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**Identity (De/Re-)Construction: A shifting scale of identities moving abroad and
its teaching implications**

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Independent Professional Project

Brattleboro, Vermont, USA

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Abstract

Language learners who relocate voluntarily to different countries where their native tongue is not the primary spoken language, often uncover and learn aspects of who they are, that is, their identity and user agency. Through personal experience relocating, I intend to share the phenomenon of identity de/re- construction being immersed in another language and culture, moving in between my 'original' home country and the 'new home,' all while not being able to experience both former and latter identities at the same time (physically). This study will explore what I coin as an 'identity spectrum' through first person narratives (interviews) to expand on a shared experience, while honoring the individual nature of the stories. This study has a similar interest and is inspired by Third Culture Kids (TCK), but, it explores those moving abroad past the first 18 years of age and consequently experiencing a shift in who they are while acquiring a new language, culture, and self.

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Identity (De/Re-)Construction: A shifting scale of identities moving abroad and its teaching implications

Introduction

Within the realm of education, namely language education and its teaching, be it English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL), research and literature in the last few decades have begun to pay attention to students beyond being learners in the classroom. There are a multitude of complex learning environments throughout the world with diverse student makeups of different gender preferences, races, nationalities, age; and most importantly: familial, social, and cultural upbringings. With such complexities, a body of students in a classroom cannot be taught in a linear fashion. Often times, in international and multiethnic learning environments there are a multitude of different needs, learning styles, language faculties, literacy and education levels present in the classroom; English could be a given student's second, third, fourth or even fifth language acquired (where every language may have its own role/function, resulting in diglossic functionalities). In addition to language, students can have different identity makeups within these languages, that is, through their different experiences moving across culture(s), acquiring different languages, experiencing different cultural values, ways of thinking, and social norms, parts of who they are or claim to be could potentially be expanded on while not necessarily leaving behind the 'former' or 'original' identity. Rather, they move along an '*identity spectrum*' having moved between their original and cultures other than their own, which they may or may not identify with. It is important to note what I refer to as identifying with a culture does not necessarily mean one legally takes on naturalization or any form of immigration, rather, adoption of cultural mannerisms and acquiring language. This is inspired by the Third Culture Kid (TCK), coined by Ruth Useem (1950). A TCK is a person who has lived his or her childhood moving from country to country and is often referred to as a global

nomad (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999). Simply, they are children who are raised in different cultures than that of their own. They are also typically raised in cultures outside that of their parents'. These persons often live and move into different cultures other than their own due to their parents being employed in different countries before they have had the chance to develop their own identities. I intend to expand on existing bodies of literature, by presenting my own first- person narrative alongside the narratives of the participants I have chosen to interview, to uncover similar themes to what I coin as an *identity spectrum*. The notable difference I am exploring is: the *voluntary* efforts of myself and participants to go abroad into foreign cultures past the 18 years of age defined as adulthood, ultimately experiencing the identity shifts TCK experience during their crucial years of development leading into adulthood.

The idea of an identity spectrum, if you will, emulates that of a plurilinguistic framework: one should not view a speaker and the languages they speak on a hierarchy. Rather, it helps myself and others to understand that linguistic repertoires are meant to be cultivated (including partial or uneven skills across languages), engage prior knowledge and lived experience, and develop metalinguistic and metacognitive competencies (Wichser-Krajcik, 2021). In other words, languages work together rather than functioning as separate systems. Jim Cummin's Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (1978) states the heritage language knowledge is transferable to the new language, where the second language is closely linked to the current competence the student may have in the first language. To compare this to identity, I imply that there are multiple identities that may arise moving across different cultural landscapes and that they may play different roles in a given environment. One identity can be influenced by another on the identity 'scale,' allowing one 'self' to feed the 'other' with experience, therefore transference of knowledge could be achieved. As an example, I lived in Bavaria, Germany for one academic year and inevitably went through the experience of living in a culture where my native language (English) is not the primary spoken language. Having lived in the state of Bavaria, which is

peculiarly different than the rest of Germany (in terms of mannerisms, culture, etc. – putting a stronger emphasis on cultural differences), I needed to adapt to stark contrasts from the culture I came from, where I would experience the ‘de/re-construction of self.’ After some time, that new way of living became a norm for me and I ran with this new norm upon return to the USA. I experienced what can be defined as reverse culture shock, finding that I almost had to reintegrate into a society that was familiar, however did not become foreign, rather, I got to look at my own culture (the USA) from a fresh lens, having been away for an academic exchange year. The U.S. Department describes reverse culture shock as such:

As we immerse ourselves into a new culture, we become familiar with new practices. We learn the smells, the sounds, and the feel of our new location. We learn to interact with new people. All of this is incorporated into our new identity. Eventually, we become accustomed to our new way of life, not realizing that these little changes or customs define what we now find familiar. New routines become our norm. We create new identities through these routines and practices, immersing ourselves into the customs of our new "host" country (U.S. Department of State).

In that process, I also recognize that I was raised in western society, which I believe aided me in the process during my first experience being in Western Europe. Upon return, I was still ‘myself’ in the sense that I will always be tied to the USA culturally, linguistically, and socially, but I have also undeniably got to realize aspects of myself having moved into the unknown and getting uncomfortable. In essence this has allowed me as an educator, student, and continuous language and cultural learner to sympathize, empathize (in certain cases), and most importantly have compassion for students experiencing difficulties in and outside of the classroom.

When students with such a multifaceted makeup step into the classroom, the present educator must know how to facilitate the classroom with particular care, bearing in mind the cultural context everyone comes from and the role they are playing not only within the classroom, but in the environment in which they are now living in (displaced or voluntary). One may question how to tackle such a large task when there are educators whose ‘life, educational, and linguistic’ experiences do not compare to the diverse makeup of their students. Educators may or may not

have travelled across different linguistic and cultural landscapes as their students. I do not imply that international experience equates to being a competent teacher, but international experience could complement teaching styles, insofar that teachers could inherit cultural sensitivity, awareness, and attentiveness to the way students may feel integrating into a new culture. I therefore refer to the idea that identity (de/re-) construction could be an implication; this is what I intend to explore as a potential classroom teaching implication. To support this objective, I will position my arguments by consulting and expanding on the academic literature/research done by Norton Peirce (1995) and what she describes as Imagined Communities/Imagined Identities (along with several other of her variables), Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000) and what they describe as the 5 initial stages of language loss and the four stages of recovery and (re)construction, as well as Sfarid (1998) and the interpretation of acquisition metaphor (AM) and participation metaphor (PM). These theories and frameworks will be the academic foundation to make sense of the experiences of the participants as well as my own. I have summarized my objectives for this essay into three different questions:

Objectives/Research Questions

- (1) How do people (including myself) move from a place that is comfortable into the unknown?*
- (2) How can understanding this experience help teachers to understand and address the culture shock their students may experience coming to a new place of residence?*
- (3) Can different experiences be understood in terms of an identity spectrum? What is the nature of that spectrum? Does such an 'identity spectrum' inherently exist for those who have experienced identity shifts having gone abroad (past the defined age range of Third Culture Kids [TCK] - 18), or is it something influenced by our environmental, social, and linguistic encounters?*

I will begin the next section by giving an overview of the aforementioned literature and their respective implications. The order of literature reads as followed: Norton Peirce (1995), Sfarid (1998), and Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000).

