traces of three levels of factors. According to this model, we can speculate that the participants in Hoffman and Walker's (2010) study had variable L2 knowledge in the sense that the linguistic forms they knew were not categorical or homogeneous; instead, their mental representations were affected by the variable strengths of social (e.g., ethnic identity), linguistic (e.g., the accompanying phonological context), and temporal factors (e.g., differences in relative time of acquisition across generations). This variationist model further blurs the boundary between competence and performance, and shows a potential link between cognitive and social approaches to address learner language.

The variationist view of language has important implications for L2 learning. First, L2 learning is variable in its outcome not only in the sense that learners vary in their degrees of approximation to native-speaker (NS) patterns, but also that their L2 knowledge is unique and retains different traces of social meanings. This interpretation challenges the view that learner speech is mere deviation from NS speech. If we define success as NS patterns, then learners and educators should make efforts to create the social context that increases the likelihood of native-like production. However, such attempts are not always realistic; even the abovementioned second/third-generation Chinese growing up in Toronto may exhibit different linguistic profiles from NSs due to uncontrollable social factors. Therefore, learners and educators should consider

---

<sup>5</sup> Each side represents a variant of a two-way linguistic variable.

local learning contexts and (re)define the norms and targets against which they measure learning progress, assess proficiency level, and decide pedagogical and learning methods.

Second, L2 learning is more than internalisation of decontextualised grammar. The linguistic forms that learners acquire and use are fraught with social meanings. Thus, it is of interest to learners to develop sociolinguistic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), that is, to actively manipulate and interpret language to fulfil social purposes, with a focus on the appropriateness of the speech in context as opposed to grammaticality in isolation (van Compernelle & Williams, 2012). For this reason, learners and educators should focus on both form and meaning to foster the ability to communicate effectively.

Nevertheless, Hoffman and Walker's (2010) study also reveals several limitations of variationist research. First, variability could be attributed to unpredictable factors and the validity of any cross-sectional account of learner language is limited to a degree. As noted earlier, a host of variables ranging from speech contexts to interlocutors may bear on L2 production. Thus, the ethnicity or the speech style of the interviewers in Hoffman and Walker's (2010) research might have influenced the speech produced by the participants. A change of the speech context may trigger a change in linguistic profiles. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that variationists can only get plausible close-ups of learner language rather than a panorama.

The second problem concerns limited accounts of language transfer. Hoffman and Walker (2010) tried to avoid this problem by using the multi-generational method to "establish a baseline for features transferred from the respective minority languages" (p. 45). By comparing linguistic conditioning across generations, the authors suggest that language transfer did not persist, which appears to consolidate the role of ethnic identity in L2 variation. However, the "baseline" also reflects the participants' proficiency of the minority language<sup>6</sup>, which might significantly affect ethnic identity. This limitation is also manifested in Preston's model (2000), which fails to explain the interaction among three levels of factors. If language transfer is indicated by linguistic conditioning (Level II), to what extent does the effect of Level I and III hinge on that of Level II? This necessitates variationists and psychologists to further explore the cognitive underpinnings of L2 variation.

---

<sup>6</sup> Most second/third-generation Chinese participants were bilinguals while the first generation was minority-language dominant.



While variationists focus on linguistic forms of learner language, identity researchers like Chen (2010) are concerned with power relations underlying L2 learning process. Informed by poststructuralist theories, they conceptualise language as a value-laden system functioning as *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu, 1977). While structuralists theorise language as signs with idealised meanings signified by linguistic communities (Saussure, 1966), poststructuralists contend that language is not a set of neutral signs but situated practices in which speakers with different power and beliefs struggle to create meanings (Bakhtin, 1981). According to Bourdieu (1977), language is a form of symbolic capital that “can receive different values depending on the market on which it is offered” (p. 651). From this perspective, L2 learning is a process of negotiating access to and ownership of one’s potential and/or existing linguistic resources.

