



# Demonized Learners in Sociocultural Theory

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## Abstract

Within the frameworks of Sociocultural theory, particularly Vygotskian sociocultural theory and ZPD, Lave and Wenger's CoP, and contemporary sociocultural theory, this paper seeks to examine the unfavourable scholarly portrayal of learners and their identities based on learners' behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs about the social element of learning, particularly non-mainstream, non-normative behaviours. Such behaviours may be, to the learner, salient accompanying identity traits that were celebrated in one context but demonized in another. While learners have a degree of agency in subsequent critical, even hostile, settings, often this demonization leads to a degree of withdrawal, a retreat to grassroots rather than the mainstream, and a perpetration of accepted student norms. The deconstruction and critique of the 'Good Language Learner' gives insight into dominant discourses and metanarratives. Further to this, we see implications of these academic discourses on practitioners, especially for Asian English language teachers, as well as recommendations.

**Keywords:** Sociocultural theory, dominant, non-mainstream, Good Language Learner, metanarratives, social setting

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the portrayal of learners who chose nonmainstream, non-normative forms of social interaction, or who gravitate away from social interaction. The genesis of this paper lies in the growing dominance of sociocultural perspectives in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) scholarship, occurring with little critique of normalized learner behaviours, habits, social norms, and preferences. Approaching this dominance from the perspective of a teaching practitioner as well as as a student, I detect multiple instances where learners may be demonized in literature by the very researchers who seek to give insight into language learning, leaving such learners delegitimized. My concern is for the negative association ascribed to learners who shun peer interaction or gravitate towards solitude in language learning for any number of reasons.

It is my experience and metacognition that became the catalyst for my interest in the way socially resistant language learners are treated in prominent SLA literature particularly through sociocultural perspectives. My particular and situated experience with formal schooling forms the posture from which I approach the orientation of certain research towards non-normative, nonmainstream students. I went to school in an environment that fostered certain beliefs, attitudes and biases that manifested in certain learning habits and preferences. Having developed my first language, English, in an almost exclusively English medium at home in Malaysia, my entrance into Malay immersion was a violent shock to my senses. The situation was further exacerbated by my entrance into year two rather than year one of elementary school, due to unavoidable family circumstances. Although my difficulties were known to my teachers, none of them, least of all my Malay teacher, made special efforts to apply themselves to my Malay acquisition. Because of my prompt and sustained academic and social failure in that first year of school, I aligned myself with peers who spoke English to me so any opportunity to benefit from peer interaction was lost to me. A sociable and extroverted child, my Malay acquisition occurred in the privacy of my room where I received the ministrations of a one-to-one tutor and toiled through textbooks, workbooks, and dictionaries under the eye of my mother, whose Malay was insufficient to help her ailing daughter.

These circumstances, and others, culminated in a deep-rooted belief that my academic success or failure rested on my shoulders alone. The systemic inadequacies in my corrupt and degenerating public school system were coupled with the inexcusable behavior of teachers who frequently thrashed students in fits of rage, came to class tardily, or unzipped male students' trousers during assembly as punishment. Although I was privileged to be served by some teachers who were devoted and highly skillful, the lasting impression my primary and secondary education left on me was the value of self-reliance, silent listening during any instruction I was fortunate enough to receive, and diligent individual work in the sanctuary of my room.

In SLA scholarship, I have observed that elements of student identity similar to mine, outlined here, have been less valued than, for example, explicit vocal participation in formal class settings, a propensity for group work, and active sharing of knowledge and pooling of intellectual resources. My suspicion is that the student identity that I described of myself would not be positively framed in SLA research, had I been a subject of study. It is this presentiment that prompts my interest in the way socially resistant language learners are treated in literature, particularly through sociocultural perspectives. My concern is for the negative association ascribed to learners who shun peer interaction or gravitate towards solitude in language learning for any number of reasons. This paper seeks to explore the implicit and

explicit demonization of these types of students as portrayed by scholars employing the use of sociocultural theory in their work.

Subsequent to this introduction, I will examine literature that contextualizes this study. Within this selection of readings, I have demonstrated a degree of selectivity. While I would prefer to examine each reading relevant to this matter in this course of this paper, this would undoubtedly prove too long a discussion. Hence I have addressed papers that have appeared multiple times in academic discourse, papers that were written by prominent scholars in the field of SLA, and papers that I believe to be outstanding examples of the issue I am undertaking. In my discussion, I will consider the alarming lack of critical perspective in studies. I believe my critique to be solitary rather than generic precisely because of the scarcity of arguments of this sort in literature to this point. Applying my findings to future praxis, I discuss implications for an Asian, situated teaching context.

## 2. Literature Analysis

Within the study of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), we have observed scholarly interest in teachers and teaching (Johnson, 2009; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston and Johnson, 2009; Bradley, 2010; Kanno and Stuart, 2011; Xu, 2013). In view of the postmethod, poststructuralist posture, wherein the context of education takes prominence, we have proceeded to examine SLA learners in formal school settings (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994; Toohey, 1998; Storch, 2002; Watanabe, 2008), the workplace (Li, 2000; Firth, 2009), within communities (Han, 2012; 2013; Takahashi, 2013), and in places of worship (Han, 2011; 2014).