Academic Literature and their Implications

Imagined Communities and Imagined Identities

Norton Peirce (1995) has been invested in looking at the implication of *imagined communities* and *imagined identities*. These two terms refer to one's language learning process extending far beyond the classroom and acquiring it merely as knowledge in a new community. What is explained here is the 'wanting-ness' to be a part of a greater community and social groups. These two terms are crucial in understanding the complexity of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) experienced by language learners:

For many learners, the target language community is not only a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships, but also a community of the imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future. An imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language can be understood within this context (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 415).

In addition to the terms imagined communities and imagined identities, I would like to refer to a third term she has used, *investment*. Investment is a term Norton Peirce (1995) uses, expanding on what Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) describe as *cultural capital*. Cultural capital is used to describe different levels in academic achievement and performance, that is, knowledge credentials, and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups and cultural capitals have different exchange value or 'currency' (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 420). Think of this quite literally; with the concept of cultural capital, Norton Peirce (1995) expanded on the idea in that learners *invest* in the target language they learn at a given time and in a given environment, because they believe it will enlarge their resources, both symbolic and materialistic, and as a result increase their cultural capital. When one's cultural capital increases,

they can ‘reassess their sense of selves and their desires for the future.’ This works in tandem with theories in SLA, which for a long time stated motivation is a fixed characteristic of a language learner and learners who do not perform well simply do not have sufficient drive to learn (or acquire) ‘x’ language. Norton Pierce (1995), Norton (2000), and Norton (2010) sought not to correct the shortcomings of SLA theories, but rather complement ideas of motivation and its direct ties to user motivation. Most SLA studies Norton (2000) observed during the time she conducted her research with immigrant women in Canada only looked at information mentioned before, motivation and user insufficiency thereof. What they did not mention was the large gap in power relations between those language learners and speakers of the target language. For those shortcomings, Norton (2000), in her study with immigrant women, found that having high levels of motivation does not necessarily result in ‘good’ language learning and that:

unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers were often salient in her learners’ accounts. Accordingly, she found it necessary to develop the construct of investment to complement constructs of motivation in the field of SLA (Norton Peirce 1995; Norton 2000, 2010, in press) (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 420).

Norton & Toohey (2011) also mention other factors that may hinder student performance despite their ‘motivation’ to learn the language. When other social factors such as racism, elitism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-immigrant attitudes exist within the community that a learner’s target language exists, investment on the end of the user may be little to nothing and in effect one cannot expand on cultural capitals. Learners who live in oppressive communities are often silenced, stripping away what Norton Peirce (1995) describes as the *right to speak*, where this right and the power to exercise it is unequally distributed, and often L2 learners find themselves positioned by others as speakers without that right. I speak of this right as it is heavily tied to investment, imagined communities and imagined identities. A very clear example

of imposed positioning by other members of communities can be seen in McKay and Wong (1996). A two-year ethnographic study had been conducted on immigrants arriving to California from Taiwan and China, where only one student came from a lower socioeconomic background. This particular student, Brad Wang, went to a top middle school in Shanghai and his spoken and written Chinese is described as a ‘verbal virtuosity,’ which was invisible to his teachers in California at the time. He attempted to make friends with mainlanders of Chinese and Taiwanese descent; when interacting with them he described himself as *zhengzong zhongguoren* ‘I am authentic Chinese,’ but failed to do so effectively. This, in effect, was an unintentional isolating tactic, which ultimately led to rejection of his peers. He had countless attempts to learn English, but failed. “Feigning comprehension” is a term used to describe Brad’s English language learning as a result of teacher and peer rejection, where he faked input during class, but output (production of his abilities) was poor when it was called for. It built a stigma against him and immigrants who are unwilling to learn English, leading to a prescribed identity by his teachers; a ‘low achiever.’ This goes along with Norton’s (1995) three-part identity model: investment → communities of practice → and right to speak.

This is a stark example of what happens when users are not accepted by their communities and often become silenced, which in effect builds resistance towards the group one may imagine themselves to be a part of. Just as Brad Wang attempted to use his Chinese authenticity as a way to gain acceptance and build relationships with his classmates, Norton also notes the distinctive variables race and ethnicity with great importance, noting they are connected to one’s identity and language learning; these variables have also received attention from various scholars such as Ibrahim (1999) who looked at continental African students who are French speakers, living in in Franco-Ontarian high school in Canada to ascertain the impact

on language learning of ‘becoming black’ (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 424). Ibrahim (1999) understood during this study that the linguistic styles one uses are associated with ‘blackness’ in North America, and the African students adopting and using these stylistic features was a way for them to construct identities familiar to (and often esteemed by) their peers, and to connect to North American imagined constructions of ‘blackness’ (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 424).

With the intersectionality of race and nationality among groups of people being closely related to the language acquisition process, acquisition metaphor (AM) and participation metaphor (PM) discussed by Sfarid (1998) can therefore be introduced.

Acquisition and Participation Metaphor

As defined, AM compels us to think of knowledge as a commodity that is accumulated by the learner and to construe the mind as the repository where the learner hoards the commodity...PM, on the other hand, obliges us to think of learning as a ‘process of becoming a member of a certain community (Sfarid, 1998, p.6). In education literature, namely in the past two to three decades, PM has been introduced *not* as a replacement for the traditional AM, rather as its complement – this is where identity meets language acquisition and where my area of interest, as it relates to identity and language, meet one another. PM entails ‘the ability to communicate in the language of a community and act according to its particular norms,’ while AM is about states and the permanence implied by related terms such as ‘having’ and ‘knowledge.’ PM is characterized by ‘doing,’ ‘knowing,’ and ‘becoming part of a greater whole’ (Sfarid 1998; Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000, pp.155-156). While these two metaphors work in tandem, I would like to mention, I do not solely believe PM is a way of ‘integrating’ into a community, but also a method for those who already exist within a community to function, thus understanding how to navigate their social landscapes. For example, I as the writer of this essay

have the knowledge (AM) and skillset to speak, interact, communicate, and behave accordingly to my cultural 'norms' in the USA. I also recognize that there is a linguistic *standard* that is mutually comprehensible to the masses, that is, Standard American English (SAE). There is also a normal way in which I would interact with people who are familiar (i.e. family and friends in) which would differ from my interaction with strangers. There is also a noticeable difference in the way I interact with communities that are most relatable to myself, that being the black community for instance. In this specific example hints at a form of solidarity for myself and the black community; being able switch between a standard form of English and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), where these two different codes entail two different expressive mannerisms between interlocutors. SAE would rather limit the expressive attitudes between two black AAVE speakers; I therefore refer to code switching not only as a linguistic form of switch, but having a command in switching mannerisms. This is where the application of knowledge, PM, is put to use. A very intriguing example of this can be seen in an ethnographic study done by Brown (2006), where the intersection between race, gender, and economic status (also relating to investment) meet. The title of study follows as: "*Girls and guys, ghetto and bougie: Metapragmatics, ideology and the management of social identities.*" It explored the metapragmatic awareness of an academically successful nineteen-year old African American female speaker, Jackie. The intention was not to categorize the results to a group of people as a whole, rather to use her responses as insight into adolescents and language use, that is, social identity. Brown (2006) suggests through a one-on-one interview with Jackie that given linguistic performances are a 'complex negotiation of ethnicity, gender and class that both draw from and resist the macrosocial indexing of social categories' (Brown, 2006, p. 596). The study itself focuses on the relationship between ideology and metapragmatics, where Jackie is aware of her

