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IDENTITY NEGOTIATION OF FEMALE ESL LEARNERS: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

   This qualitative study employs Communities of Practice (Lave& Wenger, 1991) framework to map out how female learner identity is built and negotiated within Post-colonial Pakistan. The study traces out the ongoing identity struggles of young Pakistani female ESL learners at The Institute of English Language and Literature (IELL), University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan, from a broadly poststructuralist perspective .Data analysis and interpretation were guided by CoP framework which views learner as essentially part and parcel of the learning environment within which learning takes places. The data revealed a complex picture of Female English Language Learner Identity (FELLI), as diverse subject positions emerged while the participants developed a sense of alignment with different CoP and displaying acts of resistance to counter discrimination. Higher education appeared as a site of identity negotiation and transition into new CoP for the participants. The participants demonstrated signs of social, linguistic and academic participation in as participating members of academic CoP.

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Keywords: Social Identity, Gender, ESL Learning, Communities of Practice.

INTRODUCTION

   The present study aims to explore how female learners form membership of different CoP such as academic CoP, by virtue of participating in them and how this participation impacts their identity negotiation. My study is set within Post-colonial indigenous context as I study the language learning experiences of young female ESL at The University of Sindh, Jamshoro. From post structural view language is viewed as a locus of social organization, a site for power and struggle, a form of individual consciousness and symbolic capital (Bourdieu,

1991). Learning in this context is process whereby individuals participate in a certain community of practice as it entails how we relate to a certain context.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

In contemporary Pakistani society English language functions as a mediator of power, therefore, its significant to examine how female learners negotiate power within various CoP to acquire their membership. The present study draws on perspectives from Lave and Wegner (1991) to examine how female learner identity interacts with ESL learning as the learners become participating members of academic CoP.

Statistics reveal that there are more than 6 million users of English in Pakistan which is more than the population of New Zealand (CIA World Fact Book, 2002 cited in Mahboob, 2004). Pakistan's national language is Urdu spoken by a minority of 7.57% (Rahman, 2002b) whereas the official language is English. Rahman (2005) believes that Urdu was made national language by the political forces, for its integrative symbolic value to reinforce the ideology of Pakistan and two nation theory, whereas English has a great value attached to it in among the elite youth as a gate keeper to power and the social upward mobility associated with it. Pennycook (2000) has also referred to the gate keeping role of English in post colonial societies in particular. In crystal's (1997:24) view our learners consider English "as a valuable instrument enabling people to achieve particular goals", so English is a commodity which carries various social as well as economic advantages for its speakers (Baker, 2006). Such findings were confirmed in Mansoor's (2002) study conducted on higher education in Pakistan, which revealed that English as a means to high social status has an impact of learner identity.

RESEARCH SITE

The site of the study is UoSJP, the oldest and largest public institution of higher education was established in 1947, its home to almost 25000 students in 43 teaching disciplines/departments and institutes functioning in various academic faculties. English is a mandatory subject in all institutions of higher education in Pakistan including UoSJP where it's taught for two years and four semesters. In First Year, the English course is called Remedial English which is

meant to remedy the linguistic deficiencies of young learners; it's replaced by English compulsory in second year comprising of grammar items and selected literature. The significance of English in Pakistan can be understood from the fact that it has multiple uses, from military to bureaucracy to education, English is literally used everywhere. In post-colonial countries including Pakistan English language learning and its uses are linked with power and prestige (Shamim, 2011). English is implicated in the social fabric of the society so much that inequality is not just linked with class, race and gender but also to the access to lingua franca of the world- English. Thus, English language learning provides an opportunity for economic success (Pavlenko, 2004). Since English has assumed such an important position in the world's educational system, it has become a tool for exclusion and inclusion for further education, employment and social climbing.

WHY WOMEN?

