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FROM FARMER TO SCHOLAR: IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION AND PORTUGUESE IN L2 ACQUISITION BY AN EXCHANGE STUDENT

De agricultor a acadêmico: reconstrução de identidade e aquisição do Português (L2) por um intercambista	De agricultor a académico: reconstrucción de identidad y adquisición del portugués (L2) por un estudiante de intercambio
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Abstract: This study examines the relationship between learner identity reconstruction and the acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese (BP) as an additional language (L2) by an exchange student. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research focuses on the experiences of a graduate student from Ecuador. Data collection involved interviews, observations, and analysis of the participant's social media interactions and language proficiency tests. Drawing on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1986) and social theory (Norton, 1995), the study explores how the participant's evolving sense of self as a foreign scholar shaped their motivation and investment with BP. While formal proficiency gains remained limited, the study reveals a dynamic relationship between the participant's desire to join the Brazilian community and their investment in learning BP at a basic level to fulfill academic and social needs.

Keywords: Learner Identity Reconstruction. L2 Acquisition (Additional Language Acquisition). Brazilian Portuguese. Exchange Students. Social Interaction.

Resumo: Este estudo examina a relação entre a reconstrução da identidade do aprendiz e a aquisição do português brasileiro (PB) como língua adicional (L2) por um intercambista. Utilizando uma abordagem qualitativa de estudo de caso, a pesquisa foca nas experiências de um estudante de pós-graduação do Equador. A coleta de dados envolveu entrevistas, observações e análise das interações do participante nas redes sociais e testes de proficiência. Com base na teoria sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1986) e na teoria social (Norton, 1995), o estudo explora como a identidade em evolução do participante como acadêmico estrangeiro moldou sua motivação e investimento no PB. Embora os ganhos formais de proficiência tenham sido limitados, o estudo revela uma relação dinâmica entre o desejo do participante de integrar-se à comunidade brasileira e seu investimento no aprendizado de PB em um nível básico para atender a necessidades acadêmicas e sociais.

Palavras-chave: Reconstrução da Identidade do Aluno. Aquisição L2 (Aquisição de Língua Adicional). Português Brasileiro. Estudantes de intercâmbio. Interação social.

Resumen: Este estudio examina la relación entre la reconstrucción de la identidad del aprendiz y la adquisición del portugués brasileño (PB) como lengua adicional (L2) por un estudiante de intercambio. Utilizando un enfoque cualitativo de estudio de caso, la investigación se centra en las experiencias de un estudiante de posgrado de Ecuador. La recolección de datos incluyó entrevistas, observaciones y análisis

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de las interacciones del participante en redes sociales y pruebas de competencia lingüística. Basándose en la teoría sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1986) y la teoría social (Norton, 1995), el estudio explora cómo la identidad en evolución del participante como académico extranjero influyó en su motivación e inversión en el PB. Aunque las mejoras formales en la competencia lingüística fueron limitadas, el estudio revela una relación dinámica entre el deseo del participante de integrarse en la comunidad brasileña y su inversión en aprender PB a un nivel básico para cumplir con necesidades académicas y sociales.

Palabras clave: Reconstrucción de la identidad del alumno. Adquisición de L2 (Adquisición de lengua adicional). Portugués brasileño. Estudiantes de intercambio. Interacción social.

1 INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the Portuguese people in Brazil marked the beginning of a long and multifaceted history of Portuguese language instruction as an additional language (L2). Initially, the (foreign) Jesuit missionaries played a crucial role in introducing the language and shaping its early development as they interacted with indigenous populations (Carvalho, 2024). Subsequently, Portuguese became an additional language for successive waves of European settlers and African slaves and continues to be so for modern immigrants and refugees, reflecting the diverse migratory patterns that have shaped Brazil's cultural mosaic.

The contemporary global landscape is characterized by rapid technological advancements, expanding globalization, and shifting demographics. In line with global trends, Brazil is encountering a growing foreign population with unique needs and aspirations. However, current approaches to L2 instruction may not fully address these emerging demands. There is a pressing need to understand how best to equip this population with the linguistic tools necessary to thrive in Brazilian society.