stylistic variations and how they allow her to maneuver through different social groups. We see terms such as ‘ghetto,’ ‘talking properly,’ and ‘bougie’ where the collocation ‘talking properly’ occurs fourteen times in the interview total. Throughout the study Brown (2006) investigated the several ways Jackie maneuvers between provided situations with her interlocutors (speech partners) which is indicative of variance between micro-social (friends and family relationships) and macro-social (ideologies intersecting with language and race) indexing of language varieties in the U.S. (Brown, 2006, p. 597). The focus on Jackie’s *perception* neglects performance and adds substance to the study; Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1983) state the ‘the norms at which speakers aim reveal much about the prestige or capital associated with those norms – whether they be standard or non-standard’ (Brown, 2006, p. 598). Overall, results of the study indicate Jackie’s awareness corresponds with dominant ideologies (prescriptive views). The consistent repetition of ‘talking properly’ served as a primary example in inherent deployment and conscious linguistic selection. The codes Jackie views as available to her and variation of interlocutors and ‘creative selection’ results in what Coupland and Jaworski (2004: 34) describe as ‘normal repertoires.’

The speaker Jackie in Brown (2006) is an example of a member of a certain community knowing how to navigate in her own community, PM is often associated with newcomers who could potentially reinvent traditional practices in communities. Again, I note, participation is not meant to change the existing knowledge in a community, rather complement it. Sfard (1998) describes the concept of acquisition as an implication of ‘a clear end point to the process of learning, the new terminology (PM) leaves no room for halting signals... While AM emphasizes the inward movement of the object known as knowledge, PM gives prominence to the aspect of

mutuality characteristic of the part-whole relation' (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). Those within a community, the 'teachers' are the preservers of a culture's continuity, i.e. language, mannerisms, values, etc., whereas learners become an integral part of a team (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). One may have a sense of self coming into a new community along with their own identities formulated across one or multiple environments, however, I believe a sense of user 'self' is needed when learning a second language; I am therefore brought back to the very questions of my research. I have given thought to whether identity is something innate, like language ability (universal grammar), or it is a social construct that is molded for us by society. We leave a community with knowledge (AM) and potentially knowing how to apply it (PM), but of course, it does not function at its highest potential in a community with contradicting beliefs. In essence, we must adapt and become parts of our new communities, which leaves room to, as Sfard (1998) mentions, 'reform' its ways of function, not change. In reading through Norton (2006), she argues: identities must be understood as socially constructed and situated, always 'dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place' (Norton, 2006, p. 502); an implication that would technically answer one of my existing objectives for this paper, however, I am determined to explore this claim through the interviews conducted.

5 Initial Stages of Loss and 4 Stages of (Re)construction

The integration process into a new culture is not one that appears the same for every experience, especially those relocating due to persecution, fleeing war zones, dictatorship, etc. However, moving abroad whether it is voluntary or involuntary entails the process of adapting and reconstructing one's former day-to-day way of life. Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000) effectively

described identity deconstruction/reconstruction as 5 initial stages of language loss and 4 stages of recovery and (re)construction. They were able to describe the process of loss and reconstruction by sharing snippets of bilingual authors' experiences living abroad, both voluntary and involuntary. Before defining the different stages, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) looked into the credibility of first person narratives/narrative-based research – non-scientific based research data. They argue:

Narrative explanation, unlike predictive logico-mathematical explanation, is retroactive that it clarifies events with respect to the outcome that follows from the events; hence, it is about reconstruction (Polkinghorne 1988:27)... This clearly distinguishes human actions from mere physical occurrences, since it acknowledges that people make things happen by intervening in events and that actions are generally undertaken with a preconceived end in mind... narrative based research, like its logico-mathematical counterpart, addresses questions of validity, reliability, and significance, although these concepts are understood in a different way than they are in traditional scientific research. Scientific is not about probability due to chance in a random sample, but about meaningfulness or importance (Polkinghorne 1988:175)...Most importantly, narrative-based theory and research also has ecological validity as that which 'has something to say what people do in real, culturally significant situations' (Neisser 1976:2) (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 161)

They collected a series of autobiographies from American and French authors, with Eastern European origins. The adults in the autobiographies learned their second languages during their adulthood, and work(ed) with them today. These works include Polish-English bilinguals Eva Hoffman (*Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language*), and Anna Wierzbecka (*The Double Life of a Bilingual: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*), Romanian-English bilinguals Andrei Codrescu (*The Disappearance of the Outside*) and Marianne Hirsch (*Pictures of Displaced Girlhood*), Czech-English bilingual Jan Novak (*My Typewriter Made Me Do It*), Bulgarian-French-English trilingual Tzvetan Todorov (*Dialogism and Schizophrenia*), and Russian-English bilinguals Helen Yakobson (*Crossing Borders. From Revolutionary Russia to China to America*), Natasha Lvovich (*The Multilingual Self. An Inquiry into Language*

Learning), and Cathy Young (Growing up in Moscow. Memories of a Soviet Girlhood) (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 1998, pp. 161—162). Pavlenko & Lantolf, (1998) follow by saying the Eastern European stories are ‘echoed in a memoir of a Japanese-English bilingual Kyoko Mori (*Polite Lies. On being a Woman Caught Between Cultures*)’ (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 1998, p.162). For the sake of clarity, I will only work and quote one of the autobiographies listed, as it is the most relevant to this work; Polish-English bilingual Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language*. The richness of a first-person narrative is what has driven me to write my paper via my own narrative and those of participants, to share individual yet common experiences to shifts in identity, showcased in the aforementioned works.

The authors they selected were chosen to explore an ‘atypical experience of adults who attempt to become native speakers of their second language’ (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 162). It is furthered explained, also in Pavlenko & Lantolf, (1998) that we as language learners are responsible for our language learning, in other words, our user agency. The extent we choose to acquire a language is dependent on our motivation, our investments, and affordances. The fluency and proficiency that was achieved, to an extent, by the authors in the selected books allowed them to learn a new language while not ‘losing the old and adopting the new ways of being in the world’ (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 1998, p. 162).

In these books, similar themes of identity reconstruction were fleshed out, which include self-conflict being immersed in a new community and between ‘dominant monolithic ideologies’ (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 1998, p.162) authors faced in language learning and their everyday lives in new discursive practices. Pavlenko & Lantolf, (1998) mentions the idea of ‘self-translation’ as a unifying metaphor, as these books were written in the acquired language the authors learned. The contrast made with self-translation and acquisition metaphor is a noteworthy point in that it

‘entails a continuous loss and only later an overlapping second phase of gain and reconstruction’ (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 1998, p.162). The example I use by Eva Hoffman has to do with her and her sister, Elaine, going through a stripping of identity having their original names changed when emigrating with her family to North America from Poland in 1959. Eva explains that the linguistic stripping she experienced as she underwent first language attrition:

I wait for that spontaneous flow of inner language which is used to be my nighttime talk with myself ... Nothing comes. Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shriveled, from sheer uselessness. Its words don't apply to my new experiences, they're not coeval with any of the objects, or faces, or the very air I breathe in the daytime. In English, the words have not penetrated to those layers of my psyche from which a private connection could proceed (Hoffman, 1989, p. 107)

Pavlenko & Lantolf (1998) also mention the importance of inner speech role, a key role in the theories developed by Vygotsky and Bakhtin. Vygotsky describes it as a ‘semantically dense personal meaning’ and for Bakhtin the user plays both the role of speaker and listener.