These views shift our focus to L2 learning situated in communities. As indicated by Chen’s (2010) study, the value assigned to learners’ L1 and L2 influences their capital and participation in learning activities. Evan’s limited English proficiency was considered as lack of significant capital in his English-dominant school. Evan’s L1, in contrast, was treated differently in different communities. For instance, in the English language learning (ELL) class, the teacher invalidated Evan’s L1 (Chinese) by explicitly stating in class that students’ native languages should only be used at home (p. 173). In one scenario, Evan wanted to write Chinese characters on the blackboard. The teacher stopped him immediately and Evan “became upset and hid himself underneath the table” (p. 174). Conversely, Evan’s L1 proficiency was valued in other classes, where the teachers allowed him to do tasks in Chinese and then translate them into English with help. A teacher also “gave Evan opportunities to teach the class some words in Chinese” (p. 169). The interview and observation data suggest that Evan was more engaged in those classes, where he had relatively more symbolic capital to negotiate participation than in the ELL class. Seen in this light, educators should “treat the linguistic and cultural capital of learners as affordances” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 45) that enable learners, especially L2 beginners, to fully participate in learning communities.

The uneven distribution of value is manifested not only in languages, but also in language speakers. Thus, local power relations, as indicated by the differing possession of capital among community members, may affect learners’ “right to speak” (Norton, 2013, p. 48). This is exemplified by the power differentials between Evan and his peers. Evan often got into fights

with his English-speaking peers because “he doesn't understand what others are talking about” (Chen, 2010, p. 168) and some students teased him for that or for his being “a Chinese boy” (p. 172). Due to unequal power relations, what Evan lacked was not only L2 knowledge but also the legitimacy to speak. This echoes Bourdieu's (1977) argument that linguistic competence should include “the power to impose reception” (p. 648), since speakers are not always deemed as valuable. However, some teachers addressed this problem by legitimising Evan's other symbolic capital and establishing collaborative power relations in class. For example, they acknowledged the value of Evan's L1 and his creativity, fostering a belief among students that Evan is a valuable community member. Under these circumstances, Evan seemed to be more engaged in academic and social activities in class.

As illustrated above, identity researchers focus on learning opportunities and educational equality. It comes as no surprise that scholars have challenged the relevance of such research to L2 learning (Gass, 1998). In fact, identity research is in line with other approaches that stress the importance of social interaction. For instance, the interactionist model (see Mackey, Abbuhl, & Gass, 2012) demonstrates that input, interaction, and output are essential for L2 acquisition. Moreover, sociocultural theorists (see Lantolf, 2000) maintain that learners' L2 develops through scaffolding by other L2 speakers during interaction. Yet like physicists' frictionless plane, the assumptions underlying these theories are that L2 learning communities are without conflicts and abundant opportunities for interaction are easily available. Admittedly, identity research may not explain what happens in the mind and its accounts of the effect of social factors are not as straightforward as those of variationist research. However, its relevance and unique contribution lies in its acknowledgement that L2 learning happens in communities where power relations affect one's access to and participation in learning activities, which are related to the quantity and quality of interaction. Therefore, identity research is of particular value to educators and policy-makers, who can influence the institutional, instructional, and discursive practices that shape the power relations in learning communities.

To conclude, the variationist approach and the identity approach conceptualise language from completely different perspectives, the former highlighting the linguistic aspects of L2 learning whereas the latter addressing the ideological and social issues in L2 communities. While variationists can make predictive statements about how social factors influence the direction and

outcome of L2 learning, identity researchers aim to identify the power dynamics that affect learners' access to L2 resources and interactional opportunities. However, both approaches argue for a flexible and contextualised definition of language, the shapes, meanings, and value of which are variable and socially conditioned. This theoretical orientation is compatible with the complex social nature of L2 learners, a topic to which we now turn.

### **3.1.2 The view of identity.**

Identity is generally understood as senses of *self* that reflect one's position in and relationship to the world (Duff, 2012). Although both studies recognise that identity and language are interrelated, they diverge on the view of identity and its role in L2 learning. Such divergence results in different research methods and contributions.

