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Interculturality as Collaborative Identity Management in Language Education



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Abstract

Just over ten years ago, Block (2007, p. 2) called the increasing attention that second language researchers—and social scientists at large—were giving to the construct of “identity” an “obsession.” Since then, the identities of those who use, learn or study a language have been investigated in greater detail (e.g., Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott & Brown, 2013; Clarke, 2008; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Edwards, 2009). It may seem that intercultural language education is lagging behind this tendency. However, a number of publications (e.g., Kramsch, 2009; Rivers & Houghton, 2013) suggest that, considering contemporary global societies, the intercultural goals of language learning and teaching can be better promoted by replacing the notion of “culture” with that of multiple “identities” or “subjectivities.” More specifically, language education can aim to make students capable of selecting the language resources available to them in order to express their (developing) desired identities and, at the same time, to recognise the multiple identities that their interlocutors put forth in a given context (Borghetti, 2016). To make the case for this “identity-related intercultural language education,” the article reviews and discusses a number of studies which, from different perspectives, have already argued for a more prominent role of the construct of “identity” in the field of second language education.

Keywords: interculturality, identity, intercultural language education, language-culture nexus, ELF

A Story as a Preface

Not long ago I happened to be browsing through TV channels when I paused over a popular talent show, *The Voice of Italy*. A girl in her twenties was singing in front of the cameras, while standing behind four people seated on swivel armchairs, who too were facing the cameras and not the singer. As I learned later, I was watching the Italian version of an international TV show and witnessing a “blind audition,” in which a group of judges decides which candidates will take part in the actual show,

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without being able to see them. The girl's performance was very good and at the end all four judges swivelled their armchairs to face her, in this way confirming that she would be admitted onto the show. As I immediately understood, this was also the moment when each judge had to try to convince the girl to accept them as her vocal coach, according to the rules of the show. A short conversation ensued, during which both the audience and the judges learned that the girl's name was Fatima and that her father was from Senegal. It was at that point that one of the judges addressed her in Wolof, obtaining the following reaction in Italian.

Ma: >io non ne so una parola< (.) °proprio° zero EH: RAGA! Io sono italiana! Son-romagnola! So-
 Bu:t >I don't know a word of it< (.)°not° a word HEY: GUYS! I am Italian! I'm from Romagna! I-

There is nothing particularly *special* in this short story¹, since such experiences, in times of intense mobility and migration, are *ordinary* for many people in many parts of the world. To be ascribed an identity that one does not recognise as one's own is presumably an inherent feature of interpersonal interaction, which is probably just further highlighted by globalisation. After all, this is yet another demonstration that traditional identity markers (e.g., family composition, name, and physical traits) are often useless and misleading for grasping the complexity of people's background and sense of belonging. What makes this episode interesting for the purposes of this article is rather the two parties' use of language.

The girl's utterance seems to confirm that it is the use of language that best reveals how individuals position themselves in any given interaction. Her adoption of a younger generation's slang ('°proprio° zero EH: RAGA!'), together with a rather pronounced local accent, reinforces her positioning, and in general these two factors could represent strong clues pointing toward the identity she wanted to have recognised in that very moment. We cannot know, of course, if she is used to representing herself differently in other contexts; we could even argue that she might feel like a Senegalese daughter, or even as Senegalese herself under different contextual conditions. However, here the objective is to better perceive what identities she was performing during her audition, and, above all, what clues she was offering through conversation to help her interlocutors in understanding which code or discourse choices were more appropriate for engaging with her "transportable identity" (Zimmerman, 1998).

For what concerns the judge, he seemed to have been misled by relying fully on traditional identity markers, without paying attention to Fatima's identity performance. However, a quite paradoxical point here is that it was the judge's mastery of Wolof, his being plurilingual, which appeared to make him fail in his intention of creating a sense of proximity with the girl (and thus presumably to be chosen as her coach for the show). His change of language, which was expected to work as an involvement strategy, in fact resulted in a mildly embarrassing *faux pas*.

Introduction

Considering the anecdote above, one may wonder what the advantage of plurilingualism is, if the very possibility of language choice can break down communication, rather than open up further opportunities to engage with people. In turn, from an educational point of view, this casts doubt on the role of language education; plurilingualism is not a plus *per se* and fostering communicative competence in one or more languages is not sufficient for the learners/users to establish and maintain relationships with their interlocutors. Nor is it sufficient to rely on what one presumes to be the

¹ A longer version of this story was originally published in Italian in Borghetti (2016).

interlocutor's "cultures" from what may seem reasonably trustful markers. On the contrary, it is necessary for students to learn how to use their plurilingual repertoires to notice and ratify/negotiate their interlocutors' contextual (i.e., transitory and relational) identities, which – as will be argued – may be variously linked to given cultures. In other words, besides being guided in developing their communicative competence in the target language (TL), learners need to be equipped with some awareness of how they and others shape their identities in interaction, considering that identities can be defined as:

multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly. At any particular moment a person usually experiences his or her articulated self as a symbolic, timeless whole, but this self may quickly be displaced by another, quite different "self," which is based on a different definition of the situation. (Ewing, 1990, p. 251)

This article explores what role *intercultural language education* (ILE) can have in encouraging learners to grasp such clues and to consequently accommodate their plurilingual language behaviours in consideration of the interlocutors' self-representations. Within a social constructionist orientation, it draws on postmodern or poststructuralist views of identity to explore how ILE can base its educational value on "identity"; this, it is argued, could replace "culture" as the theoretical construct that frames and justifies intercultural education in the language class. In the next pages, a number of studies will be reviewed, which, from different perspectives and with diverse degrees of explicitness, have already argued for a more prominent role of the construct of "identity" in ILE (e.g., Rivers & Houghton, 2013; Kramsch, 2009).

