



English Learners' Identity Formation as Low and High Investors in their Learning Process¹

La formación de identidad de estudiantes de inglés como bajos y altos inversores en su proceso de aprendizaje

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a descriptive case study that analyzed how unfair social relationships established in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom influenced a group of adolescent English language learners' academic investment and identity construction at a school in Bogotá, Colombia. Data associated with students' social behaviors and identities were collected through field notes, a questionnaire, and an interview. Norton's theory of *identity* and *investment* served as the basis to analyze the data from a social perspective. Three main findings emerged from the data: First, EFL learners identified themselves as high investors and low investors in their learning, depending on their own opinions about the usefulness of English in their lives. Second, power relationships based on domination and oppression reduced productive investment in the classroom. Third, some high investors resisted unfair relationships of power by investing through collaborative learning. Consequently, participants created diverse English learners' identities (dominant, submissive, resistant, and productive), which influenced their academic investment negatively or positively.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, EFL learners, investment, language learners' identity, power relations

Resumen

Este artículo reporta los hallazgos de un estudio de caso descriptivo que analizó cómo las relaciones de poder injustas establecidas en una clase de inglés influyeron en la inversión académica y la construcción de identidad de un grupo de aprendices adolescentes de inglés de un colegio de Bogotá, Colombia. Se recogieron datos asociados al comportamiento social y la identidad de los aprendices por medio de notas de campo, un cuestionario y una entrevista. La teoría de Norton sobre *identidad e inversión* sirvió como base para analizar los datos desde una perspectiva social. Tres principales hallazgos surgieron de los datos: Primero, los aprendices de inglés se identificaron como altos inversores y bajos inversores en su aprendizaje, dependiendo de sus propias opiniones sobre la utilidad del inglés en sus vidas y de su contexto socioeconómico. Segundo, las

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relaciones de poder basadas en la dominación y la opresión redujeron la inversión productiva en la clase. Tercero, algunos de los altos inversores resistieron relaciones de poder injustas mediante el aprendizaje colaborativo. Por consiguiente, los aprendices de inglés asumieron diversas identidades (dominantes, sumisas, reactivas y productivas), las cuales influyeron positiva y negativamente en su inversión académica.

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

Introduction

Research on English learners' identity construction has become paramount in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a second Language (ESL) education, since learning a language is a social and human experience in which learners not only produce meaning through language, but negotiate who they are according to the relationships they construct with others and who they want to become in the future (Flórez González, 2018; Norton, 2006; Norton, 2011). In the international arena, research on this topic has mainly focused on how immigrant English learners construct and reshape their identities in English-speaking countries as they have to struggle against immigration policies, power, class, discrimination, cultural differences, and language use (Cervatiuc, 2009; Morita, 2004; Sade, 2009). However, identity, as a situated and context-dependent phenomenon, also needs to be investigated in other contexts, of which EFL learners' identity construction in their own home countries is of primary importance. For instance, in Colombian EFL education where the present study was conducted, research on EFL learners' identity construction has recently grown in areas including (1) studies on female and male preschoolers resisting and confronting power relations and gender discourses in the English language classroom (Castañeda, 2008); (2) studies on how the use of the native language in the English classroom and the power established between the teacher and students represent determinant factors in the struggle to construct language learners'

identity (Gómez Lobatón, 2012), and (3) research on how learners construct their identity through English interaction with their peers, depending, for instance, on their speaking competence development and knowledge-power relations (Ortiz-Medina, 2017).

However, research on other issues of identity in the Colombian EFL context still needs to be conducted including adolescent EFL learners' socioeconomic and academic rivalry from the perspective of *low investors* and *high investors*. As such, this study examined how a group of adolescent English language learners, all coming from the same sociocultural background, constructed their identities as *low investors* and *high investors* in their English learning process as being influenced by the social interactions they created in an EFL classroom at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia.

Identity and investment are relatively recent research topics in language education that aim at understanding language learning as a social practice through which social relationships inevitably influence learners' academic performance. The EFL classroom is not always a pleasant and safe place where all young learners get together to learn English happily. It is rather a real-life social context in which learners not only have to cope with the demands of learning a new language, but face prejudice, power relations with their partners, and even academic rivalry. These conflictive relationships built with other partners and people who are part of their lives can generate discouraging attitudes toward the foreign language, affecting learners' academic *investment* in negative or positive ways.