I do not argue that this is what happened to myself in my experience; my experience does not entail identity stripping nor loss. Rather, I compare that I needed to go through a ‘shift’ in my linguistic and cultural identity in order to reach the current point I am at. I did not ‘lose’ my inner voice in my native tongue (English), rather, I am actively acquiring a new voice, one that is continuously emerging in my thought process, one that complements its sister, English; the German language. My experience does entail a form of ‘loss’ in the sense of dying to what once was, in order to cultivate a new self in a new country, language, culture, and identity. With this information, the initial phases of loss and phases of recovery and (re) construction are identified in *Figure 1*.

<u>5 Stages of Initial Loss</u>	<u>4 Stages of Recovery and (Re)construction</u>
- Loss of one's linguistic identity	- Appropriation of others' voices
- Loss of subjectivities	- Emergence of one's new voice, often in writing first
- Loss of the frame of reference and the link between the signifier and the signified	- Translation therapy: reconstruction of one's past
- Loss of inner voice	- Continuous growth 'into' new positions and subjectivities
- First language attrition	—

Figure 1. *Stages of Loss and Recovery* by Pavlenko & Lantolf (1998)

Seen in *Figure 1*, there is a close tie between identity and language and how they coexist when shifting across linguistic and cultural landscapes. While there is a reconstruction of identity and self-writing one's experience in the second language, I intend on looking at this experience far beyond the writing in autobiographies, rather, I look at reconstruction through interviewing, where the stories are recasted (not necessarily in a new language, but as a way to mediate existing 'selves' that have evolved over time – not writing therapy, but interviewing as a reflective practice). When undergoing this process, Pavlenko & Lantolf (1998) stress the difference between a 'person' and 'self.' Harré (1987) defines a person as the publicly recognized human individual who is the focus of overt practices of social life, whereas a self is made up of 'four coordinated manifolds' (Harré & Gillett, 1994, p. 104): a location in space or a point of view; a location in time, or a 'trajectory or path through time'; a location of responsibility, or agency; and a social location in a 'manifold of persons, ordered by status, age, reputation, and the like' (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 1998, p. 163).

A self is a coherent dynamic system (Penuel and Wertsch 1995: 89) that is in ‘continuous production’ (Harré and Gillett 1994: 111), and which emerges as the individual participates in the (most especially, verbal) practices of a culture (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 1998, p. 163).

As I recast my past and current lived experiences, I will simultaneously describe, reinvent, and relate the Pavlenko & Lantolf (1998) framework to my ongoing experience and comments of the participants. I stress, the difference here is I never lose my first language, rather, German functions as a complement and fills in the gaps where a continuous ‘Matthew,’ or self is needed, in Germany. It is an ongoing process because the existing selves are constantly influencing one another. All bits of the frameworks spoken about in my literature will be pieced together as they relate to my experience and those of the participants. As I do understand *selves* as a dynamic rather than static concept, I will be writing my story from the state I am currently in, living full time in Berlin, Germany at the age of 24 years old. In the next section, I will briefly introduce the demographics of the participants before continuing to share the stories. Following, both similar and contrasting themes between myself and participants will be shared as they relate to identity (de/re-) construction – they have all been given pseudonyms.

Introduction to the Participants

As previously mentioned, there are a total of 6 participants I have chosen to interview. The participants in equals of 2s, identify with respective pronouns, seen in *Figure 2*. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and responses during the interview.

<u>Pseudonyms of Participants</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Nationality</u>	<u>Pronouns</u>	<u>Sexual Orientation</u>	<u>Level of Education</u>	<u>Country(-ies) of (Extensive) Residence</u>
Samantha	25	White	German	she/her	Straight	Master's Degree	Ireland/United States
Jana	38	White	American	she/her	Straight	Master's Degree	Italy/Brazil
Arden	23	Black	American	they/them	Non-disclosed	Bachelor's Degree	Germany
Axel	25	White	American	they/them	Non-disclosed	Bachelor's Degree	Finland/Brazil Germany
Jackson	26	Latino/Hispanic	Colombian	he/him	Straight	PhD Student	United States/ Germany/Colombia
Wade	25	White	Australian	he/him	Pansexual	Master's Degree	Germany

Figure 2. *Demographics of Participants*

It is important to mention that the information taken from participants only include their age, race, nationality, pronouns, sexual orientation, level of education, and countries of extensive residence. All categories recorded were relevant to this study as it relates to their identities.

Participants were not randomly sampled, as selected persons are people I am familiar with and were strategically selected solely based on prior conversations held between myself and the individuals regarding culture and language. The participants and myself know each other either through associated/mutual friends, social circles, and university/academic contexts.

Introduction to The Experiences

All around me, the Babel of American voices, hardy midwestern voices, sassy New York voices...since I lack a voice of my own the voices of others invade me... I do not yet possess them, they possess me...eventually the voices enter me; by assuming them, I gradually make them mine” (Hoffman, 1989, pp. 219-220)

This statement taken from Eva Hoffman’s autobiography *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language* describes the language acquisition process I desired when moving for the first

time into my second home, Germany, a country where I currently reside. It was 2 September 2018 when I landed in Nuremberg, Germany and I began to soak up the sound of a language that sounded familiar, something I craved to emulate, yet was nothing but words with different sounds that my brain could not process. I was 20 years old at the time and on the very same day that I landed is when the selves that I had *at the time* would be disrupted, as a new essence of being, or self, would begin to emerge. The immediate culture shock I felt on the drive from the airport to the building I would call home during my studies in Bamberg, Germany is when I felt I had made one of the biggest mistakes of my life. I had begun to question all the decisions I had made leading up to that very point. I vividly remember sitting down on the bed that I would sleep on for the next year, and wept. During this time, I was completing my junior year during my bachelor's degree in Linguistics with a minor in German Language and Culture. Prior to landing, I had made moving to Europe, learning a new language, and exploring the crevices of who I was, am, and continue to expand on, my life's goal. This is the very essence of this paper and why I chose to explore this topic. It is a shared experience to have the desire to see different parts of the world and learn new languages, but to make it a life's goal, work, and desire to challenge the notion of belonging to only one nation, language, and *self* is what drove me to my current state of being. Ironically, arriving there on the first day I had begun to think of every way out of a country that made me feel uncomfortable at the time, but all it wanted to do was cultivate me. I went through a three-day in-room hibernation, where I did not leave my dorm room, and when I finally did open that room with built up courage (also because I needed to grocery shop) to face what I had hoped, believed, and prayed for, is where the real journey began; this is where the change in language, culture, person, and self (Harré & Gillett, 1994) began to shift.