This investigation aims to address a critical gap in the existing literature. While the historical trajectory of Portuguese as an L2 in Brazil has been documented, a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between learner identity and L2 acquisition is needed. This project delves beyond the “what” and “when” of L2 instruction in Brazil to explore the “why” and “how” – specifically, how the identity of learners shapes their experience of acquiring Brazilian Portuguese. To bridge this gap, this study employs a microgenetic analysis framework informed by the work of Lev Vygotsky (1986), a Soviet psychologist whose theories on social learning and cognitive development offer valuable insights into the dynamic nature of L2 acquisition. The study focuses on an exchange student learning Brazilian Portuguese during his time at a public university in southern Brazil. By closely examining his learning trajectories, the research aims to illuminate how his cultural background, personal experiences, and evolving self-perceptions as L2 learners influence his acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese.

The findings of this research have the potential to offer significant societal benefits. Cultural exchange and multilingualism are cornerstones of a globalized world (Stein-Smith, 2021), fostering understanding and collaboration across borders. The increasing number of foreign graduate students in Brazil demands a better understanding of the factors influencing their academic development, particularly the role that L2 proficiency plays in their success. The insights gleaned from this study can inform language policy

development, teaching material design, and curriculum construction, ultimately enhancing the teaching and learning of Brazilian Portuguese. Educators, equipped with a deeper understanding of prospective learners' characteristics and the interplay between identity and language acquisition, can cultivate more effective and inclusive classroom practices.

By exploring the intersection of learner identity and L2 development through a Vygotskian lens, this investigation aims to illuminate this complex relationship and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the L2 acquisition process in Brazil's sociolinguistic context. The researcher's personal experience teaching Portuguese as an L2 in the United States through the Fulbright Commission's Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program fueled a passion for delving deeper into this field and exploring ways to bridge the gap between theory and practice in L2 instruction.

This investigation serves as a springboard for a larger research project undertaken for the author's doctoral dissertation (Oppelt, 2021). While the broader dissertation analyzes data from four exchange students, this article focuses on the in-depth exploration of one participant's journey. By examining this case study, the research aims to illuminate the intricate relationship between learner identity and L2 acquisition in the Brazilian context.

2 UNDERSTANDING L2 ACQUISITION: SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY AND LEARNER IDENTITY

This study adopts a sociocultural lens informed by the work of Lev Vygotsky¹, a pioneering psychologist who emphasized the social and cultural underpinnings of cognitive development, including language acquisition. Vygotsky's core concept, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), posits that learning flourishes most effectively when learners engage in social interaction and receive support from more knowledgeable individuals. Learners internalize new skills and gradually progress towards independent mastery within this collaborative learning environment.

Vygotsky's framework provides a particularly apt foundation for this investigation, which delves into the L2 acquisition experiences of exchange students in Brazil. These learners navigate a new social and cultural landscape while simultaneously developing their proficiency in Brazilian Portuguese. Interactions with peers, instructors, and the broader Brazilian community become crucial for their language development. The ZPD framework suggests that these interactions, particularly with more proficient speakers (what Vygotsky coined to be a more knowledgeable other), can provide the necessary scaffolding and guidance to propel them forward in their L2 acquisition journey.

However, Vygotsky's theory offers a limited scope for understanding the complexities of L2 acquisition, particularly the role of the learner's internal world. To address this, this study incorporates the work of James Lantolf (2013) and Bonny Norton

¹ Vygotsky's theory is known by various names, including historical-cultural theory, theory of child development, theory of social development, and theory of cognitive development. In this article, we have chosen to use the term *sociocultural theory*.