Thus, the article starts by outlining the relationship between identity and language learning in second language research, as addressed by an increasing number of studies (see section 3). Then, it focuses on ILE and addresses three issues which seem to confirm that "an identity-related intercultural language education" is theoretically sound and pedagogically feasible. Here the argument moves from the so-called language-culture nexus (see section 1) which, despite being a well-known "sore point" in intercultural language education, has already been conceptualised in ways that prelude poststructuralist discourses of "identity" (Risager, 2006, 2007). Moreover, non-essentialist perspectives on culture, which represent a precondition for an identity-related intercultural language education, are being given increasing attention in ILE (see section 2). Finally, English as a lingua franca (ELF) research has already shown that it is possible to give limited or no attention to the target culture in language education, in favour of a more identity-oriented language pedagogy (see section 3). In the final part, the paper shifts the focus to pedagogy and reviews a number of ILE studies which have explicitly addressed (or can support discourses) on identities, in relation to educational aims, learning objectives, and teaching methods (see the section on identity management in the language class).

Identities in Second Language Research

Just over ten years ago, in his book *Second language identities*, David Block (2007, p. 2) called the increasing attention that second language researchers – and social scientists at large – had been placing on the construct of "identity" since the mid-90s an "obsession with identity." From that point on, the identities of those who use, learn or study a language have been investigated much further (e.g., Benson *et al.*, 2013; Clarke, 2008; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Edwards, 2009). As argued by Block himself, current discussions on identity in language studies are firmly linked to postmodern or poststructuralist ontologies, which have become influential explicative frames for understanding contemporary global complexities. Mentioning, among others, Giddens (1991) and Bauman (1992), he states:

In the work of many social scientists, there has been a movement away from a preoccupation with stability, function and structure to a priming of individual agency and a shift from fixed essentialized versions of demographic categories such as race, ethnicity, gender and age to a generally constructivist perspective which sees these categories as more fluid and unstable. (2007, p. 3)

Within this paradigm, which theorises movement over fixity and plurality over uniqueness, the inherent features of “identity as a construct” have been defined more or less systematically by a broad range of interdisciplinary research, which has often described identity as “multiple,” “hybrid,” “fluid,” “dynamic,” “contextual,” “situated,” among other terms. Without the aim of offering an exhaustive list, below three different frameworks are introduced which describe “identity,” in view of the reflections on intercultural language education this article wishes to put forth.

The first of these was proposed by Norton (2006), who was among the first scholars to integrate a comprehensive theory of identity into language learning (Norton, 2000, 2012). She outlines five characteristics of what she calls “a sociocultural conception of identity” (2006, pp. 24-25). Accordingly, identity is:

1. “dynamic and constantly changing across time and place”: by learning a new language, most individuals experience a “transition” in their sense of belonging;
2. “complex, contradictory, and multifaceted”: being socially constructed, identity is often contradictory and dynamic;
3. “marked by relations of power that can be either coercive or collaborative”;
4. linked with classroom practice when self-reflexivity is encouraged among learners;
5. “constructed by language” as much as it constructs language.

This last feature – the relationship between identity and language – is at the core of Bucholtz and Hall’s framework (2005), where identity is assumed as being produced in interaction. This second framework is based on a variety of research in social psychology, linguistic anthropology and discourse analysis and summarises five principles in conceiving identity:

1. Identities are first of all discursive constructs which emerge in interaction, rather than entities which precede interaction. Therefore, as is common within a postmodern vision, language use is not so much seen as the means by which identity manifests itself, but rather the very place where identities are shaped.
2. “Identity emerges in discourse through the temporary roles and orientations assumed by participants, such as evaluator, joke teller, or engaged listener” (2005, p. 591). These transitory roles influence international expectations about who does what in a specific context (who has the right to interrupt, to ask a question, and so on) and, to a certain extent, contribute to the formation of identity in discourse.
3. Identities are variously linked to broader ideological structures (dominant discourses about specific groups of people, for example) which are made manifest through language choices (e.g., lexical items, implicatures, speech evaluative orientation).
4. Identities are relational, that is, they acquire their meaning in relation to other possible identities that the speaker and the other social actors can assume in a specific context. For example, at school, identity positions are largely constrained by the institutional roles that the actors play there (e.g., the teacher and the student).
5. Identities are always partial, given that they are situated in a given context (point 4) and respond to both the interactional (point 2) and ideological (point 3) configurations.

Zimmerman (1998), instead, offers a third framework in which he distinguishes between “discourse,” “situational,” and “transportable” identities. The first two dimensions of identity mostly correspond to principles number two and four in Bucholtz and Hall’s framework (2005) above; while the third refers to those aspects of identity which are potentially relevant in every context and situation (e.g., being a woman, Spanish, and so on). Whilst more stable than discourse and situational identities, transportable identities are also strictly linked to language use in interaction. What is more, they are not always perceived as relevant in any given context. For example, by studying a conversation between Japanese and American students, Mori (2003) has shown how the two groups’ respective nationalities were brought into play in various ways during their communicative exchange: they were rarely made explicit objects of discourse, sometimes becoming relevant according to conversation topics and thus influenced particular discursive practices (e.g., when speaking about Japanese films, American students tended to position themselves in the role of questioners, while Japanese students in that of responders). Crucially, most often national identities were not salient at all in the verbal interaction between the two groups of students. Thus, differences that at first glance seem stable and macroscopic are in fact treated as irrelevant by participants in discourse. On the other hand, as illustrated by the example of Fatima in the preface to this article, interlocutors do not always collaboratively negotiate which transportable identities they consider relevant; in these cases identities are often “ascribed” (“you as a Senegalese daughter”) and possibly “resisted” in response (“I as a young Italian girl”) (Day, 1998).² In any case, whether or not this process unravels smoothly, all people perform “acts of identity” (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985) through language (among other strategies, they stress or mitigate their accent, or drop topics which position them in momentarily unwanted identities), to pursue what, stretching Goffman’s words (1959), we may call their “local identity line.”