Sociocultural perspectives have been applied to various degrees in these analyses of SLA learners so I find Duff's (2007) differentiation between "specifically Vygotskian cultural-historical orientation to sociocultural theory [and] other contemporary, more identity oriented, social theorizing...under the 'sociocultural' banner" (p. 311) useful (see also Zuengler, J., & Miller, E. R., 2006; Niewolny, K. & Wilson, A., 2009). Vygotskian theories ascribe the origins of human mental processes, including learning, to the social and collective (Donato, 1988; Johnson, 2004). Here, individuals are seen to first participate in social activities and then to internalize them, giving prominence to environmental factors at play in a learner's experience of learning (Johnson, 2004). Mental functions are seen as mediated by language and other symbolic systems and tools (Johnson, 2004; Duff, 2007). Because of this, learning is a socially constructed, highly situated process that learners engage in by means of culturally specific semiotic tools. One example of such specificity is given in Lantolf's (2000) discussion of Vygotskian activity theory, where activity is seen to be motivated by needs which become directed at certain objects and realized through specific, goal oriented actions. Because each of these elements is carried out under particular spatial and temporal conditions, 'the same activity can be realized through different actions and with different forms of mediation' (Lantolf, 2000, p. 9). Put another way, learners may interact in the intermental domain, that is, socially, using highly idiosyncratic methods of appropriation. These idiosyncrasies take on further significance when we examine the outcome of learners interacting with interlocutors, who are themselves idiosyncratic, as they mediate mental functions.

This focus on social settings heightened postmodern awareness of the unique, situated, dynamic nature of learners' circumstances (McKay and Wong, 1996; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Black, 2005; Hawkins, 2005; Ilieva, 2010; Yamat, Fisher & Rich, 2014). One element of this accent on situatedness was the relationships and interactions learners experienced with interlocutors including teachers (McKay and Wong, 1996; Duff, 2002; Ilieva, 2010), colleagues (Pierce, 1995), a community of peers (Day and Toohey, 1999; Rollinson, 2005; Talmy, 2010), and members of a greater contact zone (Chalmers and Volet, 1997; Fotovatian, 2012). In each of these relational contexts, learners and their interlocutors are neither neutral nor static and nuanced analysis is necessary in order to fully appreciate the complexity of interactions. An added overtone here is the element of learners' preferences and how they construct partiality for becoming and accessing certain socially desirable interlocutors, given the breadth of factors that come to bear on their relating (Hawkins, 2005; Takahashi, 2013).

Another Vygotskian notion is that of scaffolding, in which we see more competent individuals, experts, collaborating with less able ones, novices, with the goal of attaining the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), superseding novices' current capabilities (Donato, 1988). Although proficiency here appears to occupy the same role of elevating individuals to the elite echelons of 'more competent,' groups of peers have demonstrated the ability to collectively construct such competence (Donato, 1988; Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994; Storch, 2002; Watanabe, 2008).

With this in mind, we turn to another model of social movement and relationships, Lave and Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice (CoP), which offers an interpretation of individuals interacting with communities in which they wish to find legitimacy. Newcomers are seen to be peripheral and advance centripetally towards the center of the community where oldtimers dwell in a state of belonging. Duff (2007) sees language socialization as the progression of the novice, here the newcomer, towards 'communicative competence, membership and legitimacy...a process mediated by linguistic mastery' (p. 310). Hence the learner inhabits the tension between the requisite mastery for mediation and the goal of competence such that ability and acquisition become the source of oldtimer status as well as the objective. In this model, two parties exist: oldtimers and newcomers. Individuals fall into one of these categories and inter-party interaction is condensed in the simplistic oldtimer-newcomer identity binary.

Drawing from the work of these scholars, contemporary theorists have synthesized a model of individual identity. Weedon's (1987/1997) poststructuralist, feminist work depicted identity as a subjectivity, perpetually fragmented and possibly contradictory, presenting the individual as dynamic rather than static, agentively acting upon as well as reacting to social relationships (Davies, 1990; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pierce, 1995; Ouellette, 2008). Similarly, scholars (Duff, 2007; Haneda, 2006) draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) work, portraying individuals as possessing

fluid identities, capable of situated centripetal movement within a Community of Practice (CoP) from peripheral ‘newcomers’ to central ‘oldtimers.’

I proffer a balance between this current emphasis on the dynamic, shifting, subjective elements of identity and those traits that accompany students across what Norton and Toohey (2011) dub ‘space and time.’ Much of the literature reviewed here revolves around learners who were experiencing or who had recently experienced major spatial and temporal transitions, such as international students, immigrants, foreign workers/expatriates, or generation 1.5 learners. Many of these individuals were just commencing in their contexts of language study or were enrolled in short-term programs. Examining these studies, I find Walsh Marr’s (2010) vision of such learning contexts as being “an alchemy that can shape individuals’ sense of self” useful (p.3). Even were we to view identity as wholly and constantly in flux, my belief is that humans are organic beings, responding in a crucible where change is required or desired but necessarily requiring both ‘space and time,’ should this occur. I deduce that Norton and Toohey (2011) themselves believed these to be crucial, given that they propose these elements rather than a vacuum in which individuals instantly, ontologically become that which they wish themselves to be. Learners who display nonmainstream, non-normative forms of social interaction as a form of learning may be demonstrating forms that constitute salient parts of their student identities, which may accompany them across both space and time. These identity traits may have been formed under particular circumstances and may accompany students across chronological time, oceans, national borders, and sociocultural settings. Consideration of these accompanying traits is not only seemly; it is paramount in completing our model of the essence of student identity.