At the very time I am writing this paper, I am 24 years old living full-time in Berlin, Germany. One of the biggest notes to make is that I have decided, for many other reasons, to live in Berlin as it caters to the western lifestyle and mentality I was most familiar with, having lived in the United States, namely living in a metropolitan area: Miami, Florida.

I had such a desire to learn European languages, and learning German, the powerhouse language of western Europe, was a voice I wanted to acquire. Having lived in the country for about 3 months in 2018 following initial arrival, I had learned the basics one would learn being fresh into a country, yet conversation was not possible. Referring to the aforementioned statement taken from Eva Hoffman, I was only in the stage of allowing the voices to consume me, as I did not have a voice of my own. Yet, in that very same 3-month mark during my studies, was when I was able to construct a comprehensible sentence with a *trennbare verb* ‘separable verb’ in German during a dialogue with a former associate. In this very moment, the first of many moments, where I felt an emerging voice, an emerging self, the person I desired to be, one who would take part in a life, language, culture, is when I realized there is cultural capital before me – at my disposal. My user agency had been ‘activated’ as a language learner. Living with the ‘selves,’ which I will later define and language proficiency I currently have, I now understand the importance of language and its connection to the reconstruction of myself. The first comprehensible utterance allowed me to realize that one of the most important factors that contributes to *participation* in a community and its cultural practice is language.

The language in this country, I realized over time, is the access to a larger cultural capital, it is the bridge to opportunity. It is widely recognized in Germany as a foreigner – especially as (exchange) students or working/living here long-term – it is hard to interact with native German speakers, as most of them tend to stick within their own niches of people. Surely this is not true

for the entire population, however, it continues to be the experience I continuously witness today among my English-speaking circle in Berlin; it still seems to be very valid. While Berlin and the rest of the world relies on English for mediation through different cultures, it stays true to its country by German being the primary means of communication. My German language capabilities along with being a native speaker of English, working in a German high school, being married to a German, and being a member of a German fraternity in Berlin, is my access into being seen, recognized, intelligent, and accomplished; a way of building on my cultural capital as a foreigner. This is the *person*, as Harré & Gillett (1994) defines it, that people view me as in Berlin. I am a westerner — a black westerner, looking for acceptance in a predominantly white western society. Somehow I had to rebuild my previous and current successes, while using them as investments into my new way of living. I did not necessarily start fresh, but I had to reconstruct pieces of who I was to fit the idea of who I would like to be, in this city, culture, and language. Admittedly, a self-imposed pressure to maintain the image of the person I am viewed as in Berlin exists. That, however, is influenced by the way people (Germans and foreigners) choose to view me. I am aware of my authority, user agency as a language speaker, and as Matthew overall, but it is almost as if I play a role when I am in Berlin – in fact it is not a role, I realized. It is in fact the one identity I hold at this location in this space, a location of responsibility, and a social location in a ‘manifold of persons, ordered by status, age, reputation, and the like’ (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 1998, p. 163). My experience, as I have begun to understand it, is the definition of ‘making it’ here in Germany as a foreigner, especially valid for marginalized communities, such as people of color; myself being part of this margin. I have built a sheltered landscape that shields me from the harshness foreigners face in terms of employment, longing for meaningful connections in the community, everyday life, even in small interactions

that occur in the community with strangers. For example, Germany has a growing population of Africans from the continent of Africa, with many of them living in Berlin. Usually Blacks, Africans, African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, etc. do not speak German, of course this varies on a case by case basis. In that respect, it has been assumed, which was at one point true, that I do not speak German. When I am in public with my white counterparts, including those who are not 'German' or speak German, I am (unintentionally) hidden, masked, and blend into a population. I am hidden behind the physical characteristics of my social counterparts. As others assume who I am, the language I speak, I, in return, assume their assumed predispositions of myself. By assuming these attitudes, I inherit the *right to speak* (Norton, 1995). This is not to say Germans are in any way rejecting of other foreigners, it is merely difficult to feel a part of the culture, when you are not really 'from' the culture, nonetheless 'look the part,' which can be argued to be true for anyone relocating anywhere. In this respect, I speak specifically of my physical traits being Black. By building up a social group of Germans, and creating a self when I am with them *is* my access into learning and gaining first-hand knowledge of the language itself.

The idea that my identity I moved with coming to Germany, that is, Black Jamaican-Americanness, monolingual Matthew Francis, is sheltered by the community of Germans I am surrounded with does not take away from the solidarity formed with other communities of practice (Norton, 1995). What is meant by solidarity is the group of other foreign language assistants living in Berlin with myself, at this very time. There are a large group of native American English speakers, from the United States. While Americans are not the only group of English teaching assistants that exist (others from: Australia, Canada, England, Ireland), we can relate as we share the same tongue.

We, the American group, seem to bond over the relations we share coming from the USA and all speak English, all the while maintaining our individual lived experiences including: race, gender, and various cultural upbringings. This community of practice allows me to maintain the self, solidarity, and identity of who I am when I am in the USA, yet, the experiences I have with these groups of people do not make up for the social, cultural, and linguistic practices I share with members of my social and familial circle in Miami.

The solidarity I claim as a black Jamaican-American man and the extent to which I choose to embrace it undoubtedly changes from place to place, and I have recognized this during my continuous stay in Europe. When I am home in Miami, it is very normal to have any form of Caribbean roots. When engaging in dialogue with interlocutors in the US, I assume my Jamaican heritage. When I visit Jamaica, I must assume my American heritage, as my roots do not accept me as a “real Jamaican,” due to being born in the United States. When I am in Germany, I reach the intersection of being both Jamaican and American. I explain to German interlocutors in Germany that I am American, and usually what follows is the question of my roots, where the answer is Jamaica, where I, to them (Germans), and myself, simultaneously assume my Jamaican-Americanness. I must continuously jump in between the acceptance and politically correct prescription of nationalities between different groups of people. I must shift along the environments, the prejudice, and beliefs that exist across the landscapes I call home and I must readjust ‘Matthew’ on the existing scale of identities I form. In a legal sense, I cannot assume ‘German-ness’ but I undoubtedly cannot deny the aspects of the German attitude that I have begun to embrace within myself both linguistically and as it relates to my character. I will further explain this in an interview snippet in the next section.

The groups of people I shift between in Germany (Germans, Americans, and other groups of English speaking people in Berlin) are the primary social groups I have. Along the journey I realized how strongly they contribute to the different selves I must shift between. I have thus identified three selves: a self-prior to moving, a self when with German-groups, and a self with other English-speaking groups in Germany and all that it entails. In the next section I will describe the (de/re-)construction of myself and the feelings of some of the participants moving through the two or more different countries.

Elements of Loss and (Re)construction via Interview

I describe the first stage of loss, *loss of one's linguistic identity*, merely as an ongoing *shift*, if you will. Mentioned previously, I must continuously become who I am believed to be, and who I believe I am, moving across my social and linguistic landscapes. Let's take a look at the participant, Arden, who touches on the idea of how they are viewed in Germany and how they look at themselves, moving between Germany and the USA. Excerpt 1 is a coded snippet from our interview, word for word:

Arden

Excerpt 1

Me: Do you identify at this point in time with German culture more than your own?