(1995, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2010, 2013, 2016) who have built upon Vygotsky's ideas within the specific context of additional language learning. Lantolf's Sociocultural Theory of Additional Language Development emphasizes the intricate interplay between social interaction, mediated learning experiences (activities designed to bridge the gap between current knowledge and desired learning outcomes), and the development of L2 proficiency. This perspective recognizes that merely being in a social environment is not enough for effective learning. Learners must actively engage with the target language through guided activities and interactions that push them beyond their current comfort zone.

Building on Lantolf's work, Norton's scholarship explores the concept of learner identity more deeply, highlighting its significance in the L2 acquisition process. She argues that learners' investment in the target language and culture – their sense of belonging, motivation, and perceived future use of the language – significantly influences their success in acquiring it. Learners identified with the target language and culture are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to engage in the learning process, ultimately leading to more proficiency.

In the field of second language acquisition, scholars have explored concepts that go beyond simple motivation. Scaffolding, originally introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), refers to temporary support provided by a more knowledgeable person to help a learner within their zone of proximal development (XI; Lantolf, 2021). This support is gradually withdrawn as the learner becomes more independent. Affordances, a term coined by Gibson (1977), describe the possibilities for action or interaction that an environment offers. These possibilities are not inherent to the environment but depend on the learner's perception. Investment, a concept developed by Norton (1995), refers to the dynamic social and historical relationship between learners and their target language. It captures the learners' fluctuating commitment and engagement with the language, going beyond the more static notion of motivation.

From a poststructuralist perspective, Norton argued that language learners are not simply the sum of fixed personality traits or social identities. Rather, they possess a multifaceted, evolving identity shaped by their interactions with the social world. This identity is not static but fluid, influenced by their experiences and understanding of their social place. As Norton and De Costa (2018) noted, identity traits and social categories are interconnected and can change over time. Learners actively construct and negotiate their identities as they envision their futures and engage with the world around them.

Benedict Anderson's (2006) concept of imagined communities posits that nations are communities bound together by a shared sense of belonging, often fostered through print media. From Norton's perspective (1995), Language learners also have imagined communities, and groups they hope to connect with through language learning. These imagined communities influence learners' investment in language practices and identity formation.

Foreign exchange students, for instance, often have preconceived notions of their host country's communities and their (imagined) identities. These can be reshaped through their experiences and interactions. Learner's investment in language learning is influenced by the opportunities and power dynamics they encounter, and how they align with his/her imagined expectations.

Identity is constantly evolving, and a learner's investment in language learning is tied to this process. Imagined communities can significantly impact a learner's identity and investment, as they represent future aspirations. Present relationships require ongoing investment to maintain, while imagined relationships demand even greater investment to become a reality.

Overall, by integrating Vygotsky's sociocultural framework with the insights from Lantolf and Norton, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing the L2 acquisition of an exchange student in Brazil. The investigation explored how social interactions within the ZPD, mediated learning experiences, and the student's evolving identity(ies) as an L2 learner contribute to his acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese.

3 UNVEILING LEARNER NARRATIVES: DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This study, financed by CAPES and approved by the Ethics Committee (code 2.893.105), investigates the relationship between learner identity reconstruction and the acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese as an additional language (L2) among exchange students. Employing a qualitative, prestructured case study design (Flick, 2018), the research draws on both the developmental (Werner, 1956; Vygotsky, 1978) and identity approaches (Norton, 2013, 2000, 1997; Darwin; Norton, 2023) of an exchange student.

The research site was a public university in southern Brazil with a history of welcoming international students. The university offers Portuguese as an Additional Language (PAL) courses for current and prospective students. These semester-long courses, supervised by the Center for Languages and Communication (CLC) department head, are taught by undergraduate Letters students using a communicative, task-based approach informed by Celpe-Bras.

We purposefully selected a beginner's level PAL course offered in the second semester of 2018. This course attracted students with varied motivations and attendance patterns. Some enrolled students never attended, while others (including some from the previous semester) remained consistent throughout the semester.

Through purposeful sampling, we focused on four persistent graduate students who actively participated in the course, relying on its content to advance their academic pursuits. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants (Appendix B). After receiving ethics committee approval (September 2018), we contacted the university and obtained consent from the department head and course instructor (Appendix A). Following an introductory meeting explaining the research goals and procedures, participants provided written consent.