Not only satisfied with describing L2 variation, variationist-SLA research is also interested in characterising L2 learners. Like most variationists, Hoffman and Walker (2010) view identity as relatively static membership in existing social groups and share a quantitative interest in measuring this membership. However, there are disagreements on how to operationalise identity among variationists in SLA, which mainly correspond to the first two waves of variationist sociolinguistics (Eckert, 2012).

The first-wave research (Labov, 1972; Trudgill, 1972) regards identity as membership in predetermined social categories, such as sex and ethnicity (Drummond & Schleef, 2016). Such research is common in SLA because the clear identification of learner groups allows researchers to easily establish correlations between linguistic and social variables, which may in turn illuminate individual differences in learning outcomes (e.g., Adamson & Regan, 1991). Yet such correlations may not always be valid, since the essentialist assumption of clear boundaries between and homogeneity within groups (Bucholtz, 2003) could mask more subtle factors that affect L2 learning. Addressing ethnic identity specifically, Hoffman and Walker (2010) note that the traditional treatment of ethnicity presumes that all group members have the same attitudes and ethnic orientation (EO), yet in reality EO may vary from individual to individual (p. 40).

Going beyond a monolithic view of identity, the second wave draws on social psychology and ethnography to explore participant-defined groupings that are meaningful to the speakers themselves (Drummond & Schleef, 2016). In Hoffman and Walker's (2010) research, identity is operationalised as the perceived degree of EO. To obtain comparable data, the authors

administered an EO questionnaire that includes 35 open-ended questions and assigned a score between 1 and 3<sup>7</sup> to each response. Table 3 shows the average mean EO index scores of each relevant group<sup>8</sup>. Salient differences existed between and within groups. This observation relates back to the linguistic patterns discussed earlier (see Tables 1 and 2), which suggest the role of EO in L2 variation, a more profound connection that lies beneath ethnic differences.

Table 3  
*Mean Ethnic Orientation Index Scores*

	Ethnic Origin					
	Italian			Chinese		
	Mean	Range	N	Mean	Range	N
Generation:						
First	1.92	1.83	10	2.24	0.57	9
Second/Third	1.59	1.18	16	1.78	2.14	21
High EO	1.88	0.63	7	1.99	0.62	16
Low EO	1.37	0.55	9	1.11	1.29	5

Source: Hoffman & Walker, 2010, p. 47, Table 2

An emic-oriented definition of identity also casts light on the rationale behind L2 variation. For example, Hoffman and Walker (2010) conducted exploratory factor analysis to reduce questions in the questionnaire to four factors<sup>9</sup>. Further analysis shows that only one factor correlates significantly with the EO mean score: social network ( $r = .794, p < .001$ ). The correlation indicates that high-EO participants had stronger ethnic social network, including using the minority language more often, actively participating in community activities, and having more interaction with members of their ethnic groups (p. 48). The authors further speculate that differences in social network between two ethnic groups can be attributed to their

<sup>7</sup> For scalability, the researchers assigned 1 to responses that suggest least engagement in the ethnic group, 3 to maximum involvement, and 2 to intermediate or mixed responses; answers that could not be coded as the above three were scored as 0 (ibid.).

<sup>8</sup> The authors used high/low EO to further categorise second/third generation. This decision was based on statistical tests that showed the best scaling reliability was achieved when participants were divided between those scored 1.50 or higher (high EO) and those scored lower than 1.49 (low EO).

<sup>9</sup> The four factors that group the 35 questions are social network, the participants' grandparents, perceived discrimination in work, and housing. No significant correlation existed among these factors (Hoffman & Walker, 2010, p. 47-48).

timelines of settlement<sup>10</sup> and visibility of minority status<sup>11</sup>, which conspire to facilitate or impede linguistic assimilation to local English communities (p. 56-57). These findings offer a potential rationale that goes beyond ethnic and L1 origins: integration into L2 social network may affect L2 acquisition and use, hence strengthening the argument that social factors play a role in L2 learning.