Making Space for “Identity as a Construct” in Intercultural Language Education

Intercultural language education seems to be lagging behind the tendency of addressing the link between identity and language.³ This does not mean that ILE has neglected identity completely; quite the opposite, both in academic publications and in language policy documents, the term “identity” appears quite a lot. However, often either the term is not used in reference to precise theories (e.g., Byram, 2006; Beacco *et al.*, 2010) or its use is based on theoretical constructs which are quite different from the ones presented above. Byram (1997, 2008), for example, refers to Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) and Self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which conceptualise identity as the result of the individual’s sense of belonging to specific groups, perceived to be in opposition to different groups. Membership is achieved in comparative and contrastive terms; for the individual, the properties of the in-group take a large part of their meaning in relation to those characterising other groups (Tajfel, 1981). From this perspective, identity assumes a certain degree of flexibility, as it is a dynamic psychological structure, which depends on the social reference system being perceived as temporarily valid by individuals to define themselves. Individuals can categorise themselves as human beings (vs. other animal species), as part of the in-group (vs. the out-group), and as individual subjects (vs. other in-group members) (Turner *et al.*, 1987). Despite this slightly dynamic conceptualisation which allows for identity multiplicity to a certain extent, at all levels, the Self only defines itself in oppositional terms. Individuals’ shifting and contextual sense of belonging are pre-determined by the groups they participate in, and little space is left for other and new identities to emerge in context.

² Pavlenko and Blackledge (2003) differentiate identities in a slightly different way, distinguishing among “imposed,” “assumed” and “negotiable” identities.

³ This is less true for language learning and teaching in general, where, for example, increasing attention has been given to the identities that teachers and learners negotiate in the classroom (e.g., Morgan & Clarke, 2011; Tsui, 2007).

More recently, a number of publications (e.g., Houghton, 2013; Kramsch, 2009; Rivers & Houghton, 2013), have reframed the discourse of identity in intercultural language education, assuming postmodern views comparable to the ones outlined in section 3. Interestingly, these works seem to allude to the notion that, considering contemporary global societies, the intercultural goals of language learning and teaching can be better promoted by replacing the notion of “culture” with that of “identities” or “subjectivities.”⁴ As anticipated in the Introduction, it seems that, by following this line of development, intercultural language education could resolve what is often considered the thorny issue of the language-culture nexus (Baker, 2009; Risager, 2007) (see section 1). This is conceivable if non-essentialist definitions of “culture” are adopted (Holliday, 2011) (see section 2) and if the specific case of ELF pedagogy is taken as a possible example and model (Baker, 2009, 2015) (see section 3).

The “Embedded” and “Embodied” Nature of Culture

1. Identity within the language-culture nexus

When putting the language-culture nexus in language education into question, one has the sensation of touching the untouchable. The belief that language and culture are indissolubly linked is firmly rooted in common thought, possibly because of popular theories (e.g., the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) as well as for ideological reasons (from modernist narratives of nation-state formation to current populist narratives). This conviction has conditioned disciplinary and institutional boundaries (e.g., the articulation of university Spanish, German, etc. departments) and shaped professional identities accordingly (in most parts of the world, for example, French language teachers are usually expected to introduce “the French culture” to their students).

The impression is that language education, even when it was experiencing the so-called “cultural turn” in the 1990s (Byram, Holmes, & Savvides, 2013), has not contributed much to problematising the language-culture nexus. Considering that the agenda of ILE research – especially at the beginning – was stressing the educational value of language learning and teaching by giving centrality to culture (Byram, 1997), it is surprising that such a crucial issue has been often eluded or treated in a non-exhaustive manner. This argument is confirmed by Risager (2007) who, while reporting on the analysis of 17 studies dedicated to intercultural language education, repeatedly stresses that the relationship between language and culture “does not emerge clearly” (p. 127), is “contradictory” (p. 147) or appears “heterogeneous and conflicting” (p. 156).

Risager (2006, 2007) offers one of the most comprehensive frameworks available with which to conceive the relationship between language and culture in intercultural language education. She starts by observing that the existence of a close connection between language and culture has become problematic, due to current internationalisation and globalisation processes, where more and more “languages spread across cultures, and cultures spread across languages” (2006, p. 2). However, she does not accept the position that there is *no* link between language and culture. The aim of her framework is thus to demonstrate that language and culture are detached *from certain points of view* (2006). The starting point of her argumentation is that in order to understand this complex relationship, a preliminary distinction between a *generic* and a *differential* understanding of language and culture is necessary. In the first case, language and culture are conceived as phenomena shared by the whole of

⁴ According to Block (2009) and Kramsch (2014), the terms ‘identity’ and ‘subjectivity’ should be problematised and distinguished. However, considering the exploratory purposes of this paper and in order to assume a comprehensive orientation toward the variety of ILE studies which either address ‘identities’ or ‘subjectivities’, this article will not to elaborate nor rely on the difference.

humanity; every individual has the faculty of language as much as they have the (biological, psychological, social) capacity to participate in the production and sharing of cultural meanings. In the second case, the world languages are considered as separated (German, Italian, etc.), and the relation that each has with specific cultural phenomena is considered. According to Risager, it makes no sense to argue that language and culture can be separated at a *generic* level, since human culture always includes language, just as much as language cannot be produced and interpreted without culture. On the contrary, if addressed in *differential* terms, the question becomes more articulated and interesting. In brief, it is impossible to talk of a link between language and culture if not in three different ways, each one depending on a particular view of language (2007):