In fact, through systematic observation, this research study identified that a group of English learners had low standards of responsibility because they were reluctant to participate in class activities, did not do homework, and refused to use the foreign language productively. Students openly said that they disliked the English language because learning vocabulary and unfamiliar structures was challenging. As a result, they ended up speaking in Spanish all the time even when the teachers encouraged them to speak in English. In addition, 85% of these students scored low or failing grades, while only 15% scored passing grades.

These limitations led us as teacher-researchers to conduct deeper systematic research to analyze which social unrest affected learners' investment in their language learning and, in addition, in which way the social relationships built in the classroom—whether oppression, prejudice, or exclusion—influenced their identity as English language learners as well as low academic performance. Therefore, a one-year descriptive case study was carried out in 2016, aiming at collecting data from learners' opinions about how they saw themselves as language learners and which social factors affected their level of investment. This research inquiry was led by this research question: How do social relations influence a group of adolescent EFL learners' identity formation as investors in their learning process?

Theoretical Framework

Identity and Investment in EFL Education

This study was informed by a poststructuralist theory on the concepts of *identity* and *investment* in the context of second/foreign language teaching (Norton, 1997, 2000). *Identity* is intrinsically related to *investment*, as they get along together during the language learning process. From a social perspective, Norton (2000) defines identity as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how this relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 5). Similarly, identity implies the agency of relating the self to the world and acting according to sociocultural norms with other human beings (Lamb, 2011; McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Van Lier, 2007). Rather than assuming identity as a collection of permanently unique characteristics that define a person, it is seen by many teachers and social theorists as a social process through which individuals develop a sense of belonging to and interacting with others based on experiences and mutual commitments (Holland & Leander, 2004; Norton, & Toohey, 2011). Identity construction necessarily requires individuals' self-recognition, relationships with others, and the social context in which they interact (Khodadady & Yazdy, 2015; Sade, 2009). Therefore, identity is

“fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing, in particular historical and cultural circumstances” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 419). It transforms with the inclusion of others and by many social factors and experiences (Armour, 2004; Lam, 2000; Norton, 2000), namely life opportunities and the harmonious or conflictive relationships established with other people.

McCarthy and Moje (2002) suggest that students' identity is a central issue in the learning process because learners understand who they are and how they are understood through social interactions with teachers and other learners. Kramsch (1993) states that identity should not be assumed as a static and a pre-determined human trait that EFL students bring to the classroom, but as susceptible to change due to social relationships and learners' diverse behaviors. Equally, West's (1992) claim that identity formation is subject to desires for social recognition, affiliation, and safety can be applied to the learning of a foreign language as this type of learning is essentially a social experience.

Norton's (1997) views of language and identity in ESL/EFL education are influenced by Bourdieu (1986, 1993) who regards identity as relying on symbolic and economic forms of capital. Symbolic capital embraces intangible set of values such as “prestige, celebrity or honour [and] recognition” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7) and “the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 291). Symbolic capital improves an individual's social conditions in terms of education, language, intellectual knowledge, status, and professional skills. Economic forms of capital, on the other hand, involve the acquisition of money, real state, and material possessions. Economic capital is usually needed when a person has to pay for his/her education or any other service that would allow him/her to obtain symbolic capital. In turn, symbolic capital will later help a person to obtain more economic capital. For this reason, symbolic and material capital become important factors in the definition of people's identity.

The difference between symbolic capital and economic capital motivated Norton (1997) to

establish the relationship between identity and investment in the language classroom. In this way, investment, as defined by Norton (1997), entails how the language learner uses both symbolic resources (time, commitment, perseverance, knowledge, etc.) and material resources (money, books, tuition, etc.) within the language learning process in order to optimize the value of his/her symbolic capital. A learner does not only learn a foreign language for personal satisfaction, but also for gaining intellectual prestige, social recognition, or working rewards/achievements (symbolic capital). Learning English opens possibilities to succeed professionally or travel abroad in life and helps a person to gain status in front of friends and relatives. Thus, a learner invests in learning a foreign language because he/she plans to increase economic capital and improve his/her living conditions.

However, strong level of investment can weaken when they are threatened by unfair relations of power in the classroom or in the social context they live in, which, in turn, can affect their language learners' identities (Darvin & Norton; 2018). English learners can experience identity conflicts just for being men/women (gender differences), foreigners or locals, non-native speakers, or individuals with different beliefs and cultural traditions when they are taught to speak English (Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004). Their level of investment in learning the target language is conditioned by their own identity, the identity they construct as language learners, and the social relationships constructed in the context in which they learn the language (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Social oppression, economic problems, exclusion, and bullying, for example, create negative social conflicts that can easily reduce high levels of investment and affect language learners' identity. For instance, the EFL classroom can be a site where bullying, a "humiliating and victimizing behavior that causes emotional, social, and physical pain for another person" (Kohut, 2007, p. 19), becomes a destructive form of power. Learners change negatively in the way they invest or how they identify as language learners when being bullied by other students repeatedly and publicly over time with physical or psychological humiliation (Olweus, 1996).

