

# Considerations for fostering students' sense of self in the foreign language

By Bruno Drighetti, Canada

## Abstract

It is a common concern among second-language (L2) learners to feel that their identity changes when speaking a foreign language compared to their mother tongue (L1). To some extent, this is a natural process and relates to the new possibilities of viewing the world offered by the new language; on the other hand, it can be an issue if learners do not feel like themselves or feel like a *less interesting version* of themselves, as shown in the presented analyses. In this scenario, instructors have an essential role in promoting alternatives that can contribute to the learners' comfort in the second language and help their L1 identity show in their L2. Given the importance of this matter, this article will discuss some key concepts and considerations about identity in a foreign language and examine alternatives that might help assist with students' sense of self, such as the importance of selecting appropriable genres, being open to uniqueness in style, as well as having a culturally responsive and personal approach in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Communicative approach; identity; subjectivity

## Introduction

Innovative methodologies for teaching a foreign language have been the focus of studies in Applied Linguistics for several decades (Markee, 1992). While grammar was once the guiding point of second language (L2) classes, many teachers and researchers now consider it a bridge to communication, not communication itself. Although essential, having a good understanding of grammar alone does not guarantee that the



language user will be able to employ it effectively and achieve its conversational goals with ease. Amongst the elements often disregarded by a grammar-centered teaching approach, the expression of identity stands out.

As a preliminary definition, this article will consider identity expression as the capacity of a language user to *translate* their identity into language; more specifically, this article will look at the transfer of their identity from the first language into their foreign language(s). In other words, identity expression aligns one's linguistics skills with one's sense of self. Another important consideration about this work is that while the terms *foreign language* and *second language* (L2) are used interchangeably, our preference is for *foreign language* to emphasize the weight of its foreignness and strangeness for the learner. Byram (2006) explains that the relation between language and identity is so strong that certain social groups are often associated with specific speech styles, exemplifying that a teacher's language style is not the same as a Real Madrid supporter's. That does not mean, however, that a subject cannot operate in different identities at different moments; because of the complexity of the human psyche, a teacher can also be a Real Madrid supporter, and an effective language user would be able to navigate both social spaces (a school and a soccer field) with little difficulty.

Most people can indeed express their parts of identity appropriately in the different sectors of life in their L1. Nevertheless, when it comes to foreign language speakers, not feeling like oneself seems to be a common concern. A clear example of this can be observed in the *Lone Lobos with Xolo Maridueña and Jacob Bertrand* podcast (2023, 3:10), in which Bruna Marquezine, a Brazilian actress who played the character Jenny Kord in the DC Comics movie *Blue Beetle*, said: «I feel limited when I'm speaking English. [...] I'm being myself, but like a version, a less interesting version of myself. [...] In Portuguese, I'm nicer, I'm faster, I'm funnier. And in English, sometimes it just takes me, it takes me a while.» Although fluent in English, the actress stated she feels less interesting in her L2 compared to her Portuguese self, in which she is nicer, faster, and funnier. This example is particularly meaningful to foreign language instructors, as it shows that a good understanding of grammar does not necessarily correlate to comfort in the L2.

Besides the idea of being unable to express oneself as one would in the first language, another common concern amongst learners is that another sense of self might emerge. Byram's (2006) research exemplifies this situation with the case of a French speaker who learned Portuguese and felt that another identity was formed through her new experiences using the foreign language. While there is no definite conclusion regarding language learning affecting her identity in this study, the author describes this phenomenon as an *interlanguage* identity (Byram, 2006, p. 11).



When speaking a new language, learners often see themselves in a situation of identity negotiation as they experience their L2 as an alien voice, especially in a context where feelings of apprehension and demotivation are present (Baham, 2021). Wang (2021) also reflects on the authenticity of second language identity, adding to the previous issues the facts that a low language competence, a disadvantageous position in power relations, and the lack of social contexts can affect the students' sense of self in the L2.

Whether a speaker does not feel like themselves or feels like someone else, teachers have the responsibility to promote ways to address this issue in the classroom. This teaching consideration is particularly important in multicultural contexts, such as Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) courses, since the senses of identity and belonging are closely related: It is unlikely that an individual will feel at home or settled in a foreign country if they feel robotic or less interesting when using the country's language.