1. If language is considered as “linguistic practice,” i.e. as observable social behaviour, the link resides in that individuals attribute meanings to their own and others’ utterances according to their personal cultural resources (see point 2).
2. When language is addressed from a psychological point of view and consists in the individual’s plurilingual repertoire (“linguistic resources”), then the language-culture nexus is to be found on an individual level: each individual has an idiolect made of all the languages and language varieties they speak, and each individual has a personal culture resulting from their participation in different groups. It is on the basis of this personal and dynamic “languaculture”⁵ that people model and interpret language practices differently from one another (see point 1).
3. While practices and linguistic resources are interdependent (namely, we use a language because we know it, and we know it because we use it), language understood as a “linguistic system” is clearly different. It is neither a social nor a psychological reality, but a social construction; it is a language (Italian, English, etc.) when we talk about it in abstract terms, temporarily forgetting that no language is unitary and homogeneous. Coherently, when language is conceived as a construction, the link between language and culture is also conceived as such.

Two aspects of Risager’s thought are interesting for the purposes of this paper. First of all, the view expressed in point 3 explains why the language-culture nexus in language education seems untouchable; being a specific social construction, this link is loaded with values and ideology, which may tend to overlook any evidence of inconsistency and contradiction in the concrete relationship existing between a language and “its” culture. Secondly, even if Risager does not elaborate on the issue, she clearly links the relationship between language and culture to a postmodern view of identity. Quoting Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), she presents “linguistic practice as acts of identity” (2007, pp. 74-75); observable language behaviours (point 1 above) are ongoing and situated identity constructions, through which individuals project externally their inner (sociocultural) understanding of the world, by smoothly making use of their multiple linguistic resources (point 2). In other words, the individuals’ cultural realities are expressed through acts of identity via the use of language. Stretching Risager’s thought, one can say this is a theoretically-sound way to conceive the relationship between culture, language and identity in ILE; in principle, it allows us to focus on identities in the language class, while still implying culture as an underlying fundamental concept. The question is now indeed to define what culture is.

2. A non-essentialist approach to culture as a premise

Risager’s conceptualisation of the existing multiple bonds between language and culture is strictly linked to a non-essentialist perspective of culture, arguably a precondition for envisaging an identity-related ILE. Moreover, as this “new” approach to culture is already spreading in intercultural language

⁵ Risager borrows the term ‘languaculture’ from Agar (1994) and uses it to indicate any of the three combinations of language and culture. However, the expression seems mostly used in the literature to refer in particular to the second meaning, i.e. the individual’s plurilingual and multicultural resources.

education (e.g., Cole & Meadows, 2013; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), it could also easily support a more identity-oriented change.

Especially in the 1990s, when systematic reflections on the educational value of language learning and teaching began to develop (e.g., Byram, 1997), ILE used to move from what can be now called a “culturalist” or “essentialist” approach to culture (Holliday, 2011), apart from a few exceptions (Kramersch, 1993, 1998). As usually happens in common thought, “culture” was defined as the set of material, social or subjective characteristics shared by the members of a specific *national* or *ethnic* community (history and traditions, social and communicative practices, religion, value system, etc.). This conceptualisation was built on the traditional way of conceiving the language-culture nexus: when referring to the existence of special relationships between a specific language and the community which speaks it, such a community was understood exclusively as a national or ethnic group.

In relatively recent times, this definition of “culture” has lost its descriptive power of contemporary reality, given that the effects or agents of globalisation (in particular migration, mass tourism and the Internet) have made societies very internally heterogeneous (e.g., Kramersch, 2009). The relative ease with which today people come into contact allows individuals greater “freedom” to select what cultural groups they want to participate in, with the result that cultures (including of course national ones) are no longer coherent systems which can be passed down with minimal variations from generation to generation (Hannerz, 1992).

Starting from similar reflections, and therefore in contrast with the culturalist perspective, a “non-essentialist” approach to culture has been put forth. In this perspective, culture is defined as (Holliday, 2011):

1. Any discourse community which creates and recreates a common social space, a story and a joint imaginary to achieve shared goals (Kramersch, 1993, 1998). From this point of view, a group for defence of human rights or a football team can be called “cultures” as much as the members of a nation-state (Borghetti, 2016). The difference, if anything, consists in the fact that the first (called “small cultures”) are more informal and unstable, while nations and ethnic groups (the “large cultures”) correspond to shared social representations, which are “reified” through the political use which has been made of them over time (Holliday, 1999).
2. An ever-changing social force; cultures are mixed, internally diverse and have uncertain and transitory borders.
3. A discourse community characterized by the use of a specific language (Italian, French, etc.), a linguistic variety (e.g., medical or academic jargon), or even by particular types of discourse (for example, mainly argumentative, if we take the case of a human rights association).
4. The product of an ideological construction. Groups create representations of each other (or even of themselves) to achieve various objectives, including increasing their internal cohesion, legitimizing certain political choices or obtaining economic benefits.
5. A series of identity characteristics that, moment by moment, individuals consider salient, depending on specific contexts, interlocutors, topics of conversation. Nobody “belongs” to a culture; rather, individuals participate in different cultural groups at the same time and, in each one, bring their own diversity, contributing in this way to constant cultural change.

Going back to Risager’s positions (2006, 2007), this last point further explains how, within a non-essentialist paradigm, the close relationship between identity and culture can be conceptualised: While a culture is the set of ever-changing characteristics which the members of a given human group recognise as their own; identity is a personal, contextual and dynamic process of identification with

different (“large” or “small”) groups or, in Bettoni’s terms “*the subjective experience of the individual who defines his affiliation to the group with which he shares the same traits*” (2006, p. 38).