A final theoretical viewpoint is that investment complements the traditional notion of motivation in language learning. Motivation is understood as learners' personal initiative and individual effort to study and use a language (Norton, 1995, 2000). However, many teachers fail to recognize that motivation is also affected by "the complex identities of language learners and the often-inequitable relations of power" negotiated "in different sites" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 415). Norton (1995) explains that, although students may be motivated to learn a language, they might invest poorly in the learning process due to exclusion, racism, intolerance, classism, and any other expression of prejudice. These inequitable relations of power can affect learners' investment despite their high level of motivation to learn the foreign language.

Research Methodology

This was a descriptive case study that focused on an event or phenomenon (Stake, 1995) within a particular context (Yin, 1994): It analyzed and described how the social relations of a group of Colombian English language learners shaped or influenced their academic investment and identity construction in an EFL classroom. As a case study, it was a holistic description and analysis of a single situation (Merriam, 1998). It was descriptive in that it described in depth a particular event or case in a given context without manipulating the environment in a way that would alter the behavior and interaction of the participants. We observed and analyzed the focal classroom in its natural, normal conditions to later provide feasible solutions to improve the problems identified during the observation.

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted by two English teacher-researchers in the second semester of 2016 at a public school in a densely-populated low socioeconomic neighborhood in the southeast of Bogotá, Colombia characterized by social inequity. They lack money, job opportunities, and limited access to education. Most of the children who go to this school make a great effort to endure

with their education because they have family problems and economic needs. 40 EFL seventh graders (21 girls and 19 boys) participated in this study. They were 13 to 16-year-old learners who took English classes for just three hours per week. As presented in the statement of the problem, most of the participants were reluctant to learn English and had created difficult social relations with one another.

Data Collection

With the research question in mind, we videotaped the classes and wrote extended field notes (Burns, 2003) regarding how participants related to each other socially and how these interactions affected or favored their academic investment and identity as language learners. A total of 18 sets of field notes were written during 50 hours of class observation. Similarly, a 30-minute open-ended interview was designed, conducted, and videotaped, following the guidelines set forth by Gubriums and Holstein (2001). This instrument helped to collect participants' direct personal opinions about their levels of investment, social relationships, and how they saw themselves as English learners. The interviews were in Spanish and conducted in small groups at the end of the school year. Finally, a questionnaire with open- and closed-ended questions served as the third instrument to collect similar information as done with the interviews. The learners completed the questionnaire at the end of the research experience.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by using grounded theory procedures in order to identify emergent patterns and findings, a process that involved the following three levels (Strauss & Corbin, 1998):

1. *Open coding* constituted the process by which the researchers read and reviewed the data many times in order to identify and name initial patterns of information in the field notes, the interviews, and the questionnaire. This step guaranteed a consistent level of triangulation among the three methods for data collection (Patton, 2002).
2. *Axial coding* was the stage in which pre-categories and categories were stated and related. Categories are abstract concepts that represent the main phenomena identified in the data (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, learners' experiences, beliefs, and opinions about how power relations affected their investment and identity were labeled with concepts such as "dominant learners ridiculed learners' pronunciation," "learners disliked English," and "high investors wanted to succeed in life." These categories included emerging aspects from the data that related to the power relationships established in the classroom and learners' social context.
3. *Selective coding* allowed the researchers to review, combine, organize, and refine pre-categories to definitely state main themes that represented the situations being observed related to identity construction and power relations. Those themes were finally set into findings.

Findings

EFL Learners' Identity and Investment and the Importance of English in their Lives

Data analysis revealed that this group of learners divided into and identified themselves as high investors and low investors. 29 learners (72%) were aware of their low investment in their learning process while 11 learners (23%) identified themselves as high investors in their learning. Prior to discussing how this division caused social contention, power differentials, and conflict among learners in the classroom, both types of learners need to be described based on how they recognized themselves as English learners in relation to their socioeconomic class and how they understood their own relationships with the world. The way they saw themselves as social individuals in their community, city, and country, was considered a strong factor to understand how they socially behaved and interacted in the language classroom.