To better address this situation in the classroom, it is essential to understand what Tavares and Quintino (2019) call a *student's word-taking*: a learner's ability to *take over* a word in a foreign language, *appropriate* it, and *use* it to express their subjectivity. As a complementary definition, De Nardi (2002) considers *taking the word* as the action of having a subject inscribed in the discourse at the same time as they produce it. This concept aligns with the idea of identity expression in this article, as it embraces the fact that not every student can express their subjectivity effectively by simply understanding grammatical structures: It urges the importance of ESL instructors to promote teaching that allows students an opportunity to *use* the language and *see themselves* in it. As explained by Tavares and Quintino (2019, p. 99), although methods and approaches can help students learn, they are not necessarily effective by themselves concerning meaningful learning and students' ability to take the word. Nevertheless, adopting a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach can offer alternatives to support students' word-taking and identity emergence in the second language, as will be addressed in the subsequent section.

## Identity expression through communicative language teaching (CLT)

Once a teacher is aware of the situation in which L2 students feel like a different version of themselves, adopting a communicative approach might be an alternative to address this condition and provide students with an opportunity to develop their communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and, consequently, their comfort in their L2 to show their identity.

Savignon (2017) is an author who has developed extensive research on the pedagogical implications of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in TESL and explains that this approach sees language as a complex object rather than a collection of compartmentalized skills. It challenges the four-skills model



of language to incorporate a multi-semiotic, less structured notion of language: It presumes that real communication does not happen via one skill at a time, but that learners' skills are interrelated, mobilized simultaneously to experience real communication (Savignon, 2017). It does not mean that practices focused on specific skills should be avoided, as it depends on the expected learning outcomes. However, adopting a CLT approach in L2 teaching recognizes the importance of embracing language complexity and the interrelatedness of skills in the teaching practice.

Considering the experience of real communication, simply teaching the structure of a language does not encompass the actual complexity of the language in use. CLT also presumes the importance of developing skills such as interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 2017). These abilities can be brought into the classroom through unexpected and real usage of the L2: Unlike what is often seen in traditional examples or practices from textbooks, authentic communication tends to be significantly less structured and predictable. In practical terms, when students are given a chance to interact with authentic materials (those that were not designed with the purpose of learning but that are seen in the real world), they are also given an opportunity to practice interpretation of the unexpected, a natural, less trained expression of their thoughts, and the negotiation of meaning in case of misunderstandings. While pedagogical materials are of great value for learners yet to have a solid linguistic basis, authentic materials train speakers to interact using the language in real communication contexts.

This perspective on language teaching is more complex than a grammar-based one, as it requires instructors to be able to balance form and function in their teaching, which are perceived as mutually affected. In addition, it adds another challenge to instructors themselves, especially if it is considered that not every teacher was trained in the skills required for spontaneous interaction. Still, in a communicative classroom, grammar is taught contextualized, including discursive features, sociolinguistic rules of appropriacy, and communication strategies (Savignon, 2017).

One last important concept for this discussion concerns the selected genres for in-class practice to achieve the aimed communicative purpose. Askehave and Swales (2001) explain that specific communicative purposes and events are often attributed to every genre. However, there is potential elusiveness in some genres—which can present different functions in different contexts. Before selecting the genres, the instructor must recontextualize them for their new in-classroom conditions to preserve the maximum authenticity possible in the simulation of the communicative event (Hemais, 2016). In short, teachers must carefully select genres to simulate the students' skills in a communicative event and, therefore, achieve the necessary linguistic outcomes.



Having briefly presented the complexity surrounding identity in a foreign language and some guiding principles for adopting a communicative teaching approach, the next section will discuss pedagogical considerations that can support students' identity expression.

## **Pedagogical recommendations to support students' identity expression**

The question that now remains is: Methodologically, how can language instructors implement these considerations into their teaching? There are countless possibilities to remediate this matter in class and promote a subjective, personal foreign language use amongst students. As discussed in the previous section, adopting a communicative language approach is key to fostering students' linguistic appropriation. This article will now address some recommendations that can be taken by foreign language teachers, specifically regarding the adoption of a communicative approach in the classroom that (a) makes use of appropriable genres, (b) is culturally responsive and open to unique forms of expression, and (c) is personal and safe.