As exemplified by Hoffman and Walker's (2010) study, second-wave variationist-SLA research starts to recognise the subjectivity and multiplicity of learner identity. Identity is no longer considered merely as a *factor*, but a lens through which to understand learners' variable social networks. We can further speculate that the speech community to which L2 learners are connected makes available a linguistic repertoire that influences the input-interaction-output process (Mackey et al., 2012) of L2 learning. Since L2 learners have different identities and social networks, we cannot assume that learners will acquire the full range of linguistic repertoires shared by NSs, nor can we expect that all learners will identify with NS communities. This relates back to the previously discussed question of norms and targets, which should be defined in ways that are meaningful to L2 learners themselves and reflective of local learning contexts/communities (see Geeslin & Long, 2014).

While variationists conceptualise identity as membership in communities and focus on its effect on learners' L2 knowledge, identity researchers consider identity as a situated position in a given context and examine its influence on learning possibilities. Like most identity researchers, Chen (2010) adopts Norton's (2000) poststructuralist definition of identity— "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space...with reference to larger, and more frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day interaction" (p. 5). In this view, identity is fluid, multiple, and context-dependent rather than fixed, unitary, and coherent (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Unlike variationists' static view of identity as something learners *have*, poststructuralist theory reconceptualises identity as something learners *do*. In other words, learners do not always have unproblematic access to certain community and its L2 resources; instead, their identities are

---

<sup>10</sup> Italian immigration began much earlier than Chinese immigration; thus, the Italians seem to be the more established community (Hoffman & Walker, 2010, p. 56-57).

<sup>11</sup> Physical or racial characteristics may constitute a factor that impedes or facilitates assimilation into Caucasian communities (ibid.).

repeatedly negotiated through social interaction. This view of identity as dynamic necessitates qualitative research with a longitudinal perspective.

In her case study, Chen (2010) examines aspects of Evan's identities as constructed by institutional, instructional, and discursive<sup>12</sup> practices in three communities. Chen's findings of Evan's identities are summarised in Table 4. Evan's learning experiences varied as his identities changed across communities. For example, in the mainstream classroom and the math group, the teachers shaped a collaborative power relation in class through valuing Evan's L1 and applauding his creativity in academic work. Under these circumstances, despite language difficulties, Evan was actively engaged in cognitively demanding tasks with appropriate scaffolding from peers and teachers (p. 170-173). In contrast, in the ELL class, the teacher authorised English proficiency only and stressed discipline in class. Situated in this context, Evan was mainly positioned as a mischievous student with language need. Consequently, he showed little interest in designated tasks and displayed disruptive behaviours. In one scenario, Evan refused to do reading exercise and hid underneath the table. When the teacher came to him, Evan went to sit on the teacher's seat and announced that he was the teacher (p. 174). As mentioned earlier, Evan also got into fights with his peers; yet he suggested in interviews that it was not his intention to make trouble: "It's not I want to. It is someone makes me [the troublemaker]" (p. 171). This statement indicates that although unaware of the underlying power relations at work, Evan felt explicitly that his identity was constructed by others.

Table 4  
*Summary of Evan's Identities in Three Communities*

---

<sup>12</sup> Institutional practices are defined as adopted practices to group or track members based on specific criteria. Instructional practices are those used to organise the content and format of teaching and learning activities. Discursive practices are verbal descriptions used by other members to talk about the focal student with regard to social, linguistic, and academic competencies (Chen, 2010, p. 167).

	Mainstream Classroom Community	The Advanced Math Group Community	The ELL Community
Institutional Identity	-A mainstream student -An ENL student	-An advanced math student -An ENL student	-An ELL student
Instructional Identity	-Limited English proficiency -Proficient in Chinese -Intelligent	-Limited English proficiency -Good at Maths -Creative	-Limited English proficiency -Lack of self-discipline
Discursive Identity	-Smart, creative, funny -Impulsive -Troublemaker	-Talented, creative, smart	-An aggressive child with behaviour problems -Troublemaker

The poststructuralist view of identity casts new light on L2 learning. First, L2 learners' commitment to learning is constructed by power relations of given contexts. The fluid nature of identity problematises the conventional view that L2 learners can be defined in binary terms as motivated/extroverted/uninhibited or unmotivated/introverted/inhibited (Norton, 2013). Indeed, the analysis of affective factors (Krashen, 1982) (e.g., motivation, self-confidence) should incorporate consideration of "What are learners allowed to do?", which, in turn, requires an examination of power relations that structure the conditions for the realisation of learners' desires/goals (Norton, 2013). Therefore, researchers and educators should view L2 learners as complex social beings, "whose history, dispositions toward learning, access to sociocultural worlds, participation, and imaginations together shape the quality of their achievement" (Kinginger, 2004, p. 241).

