Individual Differences in the Classroom

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Individual Differences in the Classroom

TIM MURPHEY AND JOSEPH FALOUT

Introduction

Individual differences (IDs) is the notion that each individual person comprises a unique combination of aspects that might determine learning outcomes. The traditional focus depicts these aspects as fixed traits (e.g., personality types or learning preferences) that are often measured through scale-based surveys and linked by statistics to other traits or to outcomes-based dimensions (e.g., proficiency). Recent, emerging understandings instead view IDs as socially interdependent, malleable states developing over time. To describe these dynamics, research methods are also expanding. This entry draws from emerging epistemologies such as dynamic systems (Ushioda), poststructuralism (Norton), and sociocultural anthropology (Rogoff). Most of the research cited below is the authors' own and has been conducted in Japan with adult learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). This selection contrasts with much research on IDs being conducted in Europe, North America, and other Western contexts for EFL, and which is often focused on young learners and on learners from bilingual and bicultural societies.

Some IDs are dynamically emerging amalgamations of motivations and identities through time, depending upon the emotional-cognitive and situational states of individuals and groups, interacting in complex and chaotic sociocultural and sociohistorical systems. We discuss the co-constructed malleable unity of past, present, and future selves (identities) in learning communities and how many IDs emerge, mediated by (a) perceptions of past events, (b) present group dynamics and the mutual influence of participants, and (c) the plans, goals, and dreams stimulated by our imagined communities and possible selves. What might matter more for learning is not *what* learners experience as much as *how* they perceive and react to their experiences; how they internalize their positive and negative experiences in relation to their academic self-concept, cope in their thoughts and behaviors, engage in learning through their self-regulatory capacities, and how their learning theories about themselves determine future action (Dweck, 2000). Rogoff (1995) writes, "Any event in the present is an extension of previous events and is directed toward goals that have not yet been accomplished. As such, the present extends through the past and future and cannot be separated from them" (p. 155).

While traditional research shows how the past influences the present and future, research on possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and imagined communities (Norton, 2001) allow us to see how future projections change present action as well. Figure 1 depicts a person operating in three planes of time simultaneously, in which any one plane can become more consciously dominant depending upon the dynamics of the circumstances. The past may continually influence the present through the antecedent conditions of the learner (ACL); near peers in present communities of imagination (PCOIs) (Murphey, 2008) can mutually influence perceptions of the past, present, and future and become models for one another (Murphey & Arao, 2001); and possible selves and imagined communities are products of our possible pasts and presents. These influences emerge through the

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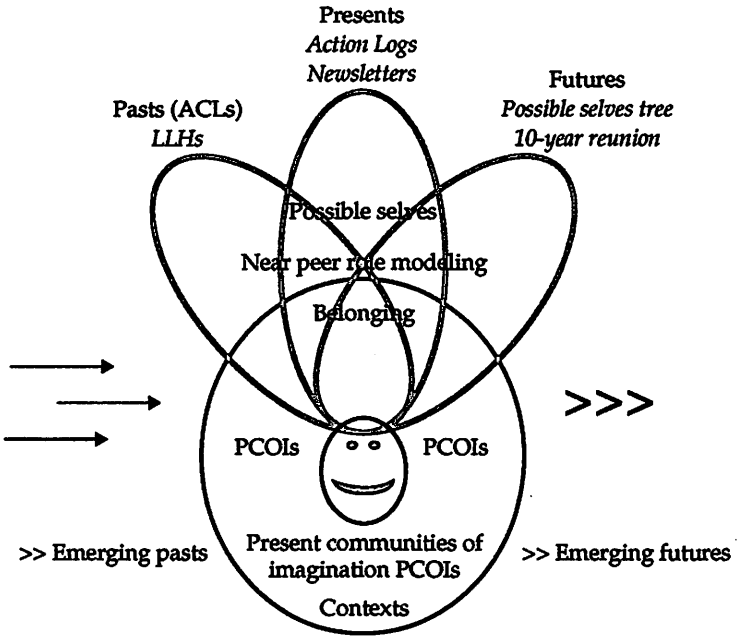

Figure 1 Three overlapping mind times situated in emerging contexts © Tim Murphey and Joseph Falout

meaning making of individuals and groups rather than through predetermined rules. This resonates with Ushioda's (2009) "person-in-context," capturing "the mutually constitutive relationship between persons and the contexts in which they act—a relationship that is dynamic, complex and non-linear" (p. 218). Therefore, to consider IDs is to consider the complex system of interdependent interactions of individuals in the specific local community of practice, our everyday classrooms.

Knowledge of antecedent, present, and future conditions of the learner can offer teachers and researchers valuable information about students' IDs that significantly impact their learning and their behavior in classes. While we need to increase the ways we find out and use such information, we already know that using, for example, language learning histories (Murphey & Carpenter, 2008) and surveys can inform us about ACLs; journaling, action logging, and newsletters (Murphey, 1993) can inform us about present conditions from the students' perspectives; and certain activities, such as imagining a 10-year class reunion or constructing a possible selves tree, can help students imagine and aim for future desired conditions. Teachers are inviting the development of students' thinking when focusing attention on these times and topics, which should help students to construct meanings about their learning lives that help them better cope with the past and present to project more healthily into the future. We recommend enlisting students as coresearchers in such activities to increase their own sense of agency in the meaning making of the past, present, and future, as they learn from each other's IDs and stimulate greater willingness to communicate in the group (Murphey & Falout, 2010).