Thinking forward to pedagogy, the idea that any kind of human group can be a culture represents a necessary condition for language students to realise that personal belonging (i.e., identity) can be felt in respect to a plurality of cultures. Moreover, a non-essentialist approach helps clarify that cultural membership is not always perceived as salient by individuals, who may experience shifting identifications, according to the plurality of factors which define the specific communicative event they are participating in (e.g., physical settings, participants, purposes). Crucially, language use helps identify what identity a person wants to have recognised. Finally, this approach prevents students from considering culture as a power-free phenomenon and, as a consequence, identities as unconstrained options for all individuals.

3. English as a Lingua Franca pedagogy as an example

Literature on English as a Lingua Franca (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011) and its the related implications in language and intercultural education (Baker, 2015; Holmes & Dervin, 2016) may play an important role in helping open up possibilities for ILE to assume “identity” as a key theoretical construct. After all, for the series of reasons sketched below, ELF studies (e.g., Baker, 2009, 2015) have offered a substantial redefinition of the link between language and culture, which is leading to a more identity-oriented language pedagogy. In this sense, ELF can represent a viable example for language education at large.

The premise is that, since a lingua franca does not have a native speaker, there is no specific cultural group whose social and communicative practices English as a second language (L2) students should learn to decode and use. Though ILE scholars (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998), in line with applied linguists (e.g., Cook, 2012), had already reached similar conclusions, contesting both the utility of taking the native speaker as a model for language and (inter)cultural learning and its existence altogether, discourses on ELF have provided concrete evidence in support of these arguments. A benchmark for learning is completely missing in the case of ELF, which in general demonstrates a case in which a specific language does not correspond to a specific culture. However, English as a lingua franca is not void of cultural elements. With few exceptions (e.g., House, 2002), it is now widely recognised that ELF speakers themselves “fill language” with their cultures. As pointed out by Baker:

[...] we see the links between language and culture emerging in situ as a result of adaptation and negotiation on the part of the participants. In relation to linguaculture we can see the influence of individual linguacultures as well as local linguacultures but here too the relationship is complex and adapted and changed throughout the course of interactions. (2015, p. 99)

ELF is loaded with the multiplicity of cultural meanings that the speakers convey and produce during the interaction, relaying on their respective linguacultures (Risager, 2007) as well as on the cultural context where communication takes place.

ELF problematisation of the language-culture nexus and the relative importance assumed by ELF speakers’ idiosyncratic linguacultures (or plurilingual identities) appear to be good premises upon which to prepare the grounds for discourse on identities in intercultural language education. After all, also moving away from ELF premises, being interculturally competent has little to do with understanding the social norms, values, etc. of specific cultural groups; it is rather linked to the ability to grasp the others’ contextual cultural belongings (i.e., identities) in real time and being able to act

upon such awareness. This is true when ELF is the medium of communication as much as when other languages are used, either as a lingua franca or not. However, putting into question the language-culture nexus is somehow “easier” in the case of an international lingua franca than with other languages, as ELF is not connected to any macro-social speech community (Knapp, 1987/2015) and no specific cultural group identifies itself with its use (at least not yet). The fact that English as a lingua franca is not linked to the ideological constructions typical of national, ethnic or religious “large cultures” (Holliday, 1999), may well have played a significant role in this sense.

Separating language from culture is less easy to achieve for other “linguistic systems” in Risager’s (2007) terms (see section 1); this is due to the fact that they are ideologised social constructions. Nevertheless, ELF can represent a viable example for identity-related ILE also at the pedagogical level. Long after it was first advocated (e.g., Starkey, 1991, 2007), the practice of introducing global ethical and socio-political issues in textbooks rather than culture-specific scenarios is now increasingly common; it has also spread in many English as a Second Language contexts in the world, due to a global editorial market. This solution of course avoids culturalist perspectives on the target language. Crucially, it also allows students greater freedom to position themselves in desired identities (e.g., female, animal-rights activist) which, made pertinent by the topics touched upon in textbooks, transcend their nationalities and first languages (L1).

4. Wrapping-up: making the case for identities beyond cultures

Following the reasons summarised above, a move from culture to identity in intercultural language education seems already under way. If supported, it may become, for ILE, a paradigm shift, like that envisaged by Hua (2014) in intercultural communication studies, i.e. a new way of conceptualising the relation between language, identity and interculturality.

In the specific case of ILE, replacing “culture” with “identity” as a theoretical construct necessarily implies a more decisive adoption of non-essentialist views of culture. By definition, this could liberate ILE from basing the educational value of language learning and teaching on comparisons between the target and the students’ national cultures, which are also problematic due to the stereotypical representations they convey (e.g., McConachy, 2018). Presenting the learners with transnational “small cultures” (Holliday, 1999) (e.g., international web communities which use the target language) is also a preliminary condition. However, in order for an identity-related intercultural language education to take place, it is necessary to introduce situations and “characters that are culturally and linguistically rich” (e.g., multilingual) (Ros I Solé, 2003, p. 148), and to make explicit that various dimensions of diversities (socio-economical, generational, gender-related, etc.) are made salient through the target language. The first aim here is to guide the students’ critical observation on how people use their languages (including the target one) to accomplish potentially infinite identity performances. Secondly, the learners themselves are invited to perceive and enact their multiplicity through the new language, assuming shifting identifications thanks to it, in classroom and beyond.