Second, L2 learning is a process of negotiating participation and membership in L2-related communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Studies have shown that access to L2 communities is not guaranteed (e.g., Giroir, 2014; Morita, 2004). Some learners may find that opportunities for L2 learning (e.g., interaction with community members) are constrained by their identities imposed by others. These identities may be related to the ideological structures and practices that are often rendered invisible in communities, such as "linguicism, racism, sexism, ageism, and/or classism" (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 32). Therefore, educators and policy-makers should

develop a critical awareness of local power relations and promote equality through institutional and instructional practices (e.g., teaching materials, curriculum design, school policies, etc.).

Despite the abovementioned insights, Chen's (2010) study reveals two major drawbacks of identity research. First, the link between power relations and L2 development is relatively weak, since participation does not necessarily lead to learning (Leung, 2010). Chen (2010) fails to capture Evan's English development (whatever kind that is) at different stages of observation in response to different power relations. This may leave unresolved questions concerning to what extent participation and commitment is translated into actual learning. Future research should provide more evidence to illustrate the impact of power on the rate, direction, or outcome of L2 learning. Second, the view of identity as multiple, fluid, and changing may lead to excessive disorganised data and subjective interpretation that undermine the reliability of research. Admittedly, this methodological concern is a logical repercussion of poststructuralist theory of identity. One possible way to address this is to provide sufficient explanations for research process to increase transparency and reduce ethical concerns.

In sum, variationists and identity researchers capture different levels of learner identity, the former stressing macro-sociological categories and local social networks while the latter addressing contextually-situated positions constructed by ideologically-informed interactions. Further, they theorise the role of identity in L2 learning in different ways. While variationists seek patterns in learners' social groupings to match L2 variation, identity researchers are interested in the contradictions manifested in individual learners' identities, with a view to examining how power relations affect learners' learning opportunities. Despite different research foci, both approaches tend to argue against monolithic views of identity and display emic sensitivity by incorporating learners' accounts of social reality.

### **3.2 Learner Agency**

The previous sections have illustrated how the social world affects L2 learners and their L2 learning. Yet learners are not passive recipients of social influences; instead, they are active agents who "can make conscious choices, resist or comply, choose learning targets, (re)shape their learning environment and learning opportunities" (Duff, 2012, p. 413). Thus, learner agency reflects learners' own contributions to their L2 learning.



Both studies examined in this essay address the agentive nature of L2 learners to a degree. Hoffman and Walker (2010) speculate that linguistic features are associated with “particular social distinctions and values”, based on which learners “adopt and use these features strategically” to express ethnic identities (p. 59). Seen in this light, learners can not only choose target-language models they prefer (Beebe, 1985), but also create their own patterns of L2 with meanings and uses related to their needs and contexts, rather than conform to the L2 system imposed by others (Canagarajah, 2016; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Deviation from NS variety, therefore, may not be errors, but a legitimate language choice. Although Hoffman and Walker (2010) did not directly investigate learner agency, their speculation represents a recent trend in variationist-SLA research, which addresses conscious language choice made by learners, with a particular focus on learners’ attitudes toward L2 varieties (e.g., Howard, 2012; Rindal, 2010; Rindal & Piercy, 2013).

However, such research faces certain challenges. First, exercising agency to express identities requires sophisticated sociolinguistic competence, which is primarily limited to advanced L2 learners. Second, agency “does not straightforwardly lead to empowerment” (Miller, 2010, p. 485), since agents are influenced by social structures. This can be related to identity researchers’ view of language as symbolic capital. In a linguistic marketplace, different languages and varieties are assigned different values. Therefore, learners’ language choice is conditioned by power relations to varying degrees.