Data collection occurred from September to October 2018 and included a variety of qualitative and quasi-quantitative sources. The researcher observed two classes and subsequently assisted with teaching to build rapport and encourage participant engagement. This resulted in increased student attendance at group meetings, a key data collection method.

The research employed the following data collection methods:

- a) Individual and group interviews: Provided in-depth insights into participants' experiences and evolving identities.
- b) Questionnaires: Gathered baseline information about participants' language learning goals and cultural backgrounds.
- c) Classroom observations: Offered a window into classroom interactions and learner participation.
- d) Messaging chats (WhatsApp®): Captured informal communication and language use outside the classroom.
- e) Social media platforms (Facebook®, Instagram®, and Twitter®): Explored participants' online self-presentation and language use in a social context.
- f) "Real world interaction" observations: Observed participants interacting in everyday situations using Portuguese.
- g) Proficiency test scores (Celpe-Bras): Provided a standardized measure of L2 proficiency development.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data, focusing on identifying recurring themes related to learner identity, social interaction, and language acquisition. Quasi-quantitative data, such as proficiency test scores, will be used to triangulate and support the qualitative findings.

As mentioned above, we focus on Ramon's data. Ramon had a diploma in Agronomy from the vocational school Colegio Tecnico Agropecuario Jose Rodriguez Labandera and an Agronomic Engineering Degree (2016) from the Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, in Ecuador. Born in 1989, Ramon grew up in a rural community in Quinindé, 224 km west of Quito, Ecuador. He was working on his family's cocoa farm with his father and siblings before applying to graduate school in Brazil. Once his family farm endured difficult times, Ramon realized the need to study so he could work in the city. Enjoying the farm life, he had never considered going to college, but a farm-work injury and globalization (according to his statement), led him to academic life. Motivated by his college professors, and now researching weed control of tropical crops with herbicides (Master's level), Ramon's future plans include the pursuit of a PhD in the near future—which could be in Brazil, according to him.

4 RAMON'S ANCHORING TO THE PAST

Ramon made limited progress in learning Brazilian Portuguese but demonstrated a perceptive understanding of his overall goals and his contextual situation as well as his imagined identity and imagined community. In this section, we draw on our appreciation of his learning journey to determine the relationship between his additional language learning—Brazilian Portuguese—and his social identity.

Ramon had only studied Portuguese briefly and had never lived outside his country upon his arrival in Brazil. Coming to Brazil was challenging to him, "Vir ao Brasil foi um desafio para mim. Não conhecia ninguém aqui. Apenas havia falado com o professor da universidade." Through language development (however limited) and interpersonal relationships, he was granted independence and autonomy, enough for him to begin feeling more comfortable so that "agora eu vou para qualquer parte" —admitted during a group meeting in early May 2019.

Such a challenge was not related entirely to him arriving in unknown territory, it was also associated with how Ramon was welcomed at the university and by his peers. Therefore, a contributing source of discomfort was the initial reactions of others to his accent which seems to have impaired Ramon’s investment in learning the language. His application process was entirely in Spanish with the consent of his advisor—which conceded him a comfortable situation—but his first face-to-face conversation with his advisor was peculiar and possibly what sparked his resistance to invest. Ramon claimed that, in their first meeting, his advisor belittled his speaking by saying he spoke poorly (“fala ruim” , in his exact words) and ultimately stating “Ah, eu não entendo o teu espanhol.” From this account, we may assume Ramon’s advisor was never a mediator in affording and scaffolding his language development—although he spoke only in Portuguese during research meetings and supervised Ramon’s research project written in Portuguese.