First, selecting which genres will be produced in the classroom is an important consideration when discussing subjective use of language. According to Bakhtin (1986, p. 63), «any utterance—oral or written, primary or secondary, and in any sphere of communication—is individual and therefore can reflect the individuality of the speaker (or writer); that is, it possesses individual style.» However, as noted by the author, not every genre allows for an expression of the self, for an individual appropriation, at the same level. Some genres tend to have a strict linguistic style, such as business documents and military commands, and do not allow as much for the speaker's self-expression. If the utterer overly changes the style in these genres, they risk compromising its communicative function, as they are not entirely open for variations (Bakhtin, 1986). On the other hand, some speech genres allow for more flexibility in their forms of expression; for instance, literary texts have more flexibility, and originality is not only accepted in such genres but a positive attribute.

By understanding how genres function in communication, teachers who want to include identity expression in the classroom can choose genres that are more propitious to their manifestation. These might be literary texts, for example, poems and short stories, or non-literary genres that do not have a strict style, such as letters or journals. What is essential is that instructors select appropriable genres, that is, texts that can give students a chance to express themselves and use their foreign language as their own. That does not mean, however, that genres with a strict style should not be practiced in class. On the contrary, many genres with a strict style are essential in everyday life and should be developed in the classroom: For instance, filling out a form in a foreign language is an essential skill for students to develop, as it is a genre that they will likely face while living abroad, and therefore completing forms is an important skill to be developed in the classroom. Working with non-expressive genres should not be seen as an issue. The problem is with



working only with such genres, as they do not create opportunities for learners' identities to come out; what is then ideal is that foreign language classrooms have a balance between objective and subjective genres, which can prepare learners for circulating in all sectors of life, the ones where their identity should show, and the ones where language is neutral and impersonal.

Another important consideration is regarding being open to unique forms of expression. Although grammar correction is essential and should be conducted by instructors, uncommon structures or expressions have significant value regarding subjectivity. Students often use a literal translation of expressions from their first language into the second language. While this strategy might not be the best option concerning actual communication and might seem odd to other speakers who do not share the same linguistic background, this is also an opportunity for students to bring their own culture into their foreign language.

Proverbs and expressions are of great value and represent a particular culture's traditions; Brazilian Portuguese, for example, has many proverbs related to nature, one of the country's primary symbols. The Brazilian Portuguese proverb *Filho de peixe, peixinho é* can be translated literally into English as *The son of a fish is a little fish*, meaning that children behave similarly to their parents. Perhaps the saying *The apple never falls far from the tree* would be the equivalent in English; however, instead of immediately correcting the student, which can attribute a negative connotation to their form of expression, teachers might instead choose to embrace the student's expression as a cultural expression and, therefore, as a form of identity. This does not mean that equivalent expressions in English should not be taught, but it must be done carefully in order not to erase the students' identity. By doing so, teaching becomes culturally responsive, incorporating features, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students into the teaching to make it more effective (Gay, 2002, p. 103).

This brings the discussion to the final consideration in the communicative language classroom: ensuring it is personal and safe. As explained by Wang (2021), because there is a connection between self-esteem and identity verification, there are consequences to potential failure in the emergence of second language identity. It is crucial for second language instructors to take into consideration that expressing the self in a second language itself is a vulnerability and, therefore, to create a safe and personal learning environment.

Building a safe learning environment for mistakes and self-expression in the foreign language classroom can contribute to students' comfort in this new language. Strong and Buyukerol (2024) explain that by sharing personal learning experiences and struggles, instructors can contribute to building a safe space in which errors are not only accepted but expected. While many learners do not feel comfortable in the second language for fearing making mistakes, this approach normalizes errors and takes them as part of the learning experience. Not only is it important to build a safe place for errors, but teachers are encouraged to

normalize other kinds of vulnerability, for example, through sharing personal stories to build rapport and allowing students to share their own. In this context, personal expressions are perceived as welcome in the classroom and grammar mistakes as part of learning.