Within the frameworks of Vygotskian sociocultural theory and ZPD, Lave and Wenger’s CoP, and contemporary sociocultural theory, I seek to examine and discuss the portrayal of learners and their identities by scholars based on learners’ behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs about the social element of learning.

### 2.1 Vygotskian sociocultural theory

Turning to the ZPD model, we see analysis of learners who demonstrate resistance to social elements in their communities. Although learners are seen as able to scaffold each other to the end of achieving higher levels of performance, not all peer-peer interaction is seen as conducive to learning. Watanabe (2008) describes Jun and Yoji, Japanese learners in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program paired with various partners for certain writing tasks. Reflecting on his collaborative interaction with one partner, Jun, who had expressed dislike for pair work in general, remarked “this pair work made me realize that two people could work well together,” and so was portrayed by Watanabe as having a ‘positive attitude’ towards this particular peer (p. 621). On the other hand, when Jun ‘expressed his frustration’ towards a passive peer, saying “I don’t think our essay writing went well at all because there was little discussion and both of us had few ideas,” this was interpreted as ‘negative attitude’ (p. 621). Similarly, when Yoji declared, regarding another passive peer, “It was not pair work because there was no interaction. I was displeased at Sota throughout the interaction,” this was also interpreted as ‘negative attitude’ (p. 261). It is problematic that learners’ attitudes of pleasure or displeasure at each other and the perceived quality and productivity of their peer interaction are evaluated as positive or negative. The evaluative nature of Watanabe’s (2008) discussion is further elucidated in her assertion that ‘not all pairs of different proficiency levels [can] provide occasions for learning’ (p. 626). Immediately subsequent to this claim, Watanabe (2008) cites Jun’s lack of trust and Yoji’s voluntary abdication of his role as an equal contributor as instances of occasions where, presumably, *learning* did not occur, not collaboration. Collaboration and learning are intimated as being interchangeable and synonymous.

In their ethnography of a Canadian kindergarten classroom, Day and Toohey (1999) apply Vygotskian sociocultural theory in their observation of how students effectively mediate social activities. Students utilized the practice of choral speaking as a method of ‘accessing the language of their teachers and peers’ (p. 46), that is, using peers and their utterances as a semiotic tool for mediation. Although language has been seen as a semiotic tool (Day and Toohey, 1999; Lantolf, 2000; Storch, 2002), this portrays others themselves as potential instruments for learners’ mediation. In another example of this, Lantolf (2000) retells a study of urban and rural adult-child dyads copying a barnyard scene depicted in a model. In the urban dyads, the adult, the more knowledgeable other, created a linguistic scaffold by directing the child’s attention to the model. This was seen as ‘strategic rather than directive’ (p. 10). The rural dyads remained under direct adult control with ‘rural mothers [using] their children as tools’ such that these children made fewer errors in copying but failed to learn how to copy (p. 10, emphasis added). Lantolf (2000) further clarifies the underlying economic motivations of rural mothers, that is, their traditional reliance on error-free reproduction of artifacts for sale. In both Day and Toohey (1999) and Lantolf (2000), we see contrasts between those who use others as tools of mediation and those who choose other tools. This interpretation through the lens of activity theory signifies that the motives, goals and mediation tools favoured by different parties are observed to be different, albeit without the explicitly evaluative language we see in Watanabe (2008).

### 2.2 Community of Practice Model and Contemporary Sociocultural Theory

At a superficial level, the CoP model bears much resemblance to the ZPD model. It is tempting to make ‘more knowledgeable other’ synonymous with ‘oldtimer,’ ‘novice’ with ‘newcomer’ and to conflate the centripetal movement of legitimate peripheral learners towards the center of a community of practice with the attainment of the zone of proximal development. Upon closer inspection, however, these equations prove problematic. While learners may feasibly band together to collectively construct a more knowledgeable other, oldtimer status is ascribed to those who command legitimacy as speakers, beyond linguistic competence (Han, 2011). Although oldtimers may assume the responsibility of actively assisting newcomers in their integration (Han, 2011), their very centrality and status creates division from newcomers- they wield the power to designate newcomers as potential members and are able proffer

legitimacy and resources precisely because of their position. Here, legitimacy is not co-constructed; it is extended. The duality of oldtimer/newcomer specifications in the CoP model also limits the spectrum of identities available to learners. While the mass media and social settings make available a certain selection of identities to be assumed, ‘individuals do not carve out an identity from the inside out or from the outside in...rather, their environments impose constraints whilst they act upon those environments’ (Block, 2007, p. 866). Because ‘the purpose of joint participation is for the less experienced participants to increase their expertise of community activities’ (Norton, 2001, p. 162), learners who increase their expertise necessarily come to ever more closely resemble oldtimers. This bears enormous implications in a setting where ‘engagement...constitutes learning’ (Norton, 2001, p. 162, emphasis added). When this occurs, then ‘the undifferentiated use of the term ‘learning’...sidesteps...what counts as learning in a particular classroom and in what ways learning is mediated by interpersonal dynamics as well as by material and symbolic artifacts’ (Haneda, 2006, p. 813, emphasis added). Within this model, learners who may not, cannot, or chose not to progress towards the center of a CoP through nonparticipation are relegated to the fringes where their learner identities are invalidated and subject to negative interpretations.