Antecedent Conditions of the Learner

Learners' histories merge into present psychological states called the ACL, which are carried into new academic situations (Gorham & Millette, 1997). These factors can include

self-efficacy, expectations of success, attributions of success or failure, task value, goal orientation, and self-concept. They are malleable through social interaction and dependent on task-specific activity. Therefore ACLs are not set traits; they are fluctuating and adaptable emotional-cognitive states, mediated by specific social environments which influence outcomes.

The construct of ACL has been applied to studies in motivation and second language acquisition. In Falout and Maruyama (2004), learners experiencing a streak of negative affect toward learning English had concurrent losses in motivation through exposure to monomethodical teaching, lack of progress, and loss of self-confidence, ending up with lower proficiencies and more negative ACLs than learners who had longer periods of positive affect, who had higher proficiencies and more positive ACLs. Falout, Elwood, and Hood (2009) confirmed that affective states and self-regulatory capacities correlated with proficiency outcomes, whereas frequency of demotivational experiences did not, indicating that ACL could be a predictor of learners' future possible selves. There was evidence that the number of times learners had negative experiences was irrelevant, but that learners who could control their affect and behaviors about learning English became more proficient and reported higher ACLs. Such learners displayed more frequent use of self-regulating behaviors when struggling with learning English.

Carpenter, Falout, Fukuda, Trovela, and Murphey (2009) investigated how learners with different ACL levels lost and regained their motivation. Figure 2 shows that those with higher positive ACLs reported earlier remotivation by using motivational and metacognitive learning strategies in greater types and frequencies, and were influenced positively by significant others in their social environment for becoming remotivated to learn English. For instance, high positive ACL students were more diligent with tasks, both self-regulated and teacher-regulated, alongside taking short breaks to recharge their energy to study. Negative ACL learners showed a lack of abilities and learning strategies in greater types and frequencies to regain control and self-confidence after setbacks, displaying a tendency toward isolated, helpless states.

The salient difference among these learners was their self-appraisals in relation to academic experiences. ACLs provide useful information about IDs that teachers can use to design activities that might help students develop more holistically, activities that are done in a PCOI and lead to positive possible selves.

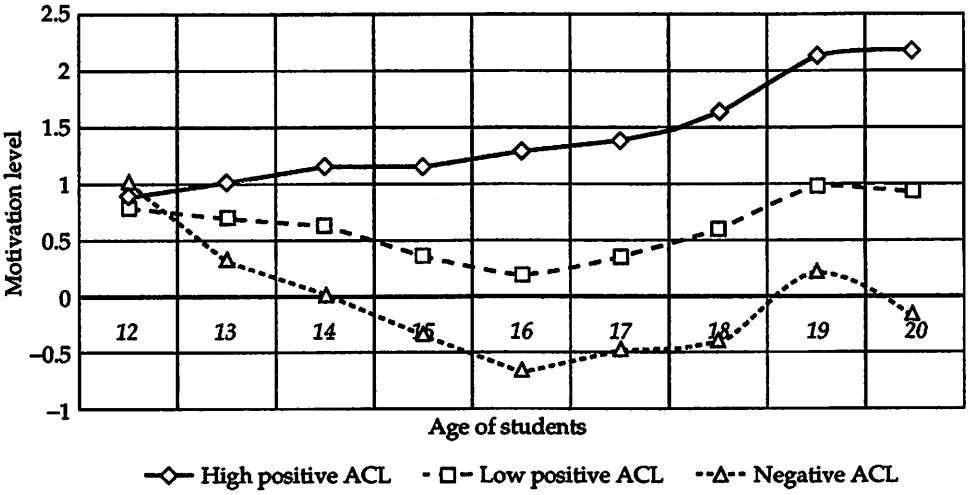

Figure 2 In-class motivation time lines © Tim Murphey and Joseph Falout

Present Communities of Imagination, Imagined Communities, and Possible Selves

Students also have IDs concerning their ability to collaborate with their present group and conceptualize their futures. Norton (2001) introduced the concept of *imagined communities* in language education to explain different patterns of learners' investment in learning their target language. Imagined communities are groups we think we belong to but whose members cannot be known with certainty. Researchers since Norton have shown that students' investments in learning greatly depend on their beliefs, the type of their imagined communities, and their propensity to envision possible selves. All these are mediated by socializing with near peer role models (Murphey & Arao, 2001) in their PCOIs.

Fukada's (2009) quantitative analysis of 248 university student surveys found a strong correlation between the extent of out-of-class autonomous learning activities and their imagined communities—students who were not active out of class reported not imagining strong imagined communities while those who were active had strong and more specific imagined communities.

When classes engage in activities concerning students' pasts or future projections, they do so within their PCOIs, the resources within present groups, enriched by near peer role modeling, positive emotional contagion, and good group dynamics which create nurturing communities of practice and co-constructed imagined communities and possible selves. Murphey and Carpenter (2008) showed how students were able to remember seeds of agency in their past language learning histories, share them in the present, and inspire each other to act more in the future. When individual approaches and thoughts about learning tasks, second language socializing, and futures are shared in a second language class as course content, students can become more hopeful, with pathways thinking and agency thinking, and stimulate more willingness to communicate.

SEE ALSO: Agency in Second Language Acquisition; Beliefs in Second Language Acquisition: Learner; Identity and Second Language Acquisition; Motivation in Second Language Acquisition

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