While Ramon had ample desire to acquire knowledge (“aprofundar o conhecimento” in his own words), valuable knowledge did not include learning the language—in our first interview he mocked “Eu falo com meu amigo: [...] vou fazer um mestrado em idioma ou em fitossanidade?” One of the questions from the initial interview was if he thought he did not need to study his Portuguese at home, to which he replied “Não, porque [eu] v[i]m para aprofundar o conhecimento.” He was studying to gain knowledge and it did not involve learning Portuguese. Culture was also understood as a separate entity, dissociated from the language. In his response to the first administered questionnaire:

Researcher: Consideras importante aprender aspectos culturais da língua? Por quê?

Ramon: Não. A cultura se relaciona com a convivência das pessoas dia a dia.

Excerpt 1: Questionnaire 1

Despite this understanding, most of his friends were Spanish speakers, and he typically had contact with Brazilians in a learning environment—such as the classroom, the research laboratory, or even his advisor’s office. His investment was never sufficient to push him to surround himself with the target language—for instance, he had never attempted to change the language on his cell phone and still used it in Spanish; he also continued watching movies and TV shows in Spanish on a streaming service for home television; and most of his posts on social media platforms were in Spanish and rarely in Portuguese (and of those, none were written by him, but shared from other profiles/pages).

The research laboratory, for instance, was one of the few places where Ramon had regular exposure to Portuguese and extended contact with Brazilians. Yet, it was not a nurturing environment as his lab colleagues did not assist with his learning and ultimately made him feel out of place— “Vamos fazer assim, vamos contando os dias [que] não te falam.” Considering “it is in the public world that language learners have the opportunity to interact with members of the target language community” (Norton, 2000, p. 12), Ramon was given few opportunities to practice his Portuguese.

The relationship between Ramon and his peers affected his investment in additional language learning. Power relations are crucial in the learning process (Mckinney; Norton, 2011; Afreen; Norton, 2024) and power asymmetries may limit learners’ membership in

the target language community. The imbalances of power relations in Ramon’s learning environment—with his peers in the research laboratory and with his advisor in his office—may have affected his engagement and commitment to learning.

The isolation he felt had symbolic and material consequences, as his access to both friendship and expertise was compromised. One of the real-world activities, a visit to the Grape Harvest Festival in February of 2019, corroborates his statements of feeling unwelcomed. In our notes, we have written (immediately after the event):

A large group of people attended the festival with us. One of these visitors was engaged in a conversation with our research participants. At one moment, this person directed his attention to Ramon and said “Para de falar espanhol! Eu não falo mais contigo, só em português!” . Ramon became immediately silent and restrained himself from engaging in longer conversations with this person. After the festival, when asked if he enjoyed the event, he merely manifested he liked it.

Excerpt 2: Researcher’s notes

Nevertheless, he mentioned that he can use his Spanish to cope without having to learn Portuguese. Such a statement is not entirely unreasonable to accept given the typological proximity of the two languages, especially at the lexical, morphological, and syntactic levels. However, once he learned he needed a certain score in Celpe-Bras and had to deliver seminars for various courses, his concern increased but still not enough to further promote his investment. Even acknowledging a need to improve to take Celpe-Bras, other course demands seemed more immediate and important. For instance, when asked how he estimated the improvement of his Portuguese within the following six months, he replied “Mais ruim que agora porque vou estudar em inglês agora.”

In sum, although Ramon felt ambivalent about Portuguese due to the way his Spanish accent was treated, he was still somewhat willing to learn the language to pass the proficiency exam and succeed in his master’s degree research defense.

Still, his resistance to invest in language development was accompanied by a significant shift in accountability. Ramon attributed the responsibility over his learning to others: to the course offered to exchange students (“Devia ser obrigatório fazer português formal.”) and to his first Portuguese teacher in Ecuador (“O que acontece é que a professora tem parte da culpa disso. Aqui no sul [...] se fala diferente”), for instance.

According to Vygotsky (1986), Scientific concepts are best and mostly learned through formal schooling; an noticeable understanding in Ramon’s speech when he plainly states “Para falar na rua, sim, o informal. Esse eu aprendo na rua, eu sempre falo. E não precisa ter aula. Mas a aula deve sempre ser formal.” The course lead instructor, during one of the observed lessons, called him lazy and concluded “tu sabes falar português, mas não tentas”—an attitude consonant with how he understood a formal Portuguese course was fundamental to his needs as a graduate student, on which the course would not focus.