The occurrences of nonparticipation may be attributed to some combination of the constraints in social communities as well as agentive, self-conscious decision making (Norton, 2001; Block, 2007). Using contemporary sociocultural theory as her framework, Norton (2001) provides a vignette of a learner within this tension. Despite being a teacher with seventeen years of experience in her native country of Poland, Katarina found herself a newcomer in her Canadian ESL class as well as in the greater community of Canada. She expected access to the identity of highly respected professional whereas her teacher treated her as a newcomer, evoking Katarina’s anger and her withdrawal from the program: a form of resistance and nonparticipation in that community of practice. In this context, participation and an increase in expertise would hardly have been neutral for Katarina; if we apply the CoP model here, we see that she would have had to effectually adopt the situating that her teacher assigned her, that is, newcomer immigrant, in order to accept the position of student in that class. To whom was Katarina a newcomer? Her status as ‘immigrant’ arose in relation, and was relative to, her teacher. To purposefully move towards an oldtimer position necessarily involves ratifying that one is indeed a newcomer, that is, a newcomer to the oldtimers in a given community. For Katarina, this was unacceptable and led to her nonparticipation. It is worthwhile to note that this incident occurred in an environment where the learner was able to agentively withdraw and seek out other communities. This may not always be the case.

Students may not always have access to withdrawal to this degree and may take up forms of mediation with their learning environment that are less welcomed and encouraged than others. In contrast with the seemingly neutral oldtimer/newcomer dialectic, the complex power relations that learners are subject to are vital in critical analysis of language learning (Haneda, 2006; Zuengler, J. & Miller, E. R., 2006; Niewolny, K. L. & Wilson, A. L., 2009; Norton and Toohey, 2011; Han, 2012). Confronted with a CoP that may not position them favourably, as with Katarina, students may choose to resist existing, accepted, expected forms of social participation or, on the other hand, make efforts to adopt them. Both these decisions entail the element of individual agency acting upon and being acted on within a social setting. One example of the former choice is elucidated in Duff’s (2002) study of non-local students in a Canadian multilingual high school classroom who occupied ‘awkward’ positions because of their silence and subsequent subordinate positioning. These students, fearing ridicule or criticism by the native English speaking population, preferred to maintain silence in their classroom and favoured writing activities over verbal discourse. Duff (2002) notes that this did not necessarily form a hindrance to their learning and that ‘seemingly reticent students who did not seem to have appropriated ‘local’ norms of classroom interaction...were academically superior...based on other kinds of performance’ (p. 312). This ethnography raises questions regarding the extent to which students ‘want to display their identities and personal knowledge in class or to conform to dominant, normative local sociolinguistic behaviours’ (Duff, 2002, p. 313, emphasis in original). Duff (2002) acknowledges the nonmainstream nature of the novices’ choice of social behaviours and notes that although, in the long run, conforming to garner the acceptance of local peers was less vital, in the short run, students felt marginal and marginalized.

In another study of a learner who exemplified this, Fotovatian (2012) depicts Ratna, an Indonesian Ph.D. student in Australia, who negotiated her institutional identity using the self-isolating approach. Although cognizant of the importance of networking, Ratna undertook a ‘trajectory of...self-marginalization,’ and her ‘interactions were mainly with texts and books’ (p. 585). Because this particular paper revolved around the inadequacy of the ‘international student’ term in describing student agency and diversity, we see Ratna’s approach, along with the self-conserving and self-engaging approaches intentionally portrayed as idiosyncratic ‘different pathways’ (p.586) without any explicit evaluative attitude from Fotovatian. As with Lantolf (2000), Fotovatian (2012) takes care to illuminate the learner’s background, complete with Ratna’s history with academia and personality traits, which has the postmodern effect of legitimizing various narratives.

Conversely, students may choose to take up dominant practices in an effort to gain status and acceptance in their CoP. Kettle (2005) asserts that learners who exercise agency ‘[resist] being positioned in a certain way within a given discourse but [work] consciously and strategically to...reconstruct a powerful rather than marginalized position for themselves’ (p. 48). Woody, a Thai national at an Australian graduate program, initially ‘[referred] to himself as nobody because he [failed] to participate’ (p. 51). Tellingly, Woody went on to intentionally become ‘better’ at participating in class, observing practices that positioned himself as a legitimate member. His success was attributed to his agentive adoption of explicit verbal participation and social interaction in his class.

While we have access to narratives such as Katarina’s (Norton, 2001), non-local high school students’ (Duff, 2002) and Ratna’s (Fotovatian, 2012), where learners are acknowledged to have agentively carved out non-mainstream positions for themselves in their communities via their social practices, these narratives are hardly tinted rosily. Katarina is an example of nonparticipation; the high

school students, though earning academic success in some areas, may languish in the short run; Ratna and her self-conserving counterpart are, at best, 'different' from their self-engaging peers because the study is silent on the ultimate results of such behavior. Woody, however, is posited as unquestionably successful (Kettle, 2005).

### 3. Discussion

Throughout the progression of the sociocultural influence on SLA, from applications of Vygotskian theory to the CoP model and contemporary sociocultural frameworks, language learners and their social interactions have been examined with evaluative, even judgmental attitudes. In this survey of literature concerning learners, I have found learners possessing ideologies, biases, gravitations and behaviours contrary to dominant forms of social learning portrayed unsatisfactorily. That is to say, learners who choose, knowingly or unknowingly, to use tools of mediation other than peers, teachers, or others available in their communities are demonized and categorized as 'nonparticipating,' having 'negative attitude,' and 'unable to provide occasions for learning.' Although unequal power relations have become central to critical SLA discussions and the agency of learners in relation to their circumstances a point of interest, learners who, for one reason or another, do not enjoy or seek out mainstream social interactions are often shaded unflatteringly.