The 29 low investors were reluctant to work hard because they did not think that English was

an important subject to improve their present and future life conditions. This is demonstrated in the following two excerpts:

“Yo no entiendo nada en inglés, hable en español, profesor, eso no sirve de mucho en mi vida.” [I don't understand English, speak in Spanish, teacher, English is good for nothing in my life]. (Interview, May 27, 2016)⁴

“¿Por qué me habla en inglés si la verdad en Colombia se habla español? ¿Para qué esforzarme en aprenderlo si no me sacará de pobre?” [Why do you speak to me in English if people speak Spanish in Colombia? Why should I bother to learn it if it won't help me to end poverty?] (Field notes, September 12, 2016)

These data show that English did not represent the kind of economic capital for these learners that could motivate them to improve their social status or education level. They were convinced that they did not need to use English in their real lives, and that it was only a required subject at school. Their unwillingness to learn English was based on the precept that they recognized themselves as being socially underprivileged, lacking the average standard living conditions and opportunities that other people had such as going to the university and traveling abroad. They were aware that they belonged to a low socioeconomic class and did not have money to enjoy or pay for those expensive privileges:

“¿Para qué voy a necesitar el inglés si nunca voy a viajar? Eso es para los que tienen plata” [What do I need to learn English for if I will never travel abroad? That is for those who have money.] (Field notes, September 24, 2016)

In fact, some of these low investors wanted to finish high school and get a job as soon as possible in order to help their families to solve money problems. Some others, who were already working after the school day to help their families financially and to buy food, thought that, as soon as they finished school, they would continue doing the same informal jobs that their parents did. Thus, since investing time and effort

in their English learning was not meaningful due to family and socio-economic misfortunes, they did not identify as being productive and committed English language learners. Based on Norton's (2011) notion of identity, these language learners understood that their relationship to the world and possibilities for a better future through English learning was limited and ineffective. They thought that English did not represent a medium that would contribute to finding their way out of poverty, illiteracy, and social marginalization. Unfortunately, they brought these ideas and social identity issues to the classroom, which clashed against high investors in the English class.

By contrast, the 11 high investors (23%) were productively involved in their learning process regardless of their economic problems, lack of money, and low socioeconomic class. For instance, many times, these high investors did not have money to pay for photocopies or buy school supplies (Field notes, August 27, 2016). However, they were eager to participate actively in class, present high quality oral and written assignments, and make sustained efforts to learn grammar structures, communicative functions, vocabulary, and correct spelling in English. These learners rarely incited discipline problems or conflicts during class. As conceived by Norton (1995, 2011) and Bourdieu (1993), such productive involvement represented for these EFL learners symbolic forms of capital because they were learning the language in order to someday succeed in life. For example, when being asked in the interview “Is it useful or useless to learn English in your life?” they answered:

“Es útil porque podría hablar con extranjeros y me podrían contratar en una empresa multinacional y el inglés lo facilitaría.” [It is useful because I could speak with foreigners, and a multinational company could hire me, and English would make that easier.] (Questionnaire, December 3, 2016)
“Estudiar inglés es necesario porque me puede abrir puertas en la vida como conseguir un buen trabajo.” [Studying English is necessary because it can help me open doors in life, such as getting a good job.] (Interview, May 27, 2016)

Thus, the identity of these 11 language learners was defined by productive investment and academic

⁴ Participants answered the interviews and the questionnaire in Spanish, their native language. The English translation of their answers appears in brackets.

dedication in the English class because they not only wanted to pass the class in the short term, but were already planning how to improve life conditions and fulfill their wishes in the long term. Data show how high investors were goal-oriented as they related their academic investment to their own professional development in the future. They thought that the English language would help them get good jobs in important companies.

Similarly, high investors' identity was determined by their goal-oriented capacities, discipline, and commitment to studying English because they had envisioned English as an important subject matter in high school that would help them later be admitted into a university despite their limited socio-economic conditions.

"Es útil en mi vida porque me puede ayudar a ser un profesional y ser el primer universitario de la familia. Mis padres estarán orgullosos de mí." [It is useful in my life because it can help me to become a professional and be the first person in my family who goes to the university. My parents will be proud of me.] (Questionnaire, December 3, 2016)

"El inglés me puede ayudar a iniciar una carrera en una universidad." [English can help me to start a professional career at a university.] (Questionnaire, December 3, 2016)

Thus, these learners' identity was influenced by their interest in investing in learning a foreign language because they thought that it was useful to increase symbolic capital, represented in furthering their education at the university level and becoming skilled professionals. These aspirations for education and professional development represented economic capital improvement for these high investors. However, low and high investors' differing views on and attitudes towards English learning caused social tension and conflict in the classroom, an aspect addressed in the following section.