Women's empowerment and participation in the economy is globally recognized as an essential requirement for the growth of a nation. This need has been well documented in the principal planning document Vision 2025, issued by Government of Pakistan. The concept of women's economic empowerment (WEE) is a complex one, rooted in the very structure of the society. It is more problamatized in Pakistan because of political instability, humanitarian crises and complex emergencies which have hampered progress over the last decade and a half. The socio economic status of women in Pakistan has massive disparity and heterogeneity in Pakistan which may be attributed to a lack of education, rural urban divide, lack of justice and religious extremism. In Pakistan Women's plight may vary across different stratum or context but this is the general drop back against which Pakistani women's plight may be analyzed/ understood. Poor indicators for women in the social sphere pose a challenge to the government, which has had women's rights and end to gender discrimination as its highest priorities .To ensure maximum participation of women in the economic field the government has devised gender friendly policies, set up institutions and offices like Harassment at workplace and Ombudspersons and promoted laws to ensure safety and security of women. However, the uptake on all these initiatives is very slow.

The present study focuses on women because female perspectives have long been ignored in mainstream literature and research in Pakistan which are used for policy formulation. According to official sources 26% women in Pakistan are educated (Education Ministry of Pakistan, 2009) whereas independent sources claim the number is 12 % (Latif, 2010). International organizations such as (Asian Development Bank, 2000; USAID, 2015) link, this dearth of research to poor state of women's literacy in Pakistan. To Fairclough (1989) ESL teaching and learning must incorporate critical awareness as an academic goal as it will empower marginalized factions of the society by enabling them to questions, contradict and analyze the prevalent power dynamics. This view of Fairclough (1989) is most relevant to the present study as it deals with female ESL learners who are already disadvantaged in Pakistani society.

RESEARCH QUESTION
- How does participation in a new CoP affect female learners' identity negotiation?
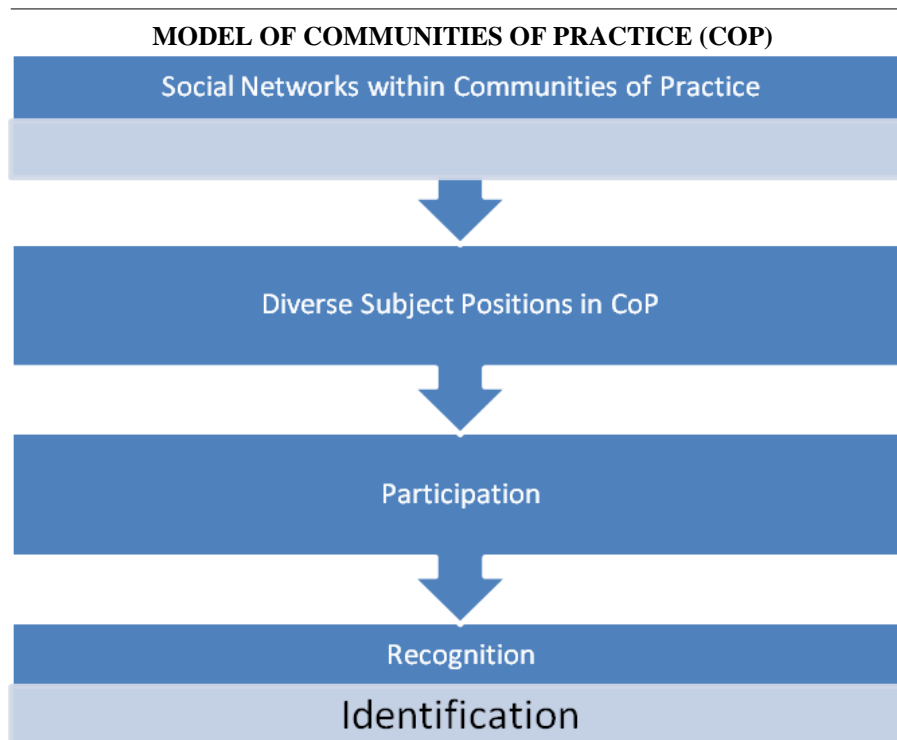
THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

To Norton (1997:420) 'social identity' is "the relationship between the individual and the larger social world, as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services, and law courts". The first layer of social identity, thus, is the one with which one is born into a certain community. A second layer of social identity is the one which people acquire through group memberships that they become a part of through active involvement in their practices like school, church, workplace and classroom. These social institutions largely determine the groups that individuals have access to and the roles they perform. These social groups have certain shared beliefs and value systems which play a significant role in the identity development of its members. Social institutions define what communicative activities and linguistic resources are available to its users, which will influence their identity. 'Social identity encompasses participant roles, positions, relationships, reputations, and other dimensions of social personae, which are conventionally linked to epistemic and affective stance' Ochs (1996:424). These historically grounded, socially constructed beliefs, knowledge, values and skills have been termed as habitus by Bourdieu (1997). These belief systems