During my review of this body of literature, I have come to further appreciate the role of ethnography and the practice of situating oneself within one's research especially during opportunities for fieldwork. This stresses the significance of examining and making visible one's own biases, assumptions and gravitations towards one's observations, examining the relationships between them so that readers and researchers can be more critically aware of the factors influencing every aspect of their interest in the issue, methodology, findings, and discussion in their writing. Here, I acknowledge, with LeCompte, Preissle, and Tesch (1993), that we cannot and should not shed our ascriptive characteristics, even as we acknowledge that they 'reflect a preoccupation with these facets of a researcher's personal identity' (p. 121). Rather, I find that ethnographers like McKay and Wong (1996), Duff (2002), and Han (2012) who purposefully include their own connection with their analysis within their writing less paternalistic because of their critical awareness of who 'I' and 'them' in their research were. Having said this, I have not identified a methodology guaranteed to produce non-evaluative, non-judgmental writing, and I do not doubt that all my efforts to situate myself in this piece of writing and observe critical awareness of my own interaction with this topic have fallen short of this ideal. Even so, I value the critical awareness that I have accumulated regarding these tendencies and my growing appreciation of multiple narratives, which I am learning to honour.

This same attitude of openness that views ourselves and our narratives as intersecting with those of our study subjects is related to that of reception of multiple narratives. The converse of this, in SLA research and in dominant discourse, is the selectivity of narratives available in the literature we review. Thus we investigate the positive experiences and outcomes associated with the social element of learning and the use of others as a tool of mediation, but rarely study the same outcome for those who do not, cannot, or will not. We see a surge in Martina's willingness to '[respond] to and create opportunities to practice English' (Pierce, 1995, p. 21), which we may contrast with learners who are 'unable to create occasions for learning.' Or we observe non-local high school students' enduring awkwardness (Duff, 2002) juxtaposed with Woody's journey from 'nobody' to becoming 'somebody' based on his developing social interaction in his class (Kettle, 2005).

This is unsurprising given the orientation of formal education towards reproducing the political and social status quo, enabling and extending the influence of dominant powers (Pennycook, 1989, Niewolny, K. L. & Wilson, A. L., 2009). This, while serving admittedly pragmatic purposes in the processes of colonization, the curation of neoliberal economic gain, and the execution of national agendas, equally contributes to the construction, dissemination, and neutralization of ethnocentric perspectives, assumptions and judgments of scholars towards learners. Ilieva and Waterstone (2013) address the 'higher education...version of ethnocentrism: "academicentrism" or the conviction "that 'our' (that is, Western) methods of teaching, research and degrees are better than those of other countries"' (Stier, 2004, p.95, as quoted in Ilieva and Waterstone, 2013). Where the ethnocentrism of the individual and the academicentrism of the researcher intersect in the self of the scholar conducting research, the result often follows that learners, especially of different backgrounds from the scholars, are viewed through the doubly shadowed lens of prejudice. This 'West is best' validation of such research and dominant discourse is reinforced by the position of intellectual authority that scholars, in and of themselves, hold, especially within the field of education. As globalization increasingly compresses space and time (Fairclough, 1999; Stromquist and Monkman, 2000; Block, 2002), communication and knowledge become less specific to locales and readily available, almost instantaneously, to nation states, communities, teachers, families, students, and other scholars, far from their origins. Jiwani (2006) raises the influence of the 'white eye' which exerts '...particular influences on the kinds of images and stories about Others which are disseminated locally and globally' (p. 32). We must examine which locales generate, which receive, and in which direction the tides of information are flowing in this compressed age. I would continue to say, in agreement with Fairclough (1999) that these tides come to distant shores posited as *expert knowledges*. The 'white eye' in scholarship becomes not only a limiting factor during evaluations of learners but also naturalized to the degree that we, including those of us Asian teachers in this region, lack metacognitive awareness of these messages (Cortes, 2000).

One aspect of such ethnocentric demonization is the problematic silence regarding the ways in which salient accompanying identity traits affect students who have traversed time and space. Studies conducted in transition settings or short-term foreign programs such as ESL classrooms (Norton, 2001; Watanabe, 2008) or 'study abroad' education for international/non-local students (Duff, 2002; Kettle, 2005; Fotovatian, 2012) may dismiss student identity traits that had served individuals well in other contexts as unhelpful and cumbersome in research contexts. In these studies, researchers provided limited, if any, narrative regarding the impact of participants' ethnic, national, personal, co-

constructed student identities on their current identities and how these worked out in practice. I have deep curiosity regarding Jun, Yoji, Katarina, Ratna, and Woody's backgrounds and the impressions they left on their current identities. English or ESL teachers who embark on continuing studies are often asked to write an autobiography chronicling their language learning journeys. In some graduate teaching programs, a crucial component of work consists of a portfolio recounting learning throughout the degree. Both these tools served to bring pasts and experiences into sharp relief in order to allow examination of our current student or teacher identities. Here Haneda (2006) proffers a possible solution to this silence through an ethnographic technique: extending inquiry into learners' pasts and including rationales and the genesis of non-standard, non-normative forms and behaviours. My belief is that scholarly demonization will fade in light of the elucidation these whole, rather than fragmented, narratives bring.