By adopting the considerations above, it might be possible to minimize the students' sense of an alien voice when they communicate in their L2. Even if instructors cannot mitigate this issue entirely, understanding how one's self-perception in the L2 can be affected and incorporating these reflections into the teaching practices are essential starting points to promote a meaningful language experience.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to present some considerations regarding identity in a second language. This discussion concerns ESL teachers, given that they have an essential role in supporting students' sense of self. It is through teaching methodologies that embrace subjectivity and allow learners to appropriate the language that instructors can have students who feel comfortable in the second language, who feel like themselves as they take over the second language as their own. To do so, as discussed in the previous section, it is fundamental to adopt a communicative approach that incorporates appropriable genres, is open to unique forms of expression, and is culturally responsive and personal. These discussions should not be finalized in this article, as there are further topics to be explored, such as innovative teaching methodologies to address the aforementioned factors and other surrounding issues that affect identity translation from L1 to L2.

## References

- Askehave, I., & Swales, J. M. (2001). Genre identification and communicative purpose: A problem and a possible solution. *Applied Linguistics*, 22(2), 195–212.
- Baham, G. (2021, November 28). Identity in undergraduate L2 writing: A juxtaposition of academic voice and internal voices. *CONTACT Magazine*, 47(3), 33–40. <https://contact.teslontario.org/identity-in-undergraduate-l2-writing-a-juxtapositionof-academic-voice-and-internal-voices/>
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. University of Texas Press.
- Byram M. (2006). *Language and identities. Preliminary study: Language of education*. Language Policy Division.
- Chomsky, N. (1959). A review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior. *Language*, 35(1), 26–58.



- De Nardi, F. S. D. (2002). *Outros dizeres sobre o ensino de segunda língua: um lugar para a tomada da palavra no terreno da opacidade e do real [Other sayings about second language teaching: a place for taking the word on the terrain of opacity and reality]*. [Master's thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul]. <https://lume.ufrgs.br/handle/10183/1656>
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of teacher education*, 53(2), 106–116.
- Hemais, B. (2016). Leitura na aula de inglês: uma abordagem baseada em gêneros discursivos [Reading in the English classroom: an approach based on discourse genres]. *Revista Do GELNE*, 4(1), 1–6. <https://periodicos.ufrn.br/gelne/article/view/9127>
- Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics*. Penguin Books.
- Lone Lobos with Xolo Maridueña and Jacob Bertrand [lonelobosofficial]. (2023, August 15). *Special Guest Bruna Marquezine | Lone Lobos with Xolo Maridueña and Jacob Bertrand Episode 13* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIhPrZ-3Rc>
- Markee, N. (1992) The diffusion of innovation in language teaching. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. 13, 229–243. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190500002488>
- Savignon, S. J. (2017). Communicative competence. In *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching* (pp. 1–7). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 44. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0047>
- Strong, B., & Buyukerol, E. O. (2024, August 30). The role of making and correcting errors in second language learning. *CONTACT Magazine*, 50(2), 9–17. <https://contact.teslontario.org/the-role-of-making-and-correcting-errors-in-second-language-learning/>
- Tavares, C. N. V., & Quintino, I. S. A. (2019). A palavra (não) tomada: enunciação e oralidade no ensino-aprendizagem de Francês Língua Estrangeira (FLE) [The word (not) taken: Enunciation and orality in teaching-learning French as a Foreign Language (FLE)]. *Revista Brasileira De Linguística Aplicada*, 19(1), 91–118. <https://www.scienceopen.com/document?vid=b1f1ceeb-d42b-41f9-ba98-696199a90066>
- Wang, Y. (2021). Authenticity of identity and second language learning. *Sage Open*, 11(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211068516>





#### Author Bio

---

Bruno Drighetti is a Ph.D. candidate in Linguistics at the Federal University of Uberlândia and an ESL instructor at Conestoga College. He holds a B.A. in English and Portuguese and a Master's in Linguistics. His research interests are primarily focused on Discourse Analysis and Stylistics, with a particular emphasis on the application of discursive theories in TESL practices to support innovative teaching methods and effective curriculum development.