Ramon’s endurance to invest in learning Portuguese was influenced not only by reduced language opportunities and uneven power relations but also by his expectations of the Brazilian people—in terms of his imagined community—and over his sense of membership—his imagined identity and his social identity.

According to Norton (2019), “a learner’s imagined identity and hopes for the future will affect her or his investment in the language and literacy practices of a given classroom and subsequent progress in language learning” (p. 302). This is particularly relevant in Ramon’s case since he had repeatedly expressed that he felt deeply rooted in his origins and not able to fathom the idea of dismissing his past. His academic success was not planned but rather emerged out of necessity, as illustrated by the following excerpt from a chat exchange:

Ramon: Então o mundo foi sufrendo a globalização eu eu saí a estudar
 Researcher: Ah... pra ajudar mais a família, então?
 Ramon: Sim, depois volte [[a]] trabalhar um tempo
 Ramon: Por que meu pai Tinha contas que pagar
 Ramon: Eram tempos bom
 Ramon: Agora não sei
 Ramon: Então pagamos e eu tive uma lesão que até hoje segue incomodando
 Ramon: E fique[i] um ano sem trabalhar
 Ramon: [[De]]pois disso saí pra estudar de novo
 Researcher: O que aconteceu?
 Ramon: Á coisa tava diferente computador e coisas asi o mundo avanço e eu vi a necessidade de estudar pra trabalhar na cidade
 Ramon: Nunca pensei em ir pra Universidade mas foi
 Ramon: Kkkk
 Ramon: Ali conhecimento muitos pesquisadores e gostava de meus trabalhos e as ganas de aprender eles mostrarão o caminho pra chegar até aqui e sigo estudando
 Ramon: Difícil de explicar
 Excerpt 3: private messaging chat; June 2019.

These roots were so vivid and palpable, that Ramon could not understand the shift in his perceived social identity. He inserted himself in the farmer imagined community and not yet in the engineer imagined community:

Ramon: Mas muitas pessoas acha que sim eu agora só engenheiro tenho que cambiar
 Ramon: Eu falo foi dali onde eu saí por o esforço dessas pessoas
 Ramon: Sim
 Researcher: Como assim “cambiar”?
 Ramon: Mudar*
 Camila: Mudar como?
 Ramon: Deixar de ser Ramon Flores e ser Eng. Ramon Flores
 Excerpt 4: private messaging chat; June 2019.

Despite these internal conflicts, Ramon claimed his membership in the Brazilian community, evidenced by his comment on two occasions: in a group chat on a messaging phone application in September 2018 when he claimed “Ja sou aspirante a gaúcho” and in a second moment to another participant during a group meeting in early May 2019: “Cara, tem que torcer pra um time. Por isso você não é brasileiro ainda.” He similarly claimed membership in the foreign graduate student community— “A proficiência

deveria ser tão fácil como a disciplina é para nós” —in which the choice for using the object pronoun ‘us’ suggests he was challenging his right to belong to these communities, however conflicting.

An additional source of opposition arises from the fact that, despite confessing to a discouraging relationship with his peers, he felt welcomed by the broader community. This conclusion is suggested by the following excerpt from our initial interview:

Researcher: Vamos focar nas pessoas. Vamos simplificar. Como as pessoas da cidade te tratam?

Ramon: Bem. Sempre muito bem. Tranquilo, todos. As pessoas dizem que não gostam de estrangeiros. Outros brasileiros, que vem de outros lados, dizem isso.

Researcher: E tu concordas?

Ramon: Eu escutei alguma coisa por aí. Mas aqui em volta tem várias culturas, aqui dentro do Brasil mesmo tem parte italiana, tem parte alemã... não sei assim, em que parte está mais o problema.

Researcher: O brasileiro em geral, então?