In Chen’s (2010) study, agency is conceptualised as learners’ investment (Norton, 2000) in L2 learning. If learners invest in a language or literacy practices, “they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 37). For example, Evan invested in learning activities in the mainstream classroom not only because the power relations constructed favourable identities for him, but also because he wanted to retain these identities and gain more social (e.g., better relationships with peers) and symbolic capital (e.g., English proficiency) in the communities. Hence, L2 learners’ investment in learning should also be viewed as “investment in their own identities” (Norton, 2013, p. 11). However, it should be noted that Chen (2010) characterised Evan’s investment mainly in terms of his active participation in learning communities and neglected the fact that one can express agency by

deliberately not acting (van Lier, 2008). For example, silence and non-participation may also represent investment for particular purposes.

To conclude, learner agency is still a relatively new topic in SLA that requires further theorising and empirical evidence (Deters, Gao, Vitanova, & Miller, 2014). Variationists and identity researchers share the belief that learner agency, whether language choice or investment, may dramatically affect L2 learning trajectories and outcomes (De Costa & Norton, 2016; Duff & Doherty, 2015; Nance, McLeod, O'Rourke, & Dunmore, 2016). Future research could examine "the structure and agency dilemma" (Block, 2013, p. 126) and focus on how learners can harness the affordances available in the learning context (Deters et al., 2014).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The rise of the sociolinguistic model has advanced our understanding of L2 learning by reconceptualising learner language and identity and emphasising the role of learner agency. Unlike traditional cognitive approaches that consider language as isolated neutral structures to be internalised in the mind and L2 learners as language processors, sociolinguistic theory foregrounds the social nature of language and views L2 learners as social beings situated in communities. It also challenges the conventional cognitivist view of L2 learners as passive recipients of language by highlighting learner agency.

This essay has discussed the contributions of sociolinguistic theory by focusing on two theoretical strands: the variationist approach and the identity approach. Although both approaches address the social dimensions of L2 learning, they represent two directions of theorising and methodology within the sociolinguistic model. The quantitatively-oriented variationist approach seeks to establish correlations between social and linguistic variables, with a view to describing and explaining learner language. It also explores learner identity through seeking patterns of social groupings, which are expected to match L2 variation. The identity approach, on the other hand, employs qualitative methods to uncover the ideological underpinnings of L2 learning, with a focus on the effect of power relations on individual learners' identities and learning opportunities. Moreover, both approaches show an increasing interest in agency, with variationists suggesting learners' language choice and identity researchers highlighting learners' investment in language in return for more symbolic and/or material benefits.

As illustrated by these two approaches, the sociolinguistic model has contributed to the expansion of “the ontological and empirical parameters of SLA” (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 295), transforming the field from an acquisition-centric and cognitive-dominant paradigm to a multi-layered ecosystem in which cognitive and social dimensions of L2 learning are interrelated (see The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). As suggested in my discussion of the compatibility of sociolinguistic theory with other approaches in SLA, the cognitive and social perspectives may not be divided in the sense that they are theoretically mutually exclusive. Instead, their tension may derive from the fact that each approach addresses different levels of L2 learning (e.g., from the level of brain to the level of society).

However, as indicated by the limitations of the two approaches discussed in this essay, social approaches need to further draw on cognitive perspectives to better answer the question of how learners acquire socially-situated L2 knowledge. Moreover, for the social strands that prioritise contexts and interactions, one of the most urgent tasks is to establish stronger links between social participation and learning outcomes, so that we can better identify the social causes that directly affect L2 development.

To build on what has been achieved since “the social turn” (Block, 2003) and become a more robust enterprise, SLA research should move toward greater integration of different levels of L2 learning and take on board the need for greater conceptual flexibility and interdisciplinarity. Some scholars in SLA have pointed out the possibilities of social-cognitive synthesis. For instance, Aktinson (2011) suggests a sociocognitive model that explains how “mind, body, and world work together” in L2 learning (p. 143). Larsen-Freeman (2011) proposes complexity theory that views language as “a complex adaptive system” influenced by cognitive and social factors (p. 49). SLA research could expect worthwhile returns as increased investment is made in a greater synthesis of cognitive and social perspectives.