The changes outlined here may not be easy to realise: usually people assume cultures and cultural identities as reified or solid realities (e.g., Dervin, 2012; Holliday, 2011). This is due to different factors (which depend on context specificities), including: ideological reasons, when language contact is framed within political discourses; the pervasiveness of traditional views (linked to past political constructions); the influential power of language commodification (e.g., the Italian language is much easier “to sell” if strictly linked to Italian art). On the other hand, poststructuralist views of culture and identity such as those assumed here are themselves ideological constructions, sometimes seen as designed by those “at the top of the global power pyramid,” who have the “privilege” of individuality (Bauman, 2005, p. 3, p. 26). While this is not the place to address this issue, it is worth mentioning

that a major part of the intercultural dialogue envisaged here takes place from culturalist and non-essentialist conceptions of identity. In other words, it is necessary for language students to develop the awareness that some individuals tend to perceive their national/religious identities as salient in any context while others prefer not to be automatically associated to the large cultures they participate in. These last reflections already pertain to pedagogy, the object of the next section.

Identity Management in the Language Class

After discussing the premises for an identity-related ILE at a conceptual level in see section 4, we now turn to teaching practice. A number of studies have put forward various proposals which, once linked to each other, may indicate a way to coherently move from culture to identity in the language class.

Crucially, this change does not require the adoption of new teaching methods nor the design of dedicated class activities; rather, it invites us to rethink the existing in the light of “new” theoretical input, as already suggested by some scholars (e.g., Baker, 2012; Rivers & Houghton, 2013).

In the introduction to their edited volume *Social identities and multiple selves in foreign language education*, Rivers and Houghton (2013) state that, “[...] one of the unifying threads linking chapters within this volume is that focused upon replacing the nation as the primary unit of analysis, as is traditional within foreign language education, with an alternative” (2013, p. 7). The alternative to which the authors and editors allude is precisely represented by the question of identities in the language class, which they address relying either on Social identity theory (see section 4) or on interdisciplinary research dedicated to multiple identities (see section 3). Despite this mixed-approach, to the best of this author’s knowledge, the volume represents the only contribution which attempts to link theories of identities with classroom research and, above all, with teaching practice. As a matter of fact, the chapters collected in Rivers and Houghton’s volume mainly focus on language practices and interaction dynamics, often with the aim of identifying which factors foster/inhibit students’ and/or teachers’ identity co-construction, in the process of learning/teaching a target language.

Even if Rivers and Houghton’s edited work represents the most explicit attempt to replace “culture” with “identities” as a theoretical construct with special attention to classroom practice, its aim is still mainly descriptive, aiming to portray how identities are made relevant (and may be studied) in the language class. In order to assume a prescriptive orientation (i.e., to “focus on teaching and assessing, as well as on the use of [...] descriptions in the formulation of teaching objectives”; Byram, 2009, p. 325), in the sections that follow, the present literature review discusses how an identity-related ILE may develop from recognised educational aims (see section 1), learning objectives (see section 2), and teaching methods (see section 3).

1. Educational aims

Defining educational aims is the first step in moving from the theoretical level to teaching practice. As has been done for ILE, they have been summarised in various models of “intercultural competence” (IC) (for an overview see Borghetti, 2012), namely theoretical constructs which schematically and synthetically represent the main cognitive, affective and behavioural characteristics a language student/user should ideally develop as they acquire their L2 competence (e.g., the ability to compare cultural facts or to mediate among different perspectives). It is here argued that, in order to introduce an identity-related dimension in ILE, it may suffice to slightly revise the existing IC formulations. Byram’s model (1997, 2008) is considered in particular, because it is one of the most well-known models, but above all because it derives general and specific teaching objectives from each IC component. This feature of directly linking conceptual to pedagogical levels makes this model

particularly apt to introduce the suggested identity-oriented ILE development in the language class at a pedagogical level.

As a start, it is worthwhile to note that, thus far, work on identity in both ILE (e.g., Houghton, 2013; Kramsch, 1998, 2009) and language education at large (Block, 2007; Morgan & Clarke, 2011; Rivers & Houghton, 2013) has focused on the learning subject. Particular attention has been given to offering language students “multiple identity positions from which to engage in the language practice of the classroom, the school and the community” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 432). In contrast, the importance of guiding learners to observe how interlocutors perform their multiple identities in interaction and to collaboratively manage such a multiplicity has not been addressed so thoroughly. In this regard, a feasible educational aim can be to help make learners aware that people they come into contact with often act on the basis of various and changing forms of belonging. Students can be enabled to better grasp the plurality of factors (discursive, situational, relational, macro-social and ideological) that influence the way individuals perceive themselves (as anticipated in see section 3) and thus the identities they intend to project and negotiate. In this sense, intercultural language education could aim to make learners able to effectively and appropriately select the language resources available to them with respect to the specific transportable identities their interlocutors appear to consider relevant at a given moment, rather than relying on assumed cultural features.

As said, this view does not imply abandoning intercultural competence as an educational goal; rather, it requires rethinking its presuppositions, so that the adjective “intercultural” can fully refer to all dimensions of diversity that speakers can potentially consider relevant. It is a sort of “interculturality without culture” (Dervin, 2012, p. 187): a communicative exchange is defined “intercultural” not on the basis of the interlocutors’ belonging to different groups (cultures) but considering their subjective experiences of belonging (identities) as they emerge during the interaction itself.

Therefore, referring to Byram’s model (1997, 2008), promoting intercultural competence by taking identities as a reference point means developing learners’:

1. *Awareness* that individuals identify themselves with a plurality of cultural groups, and that their shifting processes of identification are influenced by both micro (contextual) and macro (often ideological) factors. This also implies “critical cultural awareness/political education,” i.e. the ability “to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products” (1997, p. 53) linked to the cultures one considers as locally relevant, provided that a non-essentialist definition of “culture” is assumed.
2. *Attitudes* of “curiosity and openness, readiness” (1997, p. 50) to help interlocutors to perform their local preferred identities.
3. *Skills of interpreting and relating*, i.e. observation abilities enabling them to better decode identity performances in real time;
4. *Skills of discovery and interaction*, i.e. the learners’ ability to manage their own languaculture (Risager, 2007) to enact their desired identities and, at the same time, to ratify those which interlocutors appear to consider salient for themselves (or to negotiate both of these).