Social Relationships based on Domination-Reduced Productive Investment in the Classroom

Considering that identity is essentially fluid, context-dependent, and transforms as individuals

are forced to deal with or revolt diverse social circumstances (Norton & Toohey, 2011), it was observed in this study that high investors were dominated by low investors' social power. Power relations based on domination forced both low investors and high investors to assume unstable and strategic identities to deal with these oppressed social issues. One situation of unfair power was that low investors, who positioned themselves as the dominant learners in this small social context (the classroom), mocked and hurt high investors. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

When Diana⁵, a high investor in the English class, was reading aloud her daily routine in English, Samuel and Jonathan started to laugh at her pronunciation and imitate sardonically the way she spoke. Although the teacher asked them to behave respectfully, they continued mocking Diana. (Field notes, October 20, 2016).

Thus, dominant learners made fun of high investors' pronunciation in English and participation in class by laughing at, interrupting, and imitating them with the intention of making them look ridiculous. These unequal relationships based on power, derision, and contempt had complex social implications in terms of their language learners' identities. Low investors did not identify as good, productive English learners because they thought that learning English was a waste of time, they would never have to use English in their lives, and it did not represent any kind of cultural or economic capital for them.

With these negative perceptions about the English language, low investors started to create unstable and changeable identities both outside and inside school. On the one hand, they recognized themselves as being socially underprivileged because they had economic needs and few opportunities to improve life conditions, as discussed in the first finding. Their socio-economic problems discouraged them from studying English as they had other priorities in life to take care of. On the other hand, when these low investors were in

⁵ The names that appear in this section are pseudonyms. Participants' names were protected for ethical reasons.

English class and had to interact and share the same space with high investors, they suddenly became dominant and cruel bullies. Paradoxically, these low investors who had identified as being victims of socio-economic disadvantages in their lives and social context, became despotic and dominant learners in the language classroom, attacking and hurting high investors.

When these dominant learners were asked in the interviews why they mocked and bullied their classmates, they did not openly recognize this deed. However, according to data analysis in the field notes, we determined that the low investors' ambivalent, dominant, and repressive identity in the classroom was a result of two tense issues: First, they reacted against having to take a class they did not like. So, instead of investing in their learning, they procrastinated and preferred to bully their classmates (Field notes, October 20, 2016). Second, they were pressured to pass the course because it was a duty with their parents. They usually said:

“Profe, ¿Qué necesito para sacarme 3.0? Yo solo quiero pasar este curso para que mi mamá no me castigue.” [Teacher, what do I need to pass this course with 3.0? I just want to pass this course so that my mom won't punish me.] (Field notes, November 26, 2016).

“Profe, usted sabe que no me gusta el inglés. Páseme con tres, por favor. No quiero tener problemas con mis padres.” [Teacher, you know I don't like English. Pass me with 3.0, please. I don't want to have problems with my parents.] (Field notes, November 26, 2016).

Because low investors not only thought English was irrelevant in their lives, but were also pressed to achieve good grades to please their parents, they expressed their demotivation to study English by controlling and establishing power against those committed learners through mockery, cruelty, and disdain—these being low investors' unfair dominant strategies to evade the fact that they had academic problems. Thus, these low investors had personal struggles with their responsibility for passing the course and with their crumbling reputation of being reluctant language learners before successful investors' eyes. Unfortunately, the mean, dominant

attitude of low investors not only affected the relationships in the class, but also negatively influenced high investors' academic performance.

In the same way, the identity of those dominated, high investor language suffered complex transformations because of unfair power relationships established in the classroom. For instance, it was observed that 8 out of the 11 high investors had initially positioned themselves as outstanding, participative, and productive students who viewed English as a symbolic resource through which they could increase their academic knowledge, further their education level, and accomplish prosperous future plans (field notes, August 31, 2016). However, they decreased their productive identity as language learners as they were gradually forced by the dominant power of low investors to remain silent and invisible in class. The following example shows how a group of students were victims of the unbalanced power established among learners when giving a presentation in English about exotic animals in Colombia:

Juan Pablo and Alexis interrupted Alejandra and Santiago's presentation on exotic animals of Colombia. Juan Pablo and Alexis made fun of the sentences that Alejandra and Santiago pronounced. Juan Pablo talked to his friends instead of being in silent. Alejandra and her group had to stop their presentation because they felt offended and abused. Teachers talked with Juan Pablo and Alexis about their conduct. (field notes, October 20, 2016)

These data show that Juan Pablo and his group, who were low investors in the English class, interrupted and attempted to ruin the presentation of the high investors. Their dominant power based on disrespect, mockery, and humiliation was intended to attack and sabotage the academic performance of the high investors. In consequence, high investors started to reduce their participation and level of investment in their learning as these data show:

“Pues, aunque yo hago las tareas y aprendo muchas palabras en inglés, no hablo nada en clase porque me da pena y temor. Es que ellos se burlan de mi pronunciación.” [Well, although I

do homework and learn many words in English, I don't speak in class because I feel embarrassed and afraid. They make fun of my pronunciation.] (Interview, November 24, 2016)

“Aunque sé de la materia y me gusta el inglés, yo ya no quiero hablar en clase porque tengo miedo de que me ridiculicen y me hieran.” [Although I know the contents and I like English, I don't want to speak in class because I'm afraid of being ridiculed and being hurt.] (Interview, November 24, 2016)

Low investors' different forms of unjust power or bullying such as mockery, lack of respect, and rude interruptions decreased good learners' academic performance who gradually became intimidated and afraid of participating actively in class. Thus, low investors' power positioned high investors as dominated subjects who tried to avoid any confrontation by assuming a submissive position most of the time. High investors preferred to be silent and passive, rather than being the target of unfair domination. Moreover, power not only affected high investors' level of investment, but also caused high levels of demotivation:

“A mí se me han acabado las ganas de estudiar porque algunos compañeros se burlan de mi trabajo.” [I have lost interest in studying English because some classmates ridicule my work.] (Interview, November 24, 2016).

Yo ya no quiero participar en clase. Me siento aburrida con la actitud indiferente y agresiva de los otros. [I don't want to participate anymore in class. I'm bored with the indifferent and rude attitude of other classmates.] (Interview, November 24, 2016)

“Cuando hablo en inglés, sueltan la risa y lo hacen sentir mal a uno. Prefiero no participar en clase.” [When I speak in English, they burst into laughter and make me feel bad. I prefer not to participate in class.] (Interview, November 24, 2016)

Data show that, although good learners liked English very much and had been initially motivated to learn it, their investment decreased in their language learning from being socially and psychologically mistreated by dominant learners'

power exerted through verbal abuse, cruel laughter, and aggressive behavior. As can be seen in the data, one of the most common strategies of domination used by low investors was offensive laughter, a mean practice for high investors because they took it as seriously harmful. Low investors' nasty comments accompanied by cruel laughter meant for high investors a repressive way to ridicule their level of intelligence, their academic performance, and interest in practicing the foreign language. Power affected language learners' investment and identity construction, since they realized that learning a language was not always a happy and safe experience, and that being intrinsically motivated did not always work to invest efficiently when tense social relations of power interfered in the learning process.

High Investor Resistance of Unequal Power through Collaborative Investment

Attitudes of resistance to coercive power are defined as reactions and strategies assumed by only five dominated students that struggled to resist actions of mockery, interruptions, and sabotage generated by dominant students. Therefore, after a period of three months during the observation, some dominated learners' identities changed from a submissive, passive role to an attitude of resistance. One example of resistance taken from the data was the power relationship between Nicolás and Andrea. Nicolás was a low investor who made minimum effort to comply with his academic responsibilities, but exerted abusive power towards his classmates. On the contrary, Andrea was a high investor because she liked English; however, she became afraid of speaking in class and reduced her participation and investment when she became a victim of Nicolás's bullying and abuse. Over time, she became so tired of mockery and violence that she suddenly took the initiative to openly struggle against her bullies, and work harder to recover her learning investment and improve her learning. One day, when Andrea and one of her classmates were practicing a conversation in English, Nicolás started to laugh at her English pronunciation with two other bullies. Fearful and with a faltering voice, Andrea confronted the three students who were exerting unfair power on her and said:

“Nicolás, deje de burlarse, ustedes no hicieron nada para practicar esta conversación, pero sí se sienten con el derecho de molestar. Esta conversación nos costó mucho esfuerzo como para que ustedes nos vengan a interrumpir.” [Nicolás, stop ridiculing us, you did nothing to study this conversation, but you think you have the right to bother others. We made a great effort to prepare this conversation, so stop interrupting us]. After that, and with the intervention of the teacher to solve this problem, Andrea and Tomás continued with their conversation. (Field notes, November 30, 2016)

The previous example shows how Andrea’s sense of responsibility for complying with academic duties motivated her to defend herself from unfair power, demanding her right to be listened to and be respected, despite her fears to confront dominant learners. She fought for her rights as a student because she had invested much on her speaking task, and she thought that her work deserved to be appreciated by others. As she was exasperated with oppression, she used strategies such as reinforcing her investment and confronting verbally her oppressors to react against this unfair exercise of power.