Ramon: Acho que criam o problema por si só.

Excerpt 5: Interview; November 2018.

These claims are also found in his responses to the final questionnaire, at the end of our 10-month data generation. In his responses, the linguistic oversights are particularly noteworthy. A carelessness for language grammar and orthography is evident when we compare this passage with the message exchange in June 2019 (see excerpt 4).

Question: Como descreves tua experiência no Brasil?

Ramon: É uma optima experiencia ter conhesido muita gente legal e uma cultura muito diferente da minha

Question: Achas que algo mudou na tua forma de ver o mundo?

Ramon: sim, muita coisa forma de pensar e ter mais experiencia e ter conhecido perssoas de muitas partes do mundo faz pensar que não deve existir barreras e diferenças entre as pessoas

Question: O que significa aprender português pra ti?

Ramon: uma nova a oportunidade de conheser uma nova cultura e perssoas em outros lugares ja que facilita a comunicação , alem de facilitar novas oportunidades de trabalho e colaboração com outros países

Excerpt 6: Questionnaire 2

Interestingly, Ramon sent a message immediately after answering the questionnaire in which he wrote: “Foi com portugues chinelo mas [você] vai entender 😂😂😂😂.” This statement shows an awareness of his knowledge of Brazilian Portuguese as well as what is acceptable according to the situational context of the language production. His understanding of appropriate use of the language is also evidenced in his message, i.e., he evaluated his production as poor and yet submitted it as such since he considered it acceptable and/or satisfactory.

At other real-world activities promoted by the researcher, Ramon attended a dinner at a busy restaurant with live music (October 2018) and a recital at the city’s Conservatory of Music (January 2019). In the restaurant, the participant seemed very comfortable in

interacting with the waitstaff (soliciting help first from their classmates and then from me), and at the recital, Ramon was somewhat intrigued and eager for its start as he would attend one for the first time.

Ramon had embarked on an unsmooth journey toward additional language development but had maintained his desire to belong to specific imagined communities. However, in denial of the importance of appropriating and taking responsibility for his learning, Ramon began stating his ground in (re)constructing his social identity as a foreign graduate student in Brazil while celebrating his foundations—his parents, farm life, and roots.

5 UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY AND L2 ACQUISITION: LESSONS LEARNED

This investigation explored the relationship between learner identity reconstruction and the acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese (BP) as an additional language (L2) among exchange students. The case of Ramon, a graduate student from Ecuador, offered valuable insights into the complex interplay between social interaction, language learning, and evolving self-perceptions.

While Ramon's progress in formal BP proficiency remained limited, his journey revealed a dynamic interplay between internal factors (imagined identity) and external factors (social interactions) influencing his language development.

Ramon's sense of belonging to imagined communities—the broader Brazilian and foreign student community—significantly influenced his investment in learning BP. His initial resistance in part stemmed from feeling ostracized for his Spanish accent. However, his desire for membership ultimately motivated him to engage with the language, albeit at a basic level, to fulfill academic requirements and participate in social activities.

The research underscores the importance of positive social interactions in fostering L2 acquisition. While Ramon felt generally welcomed by the Brazilian community at large, a lack of support from his peers and advisor limited his opportunities for language practice and created a discouraging learning environment. This highlights the need for universities to provide exchange students with comprehensive support systems going beyond language courses, fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging interaction with native speakers.

Ramon's journey exemplifies the continuous nature of identity reconstruction during L2 acquisition. His initial self-perception as a farmer conflicted with his evolving identity as a foreign graduate student. Although he struggled to fully embrace the idea of shedding his past, his experiences in Brazil undoubtedly shaped his evolving sense of self.

By shedding light on the intricate connection between identity, social interaction, and language acquisition, this study offers valuable insights for educators, advisors, and policymakers working with exchange students. Fostering a welcoming and supportive environment, encouraging interaction with native speakers, and acknowledging the complex interplay of identity and language learning are all vital steps in promoting successful L2 acquisition experiences for international students in Brazil.

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