Arden: I think I identify with Black-American culture...but if we talk about like dominant cultural patterns, like what's transmitted about the United States to other places, very little of that resonates with me. I am in Germany and I am actively consuming and engaging with German media in a way that I am not consuming American content anymore...I am very into politics. I was never particularly into those things in America beyond what was necessary for school. I think it's because I pay so much attention to it here because it in a way feels tangible to me in a way that my own cultural products don't. I think also because I interact exclusively in German when I'm at work or when I'm out and about...so like the fact that people don't automatically read me as an American. Maybe they read me as foreign but they don't read me as American... also impacts the way that I see myself...

Me: Do you feel that your upbringing in your origin country aided or hindered your adaptation into this new environment? Were there minimal similarities between the culture or language? Large differences? Vice versa?

Arden: I think being southern plays a very big role –

Me: Where particularly?

Arden: Linguistically... I think, this is just my theory, who knows whether this has been tested true or not; I think in general the average Black American person probably enters university foreign language classrooms better prepared to deal with linguistic diversity than their professors may even realize or be willing to take advantage of and what I mean by that is, like... I grew up code switching, y'know? So as a child y'know I was like standard English is not the be-all-end-all of communication in English language or in and across other languages. Um I think I have been aware of that from a very young age. But that's the thing, because of the ways that racism works in the classroom my parents and my grandmothers in particular, are very adamant about me being able to exercise a degree of linguistic command that my white peers could not, y'know? Because they knew the kinds of barriers I would have to face... um and they knew the kinds of judgements that would oppose me on the parts of my teachers, right? They knew what people would think of black students, particularly black students who are capable and comfortable in code-switching... like there's so many times I can remember as a child where like I knew very well that there was a certain kind of writing that was tolerated and a certain kind of speaking that was not tolerated. And often as a child I was criticized by my teachers choosing consciously to speak a certain way, um because I knew it would allow me to interact more comfortably with my peers... so when I got to college it was like of course I can take German and also be aware that there are various kinds of German... like be aware of the linguistic diversity built into language and not just take it at face value.

Me: Right –

Arden: So I was not blindsided by code-switching in German with other speakers... like this is what people do – like this is what marginalized people do when they enter a new culture and have to adapt and have to figure out that balance between their own traditions and the traditions of the target culture.

When speaking about the preconceived notions of the people of their second country, Germany, Arden mentioned having prior interactions with Germans in the USA during their undergraduate studies, that is, during their degree program in the German Studies department on campus. Having this ‘prior training’ on what Germans were like had an influence on the way they perceived Germans to be. I posed whether that prior training influenced the way they see Germans and the community they have built up today; their answer reads as follows: “The things you internalize are largely influenced by your own imagination.”

Arden had a very similar experience and viewpoint to mine. Of course, this is an experience many may share, but we also have those who do not experience such shifts or ‘loss.’ Jackson, one of the participants interviewed, had a similar feeling to that of myself and Arden. He, however, takes on the roots of his origins, rather than the place he has “resided” in for the majority of his life. Jackson was born in Colombia and lived there for about 2 and a half years before moving to the United States for the majority of his life. Despite this, he feels like a “visitor” in the USA. At the age of 26, he has periodically visited Colombia over this time, for 2 months every year, where he mentions would add up to “...about 4 years.” He has also recently spent three years of his life in Germany.

As mentioned before, I do not and cannot legally take on ‘German-ness,’ rather I assume the attributes I have adopted from German people societally and linguistically. Similar feelings are expressed by Jackson having resided in the USA for majority of his life in a snippet from our interview found in Excerpt 2:

Jackson

Excerpt 2

Me: When you go to Colombia, do you feel like you are Colombian or do you feel like you’re American? If that makes sense because you lived your whole life in the United States – well almost – basically majority of your life I would say, and

when you go there what do you identify with and how do people perceive you? Do you say “I’m Colombian” when you are in Colombia and do other people agree with that?

Jackson: When I am in Colombia I’m Colombian. When I’m in the US I’m Colombian. Uh... what do people perceive me as...um...I think just anecdotally remembering it used to be sort of a like 50/50 split...where everyone is like oh, good, you’re just as Colombian as everyone else, or maybe I’m just like little kids developing their ways of speaking or whatever. It was more often that people are like ‘Oh I mean like – surely you’re American,’ but it was just some way of pronouncing some sort of words...I think that still happens a little bit... it used to bother me more...now I don’t mind it because it’s an immutable fact to me that I’m Colombian, it’s never been a question for me. Like the most someone has said recently like in the last four years is “if you’re gonna go downtown just like – you’ll blend in of course... just don’t open your mouth.” And when I am in Germany I’m also Colombian. I think the nuance that might’ve been added going to Germany is that there was an acknowledgement of the extent I had picked up American culture while living in the US. I think that was always there I just would not have bothered to think about it or recognize it.

There is no clear presence, to both his and my knowledge of a ‘shift’ in his identity rather, an adoption of cultural mannerisms when moving abroad to Germany for the first time, to study, where he would spend the next three consecutive years of his life from the age of 22–25. Jackson, moving through various environments, claims the identity of where he was born even though he has not consistently lived there for an extended period of time. Here I do not imply one should identify with the culture they were raised in, rather it was a response that allowed me to understand adopting cultural mannerisms is both consciously and unconsciously possible. Nonetheless he acknowledges the remnants of American culture when moving into a different western culture.

Moreover, *Loss of the frame of reference and the link between the signifier and the signified* is spoken about in regards to the inability of the ‘new’ language to intimately name the world (both inner and outer [voices]) (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 1998, p. 166). It occurs while the

deterioration of one's native tongue occurs (first language attrition). This is evidenced in Eva Hoffman's story:

The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. 'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. 'River' in English is cold – a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke (Hoffman, 1989, p. 106).

Hoffman describing what occurs as she is acquiring her new voice is the reversed conflict I describe as I acquire my new language, German. The very feelings associated with words and the way it describes a situation in German feels right to me. I do, however, speak with a slightly different feeling than Hoffman. For one, I do not go through a process of first language attrition, rather that I cannot express myself in English the way German allows me to in a dialogue with my interlocutors, or monologue with myself. The precise verb usage in German is incomparable to the weak feeling English verbs evoke. My emotions, what I want to say, and feelings are transmitted in one word in German, which would need a whole sentence in English, as German holds true to its synthetic Germanic nature, while English has evolved into an analytical language. Reconstructing my way of thinking in a practical sense – syntactically, semantically, etc. contributes to the process, but the means of expression as I continue to acquire my new voice, *my second voice*, allows me to connect with my emotions (inner voice) and those around me (outer voice) in a way my native tongue does not suffice. Similar feelings are expressed by the participant Jana during our interview, when she speaks Portuguese. See Excerpt 3:

Jana

Excerpt 3

Me: When you speak Portuguese do you carry that part of you (American-self) over to Portuguese? When you do speak Portuguese on the street and vs how you are with your friends... so it can be a mix of English and Portuguese or with other people on the street... what does that look like for you?