Similarly, other four high investors, who had been positioned as submissive and silent learners, suddenly emerged as resistant learners by investing collaboratively in their work:

“Trabajé con mis compañeros en los proyectos de la clase, a pesar del mal ambiente que creaban Nicolás y sus amigos.” [I worked with my classmates in the class projects, regardless of Nicolás’s and his friends’ rude behavior.] (Interview, November 24, 2016)

“Me parece que entiendo mucho, así que trabajé con mis compañeros para sacar buenas notas, a pesar de que los otros nos molestan. Sólo quieren copiar nuestra tarea, y sobre el hecho, burlarse de nosotros.” [It seems to me that I understand many words, so I help my classmates to get good grades, despite the fact that the others bother us. They only want to copy our homework and, not happy with that, they mock us.] (Questionnaire, December 3)

One of the strategies used by high investors to resist low investors’ power was to construct their knowledge through relations based on cooperative learning or investment. High investors started to help each other to complete academic work and face social conflict and oppression in the classroom. Forms of collaborative investment were evident when they explained to each other the meaning of unknown vocabulary, practiced and reviewed the speaking tasks, and studied together for the evaluations. These few learners were identified as possessing a positive and productive language learner identity through working hard in groups and investing collaboratively in order to have good grades, despite the antagonist pressure of the low investors who did not produce much.

Discussion

The analysis of the findings show that low investors did not see that the English language represented any kind of cultural or economic capital that would have helped them to envision how to improve their present living conditions, such as acquiring new academic knowledge or world knowledge, scaling social class, or furthering their education by entering the university in the near future. In fact, these learners’ identities were more defined by their underprivileged social and economic needs than by their interest and effort in improving their lives through English learning. As language learners, they thought that English was not necessary other than as a prerequisite to pass the academic year. As a result, they ended up with a low academic performance. They never valued their teachers’ advice and their classmates’ attitude to learn because they always had the fixed idea that English was not important for them.

Findings also revealed that EFL learners’ social relationships established through domination significantly reduced high investors’ productive work and commitment in the classroom, transforming language learners’ identities so easily. Thus, low investors’ dominant power based on disrespect, mockery, and humiliation was intended to attack and sabotage good students’ academic performance. In consequence, high investors started to reduce

their participation and level of investment. The fact that some learners were afraid of speaking in class, despite the fact that they liked the English class, demonstrated that relations of power constrained their investment and affected their identities because they took certain positions as language learners that they would not take otherwise. For instance, high investors inhibited participating in class when they really wanted to take an active role in the learning process. This situation shows that identity is context-based and changes from one situation to another depending on social realities and conflictive interaction established by power and submission.

In this sense, unfair power relations were a social factor that affected language learners' productive and goal-oriented identity, substantially reducing their academic investment. As could be seen, both dominant and dominated learners' identities were variable and ambivalent, not always fixed, because of the social interaction set in the classroom. According to Norton's (2011) theory on investment, for instance, high investors' submission demonstrates how power can affect and destroy their academic performance as language learners regardless of their interest in learning English (Darvin & Norton, 2018; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009). For their part, low investors' identity was determined by context-dependent issues including underprivileged social conditions, poor academic performance, and family duties.

Regarding high investors' resistance and struggle to evade power through collaborative work, it is important to mention that language learners' identity can be highly associated with their motivation to learn a foreign language. Thus, five learners' identities first fluctuated from a productive, committed identity to a submissive and silent identity. Then, they finally assumed a resistant, collaborative, and productive identity to confront openly dominant learners' unfair power established in the classroom, up to the point that they gave low investors an example of how to face social adversity such as inequality and bullying through hard work. These changes show that learners operating at a different time and in different circumstances, as dominated and then as resistant leaders, support the finding that identity is unstable and context-dependent. Of course, there may be

other cases in which dominated learners never react to power relations; they rather remain submissive and marginalized, missing opportunities to invest productively in their learning process. However, in this particular context, 5 out of the 11 high investors of this group resisted power.

Collaborative investment constituted a symbolic resource for the dominated learners as they helped each other to build their knowledge in the middle of a tense environment in order to operate effectively during their English classes. However, defending themselves from unjust power, intimidation, and bullying was not easy. This involved a slow process as they had to be victims of so much aggression before finally making the decision to fight for their right to learn English under better conditions.