As we examine these narratives, we see that perspectives on 'good' language learners imply the deficiency, no matter how elegantly or delicately phrased, of 'bad' language learners: all who fall outside the definition of 'good,' even considering how broad 'good' is. This acceptance of a single metanarrative, or, as we discussed, selectivity of portrayal within a learner's narrative, in a discourse is the antithesis of legitimizing multiple narratives. Metanarratives are 'the grand stories through which we have come to accept certain notions about "truth," "progress," "goals," "rationality"...that cradle modernism' (Aoki, 2005, p. 208). Within the context of a Canadian Master in Education (M.Ed) program in Teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language (TESFL), for example, Ilieva (2010) examines the ways in which agency was or was not applied by Chinese national students in their uptake of program discourses as expert knowledges. Delving beyond superficial demonstrations of variability in critical negotiation of pervasive discourses, she perceives 'somewhat limited resistance to program discourses' (p.363). Close examination of course assignments produced by students in this program indicated a problematic lack of critique of authoritative discourses, which I argue include the 'white eye' metanarrative of who a successful language learner is, what trajectory of progress is 'good' for them, and which goals they idealize. In Pennycook's (2001) words, we need 'a mode of working that opposes essentialist categories and attempts to engage seriously with difference' (p. 161).

Nowhere is the metanarrative of the language learner more evident than in the construction of the notion of a Good Language Learner (GLL) from the 1980's onwards, providing us with a progression of snapshots on changing conceptions of GLLs as well as trends in SLA (Norton, 2001). From ascribing success to specific cognitive and personality traits, SLA evolved to encompass sociocultural perspectives on the situated experience of learners (Norton, 2001; Johnson, 2004, Haneda, 2006). While the field has drawn from sociological and anthropological frameworks and methodologies to present a more holistic perspective of a GLL, one form of metanarrative is nevertheless substituted for another. Contemporary sociocultural theory asserts that 'the success of good language learners [relies] on the basis of their access to a variety of conversations in their communities' (Norton, 2001, p. 310). While this demonstrates a break from modernist idealization of a particular set of cognitive and personality traits, any metanarrative, regardless of how multiple, varied and evolved, nevertheless persists to confine perspectives of GLLs. This is problematic, given the explicit evaluative spirit behind the adjective 'good,' as with 'positive' and 'negative.' Even the gentler 'different' carries whispers of othering because we must ask, different from whom? The power of metanarratives lies in the fact that even without the use of evaluative language, it is possible to make certain forms of learning more desirable than others simply by the prominence we treat them with. Norton and Toohey's (2001) *Changing perspectives of a Good Language Learner*, has been included as required or suggested reading in much SLA coursework and is widely cited.

In the matter of prominence and desirability, just as in practice, comparisons and demonization in scholarly writing may make inroads into our acceptance of dominant discourse through clandestine avenues. In my literature review, I have overwhelmingly found that the hazard of othering brings weight to bear precisely through subtlety in expression. Bourdieu (1991) puts it well:

"...factors which are most influential...are transmitted without passing through the language and consciousness, but through suggestions inscribed in the most apparently insignificant aspects of the things, situations, and practices of everyday life. Thus the modalities of practices, the ways of looking, sitting, standing, keeping silent, or even speaking ('reproachful looks' or 'tones,' 'disapproving glances' and so on) are full of injunctions that are powerful...precisely because they are silent and insidious, insistent and insinuating" (p. 51).

Such lived modalities of practice are also evident in texts where readers are subject to the selective silence and reproachful, disapproving tones that are woven into these researches. The enormous influence of the textual, such as these scholarly works, on the social practice of others becomes very much lived out in the personal relationships of readers such that these discourses become appropriated into everyday lives (Fairclough, 1999).

At this point I believe a caveat would be useful; I hasten to clarify that I do not assert that all learners who choose or who gravitate away from nonmainstream, non-normative forms of social interaction are denounced. Not every instance of such choices are portrayed negatively, just as not every application of mainstream, normative forms meets applause. Further, I have not found that learners wholly occupy one extreme or another on the continuum of social practices: either mainstream and normative or nonmainstream and non-normative. Rather, in their situated, nuanced, dynamic settings, learners make choices that interact with their circumstances. I am cognizant that researchers who are aware of this make no attempt to systematically, permanently categorize learners as one or the other. However, I am passionately opposed to attitudes of judgment and those of an evaluate nature while one human being, in all their bias, predisposition, and incomplete comprehension of another, appraises the agentive decision making and identity of a learner instead of respecting and valuing it.

While it is necessary and even worthy to rigorously, candidly, explore multiple learners in their myriad of settings and

choices, including chronicling the consequences of their actions, it is neither needful nor helpful to insert our own assessment or approval or disapproval in our narration. This is not to say that learners themselves may not express such sentiments, but I believe it to be the right of the decision maker and only the decision maker, in their own knowledge of themselves, their situations and their metalinguistic awareness, to make such judgments, unless another is invited. I form this belief from the notion that ‘discussions about the socio-genesis of knowledge and learning often fail to engage the individual, even in its socially personal form that rises in ontogeny or life history’ (Billet, 2007, p. 56).