In conclusion, Byram’s definitions of the IC components require a slight revision to accommodate to identity-related educational aims. One may argue that only *knowledge* (of social groups and their practices) has limited importance in the new framework. While being informed about out-groups cannot be considered negative, a lot of information without the robust skills of interpreting is counterproductive (much more than the opposite case, i.e. developed skills without any knowledge). As a matter of fact, in information-loaded societies, it is not uncommon to meet very knowledgeable individuals inclined to make assumptions about others’ identities.

5.2 Learning objectives

This identity-based revision of intercultural language education necessarily entails rethinking the relationship between “new” ILE educational aims and communicative objectives in the target language. Even if developing the learners’ TL competence evidently remains a priority, there is a need to broaden the perspective in such a way as to account for the fact that all languages (including varieties) can be potentially used to express forms of identification. As a consequence, it is necessary to link the teaching of the target language to the use of other languages, both the students’ L1s and their additional languages.

At a conceptual level, this can be done pursuing the well-established L2 communicative (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic/discourse) objectives (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980; Council of Europe, 2001) as well as the intercultural identity-related finalities (see section 1), while including systematic reflections (and possibly the use) of other languages.

Also in this case, a good number of existing and well established theoretical reflections may serve as a starting point. Forms of plurilingual education have been repeatedly advocated in second language acquisition (for example, the idea of “multi-competence”; Cook, 2012) and language-education policy documents (see the notion of “plurilingual repertoire”; Beacco et al., 2010). As for intercultural language education, Kramsch (2009) in particular has fully addressed the relationship between the learners’ plurilingual repertoires and their identities through the concept of “multilingual subject.” In her terms, language users are first of all subjects whose idea of themselves is closely related to the languages they speak. They convey their meanings using all languages and linguistic resources available to them, in order to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, thanks to which new meanings are created and subjectivities developed. In this perspective, learning a language means that an individual acquires symbolic values in relation to the multilingual expression of Self and thus develops new resources for identity performance and development.

Concepts like “multilingual subject,” “multi-competence” and “plurilingual repertoire” help re-define the role of the communicative competence in the TL in two ways, the first linked to the learners’ own identifications and the second related to their interlocutors’ identity performances.

As for learners’ own identifications, paraphrasing Cook (2012), it can be said that L2 competence reaches its ideal degree of development when speakers/learners are able to use that language - along with all the others they know - to convey the images of themselves that better suit their identification purposes. Therefore, native speakers are not taken as ideal models any longer and a plurality of languages is used in the classroom in order for students to accommodate the target language within the repertoire that is already available to them. Assuming this perspective on identity and plurilingualism has additional impacts on teaching. For example, it implies not providing systematic (negative) feedback when students make errors in the target language and it encourages forms of code-switching and code-mixing, as these can fulfil particular identity-loaded expressive functions.

Besides impacting on learners’ identities, plurilingualism serves to give voice to their interlocutors’ identification processes. As mentioned above, from this point of view an interculturally competent speaker is one who knows how to use their own plurilingual competence to ratify or co-construct the others’ identity in a satisfactory way for all the parties involved. In some cases, this may mean adapting to the interlocutors’ language level (e.g., avoiding idiomatic expressions or using paratactic syntax), even when one’s own language skills would have allowed them to produce a much more articulate and

rich L2. However, in some cases, manifesting a good level of intercultural competence can also lead to making the opposite choice, in order to better align with the interlocutors' local identity: When using their L1 with non-native speakers, simplified speech forms can be avoided, in order not to create a social asymmetry with the interlocutor, by imposing on them an identity they – even momentarily – may not recognise as their own (e.g., being non-native speakers or foreigners). Understanding when either one or the other verbal behaviour (i.e., language simplification or the lack of it) is appropriate is a matter of enacting those critical observation skills mentioned above (see section 1), since no preliminary knowledge is reliable if made outside of a specific interaction.

3. Teaching methods

As for educational aims and learning objectives, ILE teaching methodology must only be slightly revised if the concept of “identities” replaces that of “culture(s)” as a theoretical construct. There is no need to change language curricula or to design specific teaching activities. IC development (see section 1) is essentially based on awareness of plurilingual uses and of their possible effects on people; to promote this, and thus to give the dimension of identity an intercultural role in the language classroom, it is sufficient to adopt some general expedients within the framework of communicative language teaching. Coherently, this article is not indicating specific methodological directions; what follows exemplifies three general adaptations which, as has partly already been suggested by others (e.g., Baker, 2012; Kramsch, 2009), can help give identities a more central role in the language classroom (see also Borghetti, 2016).

3.1 Intercultural uses of textbooks

Most textbooks tend to uncritically rely on the language-culture nexus, to assume an essentialist approach to culture and thus to present the target language contextualised in “its own” cultural/national environment (e.g., Borghetti, 2018; McConachy, 2018; Risager, 2018). It goes without saying that an update in editorial proposals would be desirable. In the meantime, however, these same materials can be creatively used to pursue intercultural purposes. Baker (2012), for example, suggests asking students why the target culture is presented in a certain way, and what different and/or additional information the manual could offer. Interestingly, he also proposes inviting students to critically analyse textbooks meant to teach the students' L1, since learners find it easier to detect essentialist representations when stereotypes regard contexts familiar to them. The distance between reflecting on the images that others have of us and talking about identity in the classroom is short; the experience of being reduced to less than what we are (Holliday, 2011) generally leads individuals to refute the identity that others ascribe to them and to come out with alternative identities. Questions like “what do/don't you recognise in yourself in these representations?” or “in what moments do/don't you feel Italian/French/Moroccan?” can help teachers use textbooks – and many other teaching materials – for intercultural reflections on identities.