Jana: No, I'm very different in Portuguese than in English...um my whole demeanor changes most of the time when I am speaking in Portuguese...um when I originally – the best example I usually try to explain is joking... I'm not a sarcastic person, so um when I first started trying to use sarcasm in Portuguese I remember being like 'huh' because I would say it and people were like "oh, really?" and I'm like "no no no I'm just joking" right because they were not expecting me to make a joke which was part of the problem but also, um it's not that they don't use sarcasm in the part of Brazil I was living, it was just different and so I realized that it was a lot easier to make jokes or y'know, be silly or whatever – be fun in – using the way that they did it...so if I had a joke I would tell it differently now in English than I would tell it in Portuguese... right and this happened to me the other day actually. I was sitting in the living room, I had two friends from Brazil visiting and a family member here and we were telling a story – it was in English... we were recalling something from our – from many years ago, um with this family member and I went to tell the story to my friends in Portuguese and obviously I told it very differently... like much more expressive than I would tell it in English and but it was funny because the family member was laughing and she said "I have no idea what you're saying but I can tell by the way you're explaining or telling the story um what you're saying" ... just because it's more expressive and loud and just...much more of a story telling language.

The words that do belong to our native tongues' repertoire, words the two of us, Jana and I, in a tongue other than our own, allow us to express our feelings, thoughts, and moments, that occurred in the second language in a different way that our native tongues, English, would not allow us to. This is what I categorize under (re)construction, *emergence of one's new voice*. While it has not emerged through writing, it has emerged verbally.

Furthermore, I would like to introduce the intersection of gender identity as it relates to the emergence of one of the participants, Axel, who identifies as non-binary. The rhetoric and terminology associated with LGBTQ+ members have taken a positively stark shift in terms of representation and recognition in the 21st century across society, academia, and work culture. They, Axel, experiences a way of expression in Finnish, which has ultimately transferred, or aided their means of representation societally. In addition, they speak about the roles they play across multiple landscapes. Axel has gone to Finland during a high school exchange at the age of

16 to 17, went back home to North Carolina right before they turned 18, graduated high school, turned 18, and moved to Brazil at the age of 19. They went to university in Chicago after their time in Brazil for a year and a half before dropping out, and moved first to Germany for 2 years, and went back to university in Chicago in March of 2020, during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The experience shared here during the time of their stay in Finland was in adolescence before adulthood. They however expressed going to Finland as one of the biggest, if not the biggest, voluntary effort in going abroad that impacted their identity. This is expressed during our interview seen in Excerpt 4.

Axel

Excerpt 4

Axel: My first experience abroad was while I was a minor, I was an exchange student for over a year in Finland that had probably, maybe the biggest impact on my identity in my life during that crucial developmental time and living with a host family... it changed my identity a lot like I had a different perspective growing up in a small town in North Carolina and I think it was a much more open place, I mean it's the place where I came out there first as a lesbian because I felt safe in that culture in a way I never felt in my hometown. I fell in love with the language – there's no gender pronouns and I felt really safe there. I think that's where my desire to... I could also be myself in a way that I felt was more forgiving than I could in my first language... I've always felt like I was a really awkward and... yeah – an awkward person – I think due to being neuro-divergent and every other reason but when I was awkward in Finnish then I wasn't so... then it wasn't because I wasn't from Finland... and for the first time I was quite popular there and so I always knew I would want to go back to Europe and try to rebuild the feeling I had when I was a teenager in whatever capacity I could. I fell in Germany kinda by accident, Finland was really intentional

(20-minutes elapses from this segment)

Me: Being that... you've gone through all these different environments (USA, Finland, Brazil, Germany)... because you've spoken about comfortability you've gone through in these different places... so do you feel maneuvering between these different spaces – like moving between Finland...so you come from North Carolina, go to Finland... you've lived in Chicago for school where you have a crap ton of connections... you obviously have a whole bunch of connections in

Germany now right...so that's in connection with question number 10. Do you believe you have adapted a second, third, or fourth self having spent 'x' amount of time in your new country/countries of residence? Do you move along these different identities around different people? ... So that being said, think of when I say identity when moving along this kind of spectrum, think of it as a ruler like... and it doesn't have to be like point 1, point 2, point 3, point 4 right so, myself I feel as if... when I speak to Americans here (Germany) I feel like I'm not the same Matthew when I'm back in the States and hanging out with people over there versus when I... and vice versa when I was hanging out in America and I was hanging out with my group of Germans there... well I feel like 'what is this?' It's not the same because it's so weird, we're in two different environments... and it's just so... so you feel like you have to kind of make up for this kind of loss like hanging out with Germans in America and it's not in Germany I kinda have to like shift over to like Matthew in my own element and I'm talking to this group of people here (USA) that I'm used to having around in Germany... so it's like I'm kinda shifting along this spectrum... Matthew in Germany, Matthew in the States. Do you feel like you create third, fourth or maybe just second self... really when you go along these different environments?

Axel: That's a good question... I mean I think it's hard because I don't think – I mean I think in every environment we're performing to a certain extent and I think that I've never particularly been good in the sense that when I return home I no longer really know the identity that I used to have there. Like when I'm in my small town people ask me where I'm from even though my family is a big part of the community like they know my sisters, they know my brother, they sure as hell know my mom and step-father like... but they don't recognize me and it's because I don't look like I'm from there and I don't talk like I'm from there and on top of all those things I haven't been there now for a decade – I've moved out of North Carolina... when I was sixteen and since I've been gone most of the time for the past decade and I think the identity when I'm there – I've spent so little time maybe a few weeks, I feel like I'm visiting which is a strange feeling because like I'll feel homesick now but for some place that doesn't exist because there's no place for me to go back to where I have a new identity... where my identity there is a visitor, a stranger from the big city. And, um, when I'm in Chicago I play this role I'm supposedly an expert in German or like I mean I talk German in different schools and in tutoring contexts and in my university

Me: So... being this expert this expert in German, being this expert in a language that you've learned and that you've been immersed in before and you are now living in... speak about that 'Axel' in that environment, being the expert versus the 'Axel' being in the motherland of German speakers (Chicago working at a German immersive school) and how do you feel being there... and you're technically around Germans in that setting... like native speakers like born

Germans living in the States... speak about you in that environment versus you being here (Germany) actually.

Axel: Oh I'm more of a like... I get a lot more like... recognition in the US for sure I mean people... I mean I've worked in a German international school... I worked in a school where there were many other Germans but regardless of that because it was in the United States parents were impressed by me – they were thrilled that I could speak fluent German... the other staff members were so excited that I was an American who spoke fluent German... I mean you (Matthew) speak German yourself so that's not something they meet all the time it's not a skill that a lot of people have... and I was known like... one of my friends was getting their hair cut and I realized my hairdresser remembered me and they were like "oh that's the person who's... that's the German person" ... and I felt really safe and comfortable with that like career-wise I have no trouble finding jobs or opportunities whereas here (Germany) I mean my identity, like I am obviously a native English speaker but the fact that I speak German is not a thing to be impressed at. There are plenty of Americans here that speak German... there are tons of Americans living in Berlin so... I don't feel like I have many skills to offer here but maybe my perspective is a little bit different.

Me: ...So you're moving between these different people, if you will... versus when you come here (Germany)

Axel: Yeah I'm no longer that person

Me: How do you – so is that your view? Or is that other people's views?