Returning to my own narrative, I have found the Vygotskian notion of mediation tools useful in my understanding of my value of self-reliance, silent listening during instructions, and individual work. While the rural mothers in Lantolf’s (2000)’s vignette chose to use their children as tools, as a learner, because of my ontology and life history, I have preferences for other tools. I reiterate, I do not claim to be solitary and isolated from my social setting in my learning. I merely observe my own idiosyncratic methods of appropriating mental functions, which include, like Ratna, a preference for texts and books over face-to-face peer conversations, individual work over group work, and, like the non-local high school students, silence over explicit verbal participation in class. I do not use online discussions or other online forums in the formation of my ideas and understanding and I rarely approach others with questions I can look up myself. On multiple occasions as a language student, like Jun and Yoji, I have felt displeasure at my pairings during academic activities. If I had been a subject in some of the literature I have just reviewed, I might well find myself sketched as having a negative attitude, being different, not providing an occasion for learning, not participating, and probably not qualifying as a ‘good’ language learner.

#### 4. Implications for Praxis

Through the use of critical ethnography, Pennycook (2001) invites the adoption of transformative, rather than singularly descriptive, goals. Through this literature review, I have discovered several implications for my situated teaching praxis as an elementary school teacher in the developing nation of Malaysia. Firstly, observing my own learning journey in its entirety, with the surety of knowledge of myself, I know myself to be a fairytale student in my native Malaysia, because of the very traits that I have outlined, so problematic in the context of my Canadian graduate studies. In an increasingly globalized world where global education, multiethnic representation, multiculturalism and poststructuralist appreciation of multiple narratives is on the rise, there is no place for such narrow categorizations.

Secondly, preference for individual work and silence in class do not necessarily constitute confinement from the social and collective, only from certain *forms* of interacting with these. Rather than elevating mainstream, normative forms of social learning, I propose we consciously resist equating the application of the sociocultural framework in SLA to the examination and legitimization of particular methods of participation.

Thirdly, in connection with this resistance, my research and teaching experience has cemented a belief that comparisons between learners are unnecessary and unhelpful in the formation of identities and portrayals. Although ‘different’ may ostensibly appear to be an innocent description of students, the subsequent question arises, ‘different from whom?’ Put another way, particularly for scholars, ‘different to whom?’ We have seen that more often than not that ‘different’ implies ‘different from mainstream/normative/dominant forms of learning and participation’ such that these become central. ‘Different’ learners, then, who are only ‘different’ when compared to these, are described through how they relate to the mainstream rather than in their own right as celebrated individuals. It may be argued that researchers such as Fotovatian (2012) associate equal difference to each type of learner they describe, but I would explore this notion with a degree of caution, recognizing the clandestine ways in which normative styles of learning creep into even the most neutral of comparisons. Comparisons such as Duff’s (2002) in which high school learners who resist normative forms of participation, and therefore learning, may yield findings such as success in different academic areas and within multilingual communities. I have observed this tendency to compare students and their successes or failures in similar anecdotes multiple times in class discussions. Many times, I have listened to my colleagues remarking along the lines of “Native English Speakers may...but non Native English Speakers on the other hand are better at...” Such comparative attitudes attempt to compensate the relative inabilities of certain learners with abilities, which tendency requires a more analytical attitude (Dr. Huamei Han, personal communication, September 2, 2014). I would discourage these comparisons, for reasons aforementioned. Here I find the collaborative agreement Dr. Huamei Han distributes in her graduate courses at Simon Fraser University useful. In it, one principle the class community upholds is ‘Respect our uniqueness.’ Rather than using ‘different,’ with all the attending nuances, I would advocate, as an alternative, ‘unique,’ which bestows both obvious and positive connotations on every learner with their own set of experiences, methods, practices, and preferences. In her book, *Don’t Call Me Special*, Pat Thomas addresses the issue of children with disabilities and the need for communities to cease making assumptions about them. She exhorts us to remember that ‘everybody in the world is unique. That means that each one of us is a little different from everybody else’ (p. 12). I believe Thomas has no intention of minimizing or dismissing the needs of students with disabilities; rather, she seeks to combat the notion that such students are inherently *more* different than other students, that their difference is accented in a way that other students do not experience. Her use of ‘different’ here is unequivocally pragmatic in description of all people rather than in contrast with a normative, centralized core. Similarly, in our description of language learners, care must be taken in our description of diverse students.

As it stands, in a world where free and compulsory education, at least at a primary level, and subsequent education availability is a basic human right to be provided by state parties (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014), limited resources seemingly dictate that mainstream learners be given centrality and normalization in order to meet the needs of the majority. Bourdieu (1991) further illuminates the current nature of ‘the dialectic relation between the school system and the labour market’ (p. 49), wherein value in the labour market relies on conformity to learning and linguistic standardization. I would argue that the ability to serve the student masses lies in adopting the stance that

each one is unique. Surely it is only when we recognize students as each unique from the other rather than categorizing them as 'normal' or 'different from normal' that we can begin to serve all of them rather than caches of individuals who serendipitously fit into our impression of 'normal.' Bourdieu (1991) asserted that 'standard' language becomes a 'normalized' product, both contributing to symbolic domination through unification 'which is inscribed...in dispositions which are impalpably inculcated, through a long and slow process of acquisition' (p. 51). I would extend this argument to include the normalized methods of appropriation deemed suitable for such acquisition. Through the scholarly demonization of certain learners, we see this normalization reinforced and systematically impressed on practitioners, who become in turn responsible for such inculcation. Graduates and alumni of these education systems, themselves either 'normal' or 'different,' go on to perpetuate this domination.