## References

- Adamson, H. D., & Regan, V. M. (1991). The acquisition of community speech norms by Asian immigrants learning English as a second language: A preliminary study. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 13(1), 1–22.
- Adjemian, C. (1976). On the nature of interlanguage systems. *Language Learning*, 26(2), 297–320.
- Atkinson, D. (2011). A sociocognitive approach to second language acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition* (pp. 143-166). Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Beebe, L. (1985). Input: Choosing the right stuff. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 404-414). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Block, D. (2003). *The social turn in second language acquisition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- Block, D. (2013). The structure and agency dilemma in identity and intercultural communication research. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 13(2), 126–147.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). The economics of linguistic exchanges. *Social Science Information*, 16(6), 645–668.
- Bucholtz, M. (2003). Sociolinguistic nostalgia and the authentication of identity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7(3), 398–416.
- Canagarajah, S. (2016). Crossing borders, addressing diversity. *Language Teaching*, 49(3), 438–454.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–47.
- Charkova, K. D., & Halliday, L. J. (2011). Second- and foreign-language variation in tense backshifting in indirect reported speech. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 33(1), 1–32.
- Chen, X. (2010). Identity construction and negotiation within and across school communities: The case of one English-as-a-new-language (ENL) student. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 9(3), 163–179.

- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and a model of investment in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 36–56.
- Deters, P., Gao, X., Vitanova, G., & Miller, E. R. (2014). *Theorizing and analyzing agency in second language learning: Interdisciplinary approaches*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- De Costa, P., & Norton, B. (2016). Identity in language learning and teaching: Research agendas for the future. In S. Preece (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and identity* (pp. 596–601). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Drummond, R. (2012). Aspects of identity in a second language: ING variation in the speech of Polish migrants living in Manchester, UK. *Language Variation and Change*, 24, 107-133.
- Drummond, R. & Schlee, E. (2016). Identity in variationist sociolinguistics. In S. Preece. (Ed.), *The routledge handbook of language and identity* (pp. 50-65). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Duff, P. A. (1995). An ethnography of communication in immersion classrooms in Hungary. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(3), 505–537.
- Duff, P. A. (2010). Language socialization. In N. H. Hornberger (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics and language education* (pp. 427-454). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Duff, P. A. (2012). Identity, agency, and second language acquisition. In S. M. Gass & A. Mackey (Eds.), *The routledge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 410-426). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Duff, P. A., & Doherty, L. (2015). Examining agency in (second) language socialization research. In P. Deters, X. Gao, E. Miller, & G. Vitanova (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary approaches to theorizing and analyzing agency and second language learning* (pp. 54–72). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Eckert, P. (2012). Three waves of variation study: The emergence of meaning in the study of sociolinguistic variation. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41(1), 87–100.
- Firth, A. (1996). The discursive accomplishment of normality: On ‘lingua franca’ English and conversation analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 26(2), 237–259.
- Firth, A., & Wagner, J. (1997). On discourse, communication, and (some) fundamental concepts in SLA research. *Modern Language Journal*, 81(3), 285-300.
- Gass, S. M. (1997). *Input, interaction, and the second language learner*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence

Erlbaum.