Axel: I don't know I mean it can... I just think like... it's not think it's just not a skill. German here is expected, it's not a skill

Me: But in the current workspace that you're in now (English teaching assistant)... how do you feel about that?

Axel: ...they were pretty impressed by me... they were pleased that I spoke German, they were surprised... but it's still not like a skill they ask me to use. The only time I use German at my workplace because all my coworkers speak to me in English... is when I have my club on Fridays. And then I speak German with the kids.

Axel touches on the importance of roles played in environments and how its importance shifts, moving through the environments. Out of practically, it is salient that German is the default, and is expected as the primary mode of communication in Germany. We, however, notice the conflict of their skillset value, and how it is perceived in Chicago versus in Germany.

The same, applies to myself as one who has gone back and forth between the USA and Germany. Moreover, we notice the feeling Axel has, that is, not belonging in their hometown, North Carolina, yet having homesickness for this environment where there is no identity, everyone perceives them as different, other, or foreign. They feel as if they don't belong and the notable (re)construction and (re)invention of them-self has become so stark, that they no longer can identify with a given culture, nonetheless just one. In the case of Axel, gender identity and its construction is at the core of their identity journey, where their hometown does not leave room for identity to be cultivated rather repressed. This is expressed in Excerpt 5:

Excerpt 5

Axel: In North Carolina, they just passed a law today that that states that you cannot mention LGBTQ+ identities for students under the grade four and I'm a non-binary person I'm a trans-person I can't exist in that space and I'm an educator so I'm literally – me existing could be seen as corrupting the youth in the community that I grew up in. So, it's impossible to be myself in a place where I literally could be fired for being myself and so yes in this culture (Germany) it's a little bit more tolerant. But I will say that there are spaces in the US that are just as tolerant if not going further like Chicago, where I lived, but the cons that are in Chicago are gun violence, cost of living... I went into medical debt after somewhat minor surgery, but those external factors is what makes the entirety of the United States not a safe place... to be myself.

In a similar yet different experience to Axel, participant Samantha, a German, born and raised in Germany has moved across environments such as Ireland, Vietnam, and the United States. She mentions the USA having lived in Chicago, USA for an academic exchange year where she also taught at the same German school as Axel. I got insight into the *person* she views herself to be, in a new environment, the USA, and being surrounded by her very own people, native-speaking and born Germans. See Excerpt 6:

Samantha

Excerpt 6

Me: So how did they feel about you...?

Samantha: It was actually so funny, it felt like going into a bubble... it was like I lived in America, I was surrounded by Americans because my friends were American and the family I lived with was American too and I went into the school and pretty much everyone there was from Germany actually...like born and raised Germans... I can't really explain it. It's like having Germany in a building. Because German people are like... I don't know like I see a German and I know a German when I see them.

Me: So there must've been a very interesting linguistic situation...in that whole environment... so it's literally a building, isn't it?

Samantha: Yeah –

Me: ...The minute you get out of building it's like okay, back to English speaking Chicago.

Samantha: Yeah, um, I guess except for occasions when I helped the kids doing homework or when we talk among each other as a secret language, like their parents didn't actually speak German so sometimes I was speaking to the kids in German or they're talking to me so we could have like conversations.

Overall, throughout my continued lived out experience, being an English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) educator, along with accounts of the interviewees, who have lived in various different countries, lived experiences, and either steadfast or continuous identify shifts, we all share the same phenomenon none of us prior to the interviews could put a name to. It is apparent that we cannot neglect the concept and influence our environments have on us. I therefore agree with the statement of Norton (2006) in that identities must be understood as socially constructed and situated, always 'dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place' (Norton, 2006, p. 502), partially answering my third objective question, where an identity spectrum cannot inherently exist, rather it is what Chomsky refers to as a black box that needs to be cultivated. Whether identities can be understood on an identity spectrum is salient based on the responses I have received from my participants including myself. My beliefs, based on my own experiences, and the participants I

have interviewed, as speculated, varies on a case by case basis. I agree with the words of Arden, where I compare identities to that of code-switching; users have the command to understand the diglossic nature of language just as much as their *identities*, *selves*, and *persons* where the functions, change across time and place. Just as identities have the ability to (de/re-)construct within people across landscapes, I also recognize first languages, as evidenced by Eva Hoffman, can attrit. I believe the same principle applies to identities, where when a language begins to attrit, so can the identity associated with a given language. In the interviews with Arden and Samantha, the phrase ‘gut feeling’ was used by themselves. My objective, how do people (including myself) move from a place that is comfortable into the unknown, is answered by the very phrase used above. *Gut feeling*. Identity and selves are aspects of ourselves that are not tangible and cannot be quantified nor properly tested, one cannot measure up experience, and the feelings we have. The uncertainty in itself is what led to the common yet different experiences we have all faced, yet could not put into words – an identity spectrum. I support my argument with the words of Polkinghorne (1988) used in, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000):

Narrative explanation, unlike predictive logico-mathematical explanation, is retroactive that it clarifies events with respect to the outcome that follows from the events; hence, it is about reconstruction (Polkinghorne 1988:27)... This clearly distinguishes human actions from mere physical occurrences, since it acknowledges that people make things happen by intervening in events and that actions are generally undertaken with a preconceived end in mind... (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p.161).

My participants and I did intervene to an extent in who we are, in that we have the ability to make decisions, have thoughts, and execute them. What we did not know is the impact which would in effect alter who we are and continue to be/identify with; the person others perceive us to be is also out of our command. I therefore challenge this one aspect of Polkinghorne (1988), where we generally have an *end in mind* – I perceive this as a ‘gut feeling’ we explore. In

respect to identity, there is no 'end in mind,' for identity, as mentioned is not a static concept. This is a similar belief held by participation metaphor (PM), where there is no end-point.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I do not say it is a must, nor have I reached a concrete teaching implication with the stories collected, including my own, but I argue the indirect identity exploration in itself is the teaching implication. The immersive experience moving across social and linguistic landscapes, tapping into the very being of who I am as a learner, teacher, and lifelong student is what built up the capability to expel the knowledge and compassion I have gained to my students when teaching. The sensitivity of every situation must be taken into account, especially when dealing with students from different cultural, societal, economic, and linguistic backgrounds, and teachers must understand that the environment they are in may or may not attribute to their self, identity, or person. Referring to the idea of a plurilinguistic framework, identities and selves should not be viewed as separate systems but as individual entities that support one another to create a sound system for its user. The same principle, I imply must be used when in multicultural/multiethnic/plurilingual teaching environments. My results as it relates to a teaching implication remain inconclusive, but I do believe intercultural exploration calls for compassion and understanding for learners and beings and not just bodies filling in a classroom. I therefore suggest further research could consider practical implications of international experiences and their contributions to teachers teaching students with multiple identity-makeups and language systems. How could this be implemented? I have mentioned several theories in this essay that are the teaching tools: investment, AM and PM, and language loss and reconstruction. Teachers could utilize these different theories in the class via group discussion or even individual interviews exploring stories, including that of the teacher. Just as I have added to the existing

body of literature via my own first-person narrative, students can use the art of reflective practice as well to make sense of their own stories, and flesh them out via writing, or whatever presentation suits their needs. This is not a journey for students to accomplish on their own, rather it should be a co-exploring process between students and educators to achieve meaningful learning.

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