In terms of identity construction, it is relevant that the dominated learners (high investors) in this English class found civilized and intelligent strategies to face the violence imposed by others, rather than responding in the same violent way. Even though they were abused, they attempted to work hard and become successful high investors in the learning process. This finding relates to Norton's (1995) explanation in that these high investors never lost their motivation to learn the foreign language despite the fact that they invested poorly in the learning process due to exclusion and power relations. Their motivation encouraged them to confront social adversity in the classroom in order to finally recover their high investment. Consequently, EFL learner identity does not only rely on individual and intrinsic motivation. Identity mainly deals with how individuals see themselves in the world, how they invest in their learning, how they interact with others, and how they solved their social differences (Norton, 1995). Social relationships, whether balanced or unbalanced, and the environment, whether just or unfair, also influence identity construction.

Conclusions

This case study concludes that low investors' evasive attitude towards English complicated their identity as language learner when they opted for establishing dominant social relationships in

the classroom through mockery, interruptions, and offenses. Since dominant learners were low investors in their English class, part of their unfair power instilled on their classmates was the result of not being committed learners and not working hard to learn. Also, dominant learners were under the pressure of their parents who were hopeful about their children passing the course. This leads to the conclusion that identity is complex as low investors' identity was unstable and contradictory because they were cruel against their peers but, at the same time, experienced frustration and failure of not being committed in the English class as their parents would have expected.

For their part, high investors were initially positioned as dominated and submissive because they had to face inequitable power. However, some of these investors eventually reacted and resisted these unequal relations of power by not only confronting dominant learners to defend their rights (with the support of the teachers), but also by investing through cooperative learning. Their identity and investment as productive learners in the English classroom were recovered through cooperation. This fact leads to conclude that there are cases in which identity in the language classroom can be positively shaped by the inclusion of and the interaction with other individuals who shared similar purposes.

The 29 low investors were characterized by multifaceted levels of identity construction: They were evasive, careless, and uninterested in their language learning, but were also dominant and mean to their classmates. Likewise, the 11 high investors' identity was many-sided and complex: On the one hand, they were productive, responsible, and committed as they saw English as a means to improve cultural and symbolic capital. On the other hand, their identity as language learners was affected by submission and domination until some of them became resistant to power in order to face and defend their rights as language learners.

One important conclusion is that learning a foreign language in the EFL context is never an isolated experience from learners' personal, family, socioeconomic, and academic dilemmas

or achievements in real life. The foreign language classroom constitutes a social space in which students bring, construct, and transform their identities based on the relationships they build in the classroom and with the world. Those relationships can be positive and equal but, many times, tense, unequal, and abusive. When power dominates the classroom, some language learners may create identities marked by hegemonic and cruel behaviors, while other learners are forced to adopt a submissive and dominated identity, reducing their possibilities for greater investment in their learning.

This results of this study suggest that English teachers should not only focus on preparing classes and teaching language contents. Instead, it is teachers' duty to take into account how personal, social, and environmental factors can affect learners' identity and investment in the English class, and to understand that learning a foreign language successfully depends on both personal motivation and on iniquitous environmental and social conditions. For instance, the participants involved in this study, especially the low investors, needed more support from teachers, parents, and the directors of the school to work on the construction of their identity as language learner in more productive and conscientious ways, a task to be carried out after the end of this project. Moreover, these learners needed school guidance to work on how to construct more harmonious relationships with the other classmates based on cooperation, respect, and tolerance, thus eradicating unfair relations of power that damage the class environment and affect their learning process.

The concept of identity challenges teachers and researchers with certain complications, because, since the construction of the self is context-dependent and context-producing (Norton & Toohey, 2011), teachers and researchers are called to do systematic and careful observations of learners' interactions and performances in order to identify their complex and dynamic identities, and how they lead learners to invest in their learning with the intention of applying pedagogical practices more effectively. The novelty of this research study in the Colombian EFL setting and other EFL contexts is that teachers can learn to understand adolescent English learners' identity formation from the

perspective of low or high investors in their English language learning, as well as the reasons for which low or high investment can fluctuate as a result of fair or unfair social relationships inside and outside the classroom.

With the help of the concepts of identity and investment, EFL teachers can create learners' awareness of the fact that they can succeed in life if they learn English as a springboard for symbolic capital such as intellectual development, education, and a better job position in the future, no matter if they come from low socioeconomic and underprivileged backgrounds. Likewise, learners need to be aware that if they invest more in their learning and education, they will be more prepared to confront a globalized society that still promotes injustice, prejudice, exclusion, and power. They should understand that their identity is as important as the identity of other human beings. Assuming identity and investment from a social perspective, not only from an individualist standpoint, can help language learners to become active and resistant agents to confront oppression and power that many times are legitimated in the educational context.

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