- Gass, S. M. (1998). Apples and oranges: or, why apples are not orange and don't need to be a response to Firth and Wagner. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(1), 83–90.
- Geeslin, K. L., & Long, A. Y. (2014). *Sociolinguistics and second language acquisition: Learning to use language in context*. New York: Routledge.
- Giroir, S. (2014). Narratives of participation, identity, and positionality: Two cases of Saudi learners of English in the United States. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48(1), 34–56.
- Gregg, K. R. (1990). The variable competence model of second language acquisition, and why it isn't. *Applied Linguistics*, 11(4), 364–383.
- Hoffman, M. F., & Walker, J. A. (2010). Ethnolects and the city: Ethnic orientation and linguistic variation in Toronto English. *Language Variation and Change*, 22(1), 37–67.
- Howard, M. (2012). The advanced learner's sociolinguistic profile: On issues of individual differences, second language exposure conditions, and type of sociolinguistic variable. *Modern Language Journal*, 96(1), 20–33.
- Kinging, C. (2004). Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning and identity reconstruction. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 219-242). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lantolf, J. P. (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2011). A complexity theory approach to second language development/acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition* (pp. 48-72). Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2012). Complex, dynamic systems: A new transdisciplinary theme for applied linguistics? *Language Teaching*, 45(2), 202–214.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex systems and applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Leung, C. (2010). English as an additional language: Learning and participating in mainstream classrooms. In P. Seedhouse, S. Walsh, & C. Jenks (Eds.), *Conceptualising 'learning' in applied linguistics* (pp. 182-205). Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Long, M. (1998). SLA: Breaking the siege. *University of Hawai'i Working Papers in ESL*, 17, 79-129.
- Li, X. (2010). Sociolinguistic variation in the speech of learners of Chinese as a second language. *Language Learning*, 60(2), 366–408.
- Mackey, A., Abbuhl, R. & Gass, S. M. (2012). Interactionist approach. In S. M. Gass & A. Mackey (Eds.), *The routledge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 7-23). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Miller, E. R. (2010). Agency in the making: Adult immigrants' accounts of language learning and work. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44(3), 465–487.
- Morita, N. (2004). Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(4), 573–603.
- Nance, C., McLeod, W., O'Rourke, B., & Dunmore, S. (2016). Identity, accent aim, and motivation in second language users: New Scottish Gaelic speakers' use of phonetic variation. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 20(2), 164–191.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.
- Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language Teaching*, 44(4), 412–446.
- Preston, D. R. (1996). Variationist perspectives on second language acquisition. In R. Bayley & D. R. Preston (Eds.), *Second language acquisition and linguistic variation* (pp. 1–45). Amsterdam : Benjamins.
- Preston, D. R. (2000). Three kinds of sociolinguistics and SLA: A psycholinguistic perspective. In B. Swierzbin, F. Morris, M. Anderson, C. Klee, & E. Tarone (Eds.), *Social and cognitive factors in SLA* (pp.3–30). Somerville , MA : Cascadilla Press.

- Rindal, U. (2010). Constructing identity with L2: Pronunciation and attitudes among Norwegian learners of English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 14(2), 240–261.
- Rindal, U., & Piercy, C. (2013). Being ‘neutral’? English pronunciation among Norwegian learners. *World Englishes*, 32(2), 211–229.
- Saussure, F. de. (1966). *Course in general linguistics*. (W. Baskin, Trans.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2005). *Introducing second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seedhouse, P. (2004). *The interactional architecture of the language classroom: A conversation analysis perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *IRAL—International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 10(3), 209–232.
- Sharma, D. (2005). Dialect stabilization and speaker awareness in non-native varieties of English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 9(2), 194–224.
- Tarone, E. (1983). On the variability of interlanguage systems\*. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 142–164.
- Tarone, E. (1988). *Variation in interlanguage*. London: Arnold.
- Tarone, E. (2007). Sociolinguistic approaches to second language acquisition research 1997-2007. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, 837–848.
- Tarone, E., & Liu, G. (1995). Social context, variation and SLA theory. In G. Cook & B. Seidhofer (Eds.), *Principle and practice in applied linguistics: Studies in honour of H. G. Widdowson* (pp. 107–124). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- The Douglas Fir Group. (2016). A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100(S1), 19–47.
- Trudgill, P. (1972). Sex, covert prestige and linguistic change in the urban British English of Norwich. *Language in Society*, 1(2), 179–195.
- van Compernelle, R. A., & Williams, L. (2012). Reconceptualizing sociolinguistic competence as mediated action: Identity, meaning-making, agency. *The Modern Language Journal*, 96(2), 234–250.
- van Lier, L. (2008). Agency in the classroom. In J. Lantolf & M. Poehner (Eds.), *Sociocultural*



*theory and the teaching of second languages* (pp. 163-186). London: Equinox.  
Young, R. (1991). *Variation in interlanguage morphology*. New York: Peter Lang.