3.2 Teaching “to compare with caution”

One main objective of intercultural language education is guiding students to adopt a comparative method which allows them to observe and understand both the target cultures and their own (Byram, 1997). With the aim of enriching ILE within an identity-related dimension, promotion of the comparative method in class requires some scrutiny. As argued by Baker (2015), the risk is of emphasizing just one cultural dimension (usually the national one) to the detriment of other dimensions of diversity, i.e. generational, socio-economic, etc. It is thus important to make learners aware of the relative and non-exhaustive nature of the categories they use when talking about cultural facts. As exemplified in Borghetti (2018), one can certainly describe and compare the free-time activities of

Italian and Irish people, but at the same time be aware that a generalisation is in place and that the criterion of nationality is not the only one adoptable. As a matter of fact, it is possible that, with regard to recreational activities, older people in Ireland have more affinity to Italian peers than with young Irish people. In this sense, a transnational generational culture could be contemplated, which is hidden by the very decision of founding the comparison exclusively on the national variable. Crucially, as highlighted (see section 4.4), focussing on (transnational) “small cultures” may play an important role in allowing students the liberty to experience a variety of identifications in the language class (e.g., young people, in the case considered), without ascribing them an a priori identity based on their nationalities or L1s.

3.3 Class interaction for identity-related interculturality

Language teachers can use class interaction in particular as leverage for developing their students’ identity-related intercultural competence. In order to do so, the language classroom should no longer be seen as the protected environment where learners prepare themselves for “real” (out-of-class) intercultural exchange (Byram, 1997), but the very place for such encounters. Since cultural diversity in a non-essentialist perspective can be experienced within a plurality of dimensions (e.g., national, linguistic, social), even within the most homogeneous class group, there is a variety of potential identity perspectives teachers can invest in to boost interculturality.

ILE scholars have often stressed the importance of class interaction for intercultural learning purposes. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) underline for example that, on whatever discussion topic, teachers should create the conditions for each student to link class experiences with their own and to reflect on their very interpretation processes. Similarly, on the basis of Kramsch’s work (2009), Kearney (2016) argues that promoting interculturality in language education fundamentally consists in expanding the students’ meaning potential through class interaction; students develop the language skills they need to better express their subjectivities and, at the same time, create new meanings thanks to dialogue with other learners and with the teacher.

If interpreted in these terms, any class activity has a potential for identity-related intercultural learning. For reasons of space, here just one example is given, based on a “normal” ever-day classroom conversation. Kramsch maintains that there is nothing more natural in the language class than to “talk about talk” (1993, p. 264). It can be argued that even talking about learning (to use a language) is just as natural. As a matter of fact, when learning or using a new language, it occurs quite often to think of previous experiences of language learning/use. These can be stories—also heard from others—of clumsy mistakes or misunderstandings, or even episodes encountered in books or movies. Many class conversations can rotate around the students’ past and present experiences and aim at making them think and share their ideas of themselves as language users and learners. Stimuli such as the following can help collaboratively explore the individuals’ viewpoints on their own languages (including language varieties) and make the group identify what class dynamics are linked to particular language choices: “How do I feel when I speak/write the target language (other languages)?,” “Why do I prefer to work in class with classmates who know the target language better/worse than me?,” “How can I make myself understood better by less proficient classmates?,” “What L1 expressions would I also like to exist in the target language and vice versa? Why?” Interestingly, questions like these position the students in the role of language learners, a dimension of identity they all share, without assuming that their diverse biographies must necessarily be salient in class. From time to time, some students can decide to share another of their own identities in class (e.g., how languages relate to their role as youngsters in multilingual families), offering the opportunity to further enrich the educational potential of the discussion. The point is, however, that within activities of this type, the teacher leaves the

students with the task of “making the context,” namely of deciding which identities they perceive as salient (Pallotti, 2014, pp. 129-130).

Conclusion

As shown by the anecdote of Fatima and the talent show judge in the preface, plurilingualism can paradoxically be counterproductive for intercultural relations, and being knowledgeable of a given culture can produce the same negative effect. Another paradox: in times of globalisation and intense migration, a “fluent fool” is no longer the person who masters a second language without any knowledge of its culture (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994); instead it risks being the one who knows a lot about that culture. Nowadays, when people mostly belong to several cultural groups and feel their multiple bonds alternate according to contexts and interlocutors, being interculturally competent is even more linked to observational skills and flexibility than in the past. Language users need to grasp from others’ (language) behaviour what identity their interlocutors consider pertinent and to be able to (linguistically) act accordingly.

Given these premises, the article makes the case for the replacement of “culture” with “identity” as a main theoretical construct in intercultural language education. As argued, this certainly implies detracting attention from the target culture and assuming a non-essentialist perspective of culture in general. However, people can hardly be reduced to the sum of the “large” and “small cultures” they potentially participate in; individuals are active subjects, who feel affiliated to one group or another often in a fluid and temporary manner. In fact, they may well not experience any sense of belonging to the cultures conventionally linked to them (e.g., being citizens without having feelings of proximity toward the nation and its members).

In order to sustain this argument, the article presents a commented review of studies which, from different perspectives and from slightly diverse disciplines, seem to offer the conceptual and methodological bases needed to support the realisation of an “identity-related intercultural language education.”

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