Fifthly, if I demonstrate partiality to modes of student interaction and participation, this will likely funnel students towards grassroots, counter-mainstream practices. We see from the non-local high school students, depicted in Duff (2002), and Ratna, from Fotovatian (2012), that students who may not combatively resist dominant practices may nevertheless agentively sustain their favoured forms, methods and tools of mediation albeit outside of formal, supervised settings. Thus, students may sustain salient facets of their student identities for rational purposes, outside the domain of my formal influence. I doubt I would succeed in wholly suppressing such student identities, but I would be squandering genuine teaching opportunities and communicating my skepticism of students' idiosyncratic paths to success.

Sixthly, and connected with my previous point, I must regard my imagined identities of my students with awareness of my influence on their current roles and identities as well as their futures. Here I employ a critical viewpoint of my power relations with elementary aged students as a grownup, their teacher, and a representative of the school as a policymaking entity. It is vital that I constantly recall the potency of my imagined identities of my students, based on my judgments and assumptions, and the effects these have on my pedagogy and practice. These effects become lived out in social reproductions, a self-fulfilling prophecy, such that marginalized students become socialized into less privileged communities (Kanno, 2003). Put another way, students co-constructing and negotiating their identities come to fit into available categories, inhabiting the tension between labeling and their own agency (Hawkins, 2005). Conflating these, it is my wish to avoid inadvertently imagining communities for my students, contributing to the process of labeling and, eventually, constructing undesired identities and social settings for them.

Finally, as a teacher of unique students, a unique student myself, I believe the solutions to this naturalized demonization are twofold and, ideally, mutually interacting: a critical awareness of language and discourse through language education (Fairclough, 1999; Kellner and Share, 2005) and a student-centered, bottom-up, collaborative inquiry (Kellner and Share, 2005). Critical awareness of their own legitimacy as unique students necessarily comes from a concern with their own positioning, constructed and co-constructed, which learner identities are available and what they constitute, who validates and invalidates these, who benefits from the dominant, naturalized, forms of social appropriation, and the consequences of all these. The collaborative nature of critical awareness is connected to the natural creation of different interpretations by different individuals. Here, I borrow Kellner and Share's (2005) Core Concept 3 of critical media literacy, that different people experience the same media message differently. Students necessarily construct varied experiences and interpretations of the way their and their peers' learning are depicted and received, in media, in the classroom, in their homes, and in their greater communities. How better to combat the lack of legitimization of every unique social method of language appropriation, or any learning, than by paying equal attention to my students and giving as much credit to their current, inherent ability to collaboratively produce multiple perspectives and to reason with one another, rather as I do, to formally inculcate critical awareness in their persons? Surely our children may be depended upon to have the capacity to create rationales, interpretations, and ultimately critically accept or reject the explicit or hidden curriculum as provided by the texts, media, and attitudes that surround them. I fear, in matters necessitating critical awareness, we too often render them as helpless, hapless, and passive.

## 5. Conclusion

Analyzing these scholarly works within the field of SLA, sociocultural theory is the lens through which both learners and learning are viewed. Vygotskian sociocultural theory has begotten much examination of the methods of appropriation learners engage the learned with, including the derivative activity theory. This emphasis on the relationship between the intermental and intramental domains necessitates a shift from cognitive, behavioural paradigms towards a more organic, localized focus on the social setting and interactions with the learner. Modern sociocultural theory, including the CoP theory and identity theory, depicts learners as dynamic subjectivities, in flux, over space and time. Resulting ethnographies trace not only superficial learner identity traits, but also power relations wherein individuals function within communities, agentively but not autonomously. This interwoven web, as we see, is constructed of threads beyond those representative of individuals within the confines of the classroom; researchers and their feelings, attitudes, and assumptions of learners are also instrumental. Learners who cannot or will not conform to normative, mainstream forms of social interaction as a form of learning in the specific contexts in which studies occur may be demonized by scholars who are both subject to and who serve to perpetuate dominant discourses on good language learners.

In order to remedy this, researchers might consciously include a critical analysis of themselves and their interaction with their research, justly rendering themselves and their audience aware of as many of their own threads and intersections that they can identify between themselves and the narratives they examine. Rather than perpetuating paternalistic notions of a metanarrative of a good language learner, no matter how broad, a postmodern, modest acceptance of varied, multiple, successful narratives behooves scholars. In this spirit, I recognize that comparisons between learner narratives are unhelpful in analysis and lead instead to cementing dominant discourses as well as

marginal ones.

In my own praxis, I have come to celebrate my own learning journey, despite my suspicion that it does not fit neatly into the definition of a good learner within dominant discourse. From this stance, I propose resistance to making the sociocultural framework in SLA synonymous with the examination and legitimization of only certain methods of participation. This leads me to discard the notion of 'different' learners as instrumental in centralizing normative forms of social interaction and learning. Rather than driving organic, functional, rationally derived methods of appropriating the learned underground, I will seize teaching opportunities as they come, honoured by the opportunity to co-construct learning in the unique ways in which others are proficient rather than seeking to mold them to mine. To equip students for the many seemingly insignificant reproaches they will garner across space and time, I believe critical awareness of language and discourse as well as a student centered, bottom-up collaborative inquiry to be useful.

The fact that I have derived these findings as a Malaysian Chinese woman examining the work of prominent scholars in the field of SLA, situated in the western setting of a university, and that I have elaborated at length about the implications this has on my praxis in my home country, is testament to the prolific nature of these issues. Though I identify as a non-normative, nonmainstream learner in a white setting, I nevertheless anticipate many instances where I will apply these findings in my own work with Malaysian learners. Perhaps this is where the importance of this paper lies, not in my critique of these scholars, but in addressing where we all share in demonization and how we may make amends.

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