and normative practices socialize us into specific ways of thinking, feeling and being, thus affecting our individual identities. Hence, what one says and how it's understood by others is largely determined by socially held perceptions (Hall, 1990). To Burke and Stets (2009) identity represents the rules that define who an individual is. As people identify their roles and acquire a sense of belonging for these roles, they build specific identities for themselves like wife, boss, teacher, mother even gender identities like male / female. In the global scenario where English is considered as the language of market place/ world economy, it does impact individual as well a group identities. Norton (2000) studied Canadian immigrant women, where Mai, a Vietnamese immigrant woman, felt like a perfect Canadian owing to her white skin and English speaking ability. L2 learners try to align themselves with those imagined communities, whose political and social value is visible. Norton's (2000) research argues that learners show less participation in certain language activities because of their investment in particular imagined communities and their level of access to them.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (COP)

This theory links identity building and L2 learning to a sense of belonging with a certain community. According to Lave and Wenger (1991:115), 'learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: they are aspects of the same phenomenon'. Wenger (1998:145), further defines this concept as 'building an identity consists of negotiating the meaning of our experience of membership in social communities'. Associated with CoP is the theory of situated learning which views learning as participation and identification in communities of practice (Lave & Wegner, 1991; Wegner, 1998). Wegner (1998) believes that learning is an act of becoming (through socialization) and therefore, it's an act of identity construction.

"Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do , it is an experience of identity . It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming ….to become a certain person or conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person" (Wegner, 1998:215).

MODEL OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (COP)

Social Networks within Communities of Practice

⬇

Diverse Subject Positions in CoP

⬇

Participation

⬇

Recognition

Identification

DIAGRAM A1: MODEL OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Wenger (1999) asserts that the progression of learners towards investment takes a simple path starting from learning which gives them access to communities of practice; this participation enables the members of communities to acquire a position which in turn gives them a sense of recognition and self-identification. Learners' investment in a new language involves a constant struggle for access to social networks within target language communities and a struggle to avoid marginalization and alienation from them. The idea of individuals' struggle in building up new identities as competent speakers of the shared communities is central to the poststructuralist conception of identity as a subjective way of understanding the world (Weedon, 2004).

These views present identity as a form of social grouping and as a form of participation in a community. This CoP construct, therefore, has special value for educational researchers. The theory of situated learning and communities of practice has been widely employed over the few years by researchers in L2 based research (Toohey, 1996,

1998, 2000; Flowerdew, 2000; Kanno 2003, 2008; Kramsch, 2006, Leki 2001, Morita, 2004, Norton, 2000, and recently by Cervatiuc (2009).

GENDER AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Gendered practices are a result of communities of practice, which transform individual's lives and understandings of the world. These communities are defined by shared values, beliefs and activities giving birth to specific power relations within a society. Being users of a language and gendered members of a community, both require engagement with the practices that constitute linguistics, social, cultural and gendered identities of individuals. In collaborating with other members of a society, people define and constitute their respective identities and validate their position with different forms of authority and privilege in the society. Specifically in Islamic societies like Pakistan sex separation in childhood results in gendering the interests and activities of the individuals. Within such communities' cultural values along with religious beliefs are used to justify behavior and practices within public and private spaces. In such societies diasporas tend to define identities with a heightened sense of cultural and religious awareness. Thus, in order to create 'self' binaries of the other (in this case women/men) are created which helps in the formation of imaginary communities. Since women are supposed to carry out and pass on cultural values their socialization and identification happens within these restrictive boundaries. Language learning is also a gendered practice, for example, a group of English language learners who learn English and perform other gendered acts as men or women. They may be dominated by either gender or offer varied forms of participation to its different members. As a result of this participation one's experience of gender evolves into a 'gendered community' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1995:469). Often newcomers to a community aspire to get fuller participation in a desired (real or imagined) community by bringing their actions and interactions in line with the experts of the community in L2 learning (Duff, 2008). As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) observe, "gender is constructed in an array of social practices within communities, practices that in many cases connect to personal attributes and to power relations but that do so in varied, subtle, and changing ways" (p. 484). Gender, thus, needs to be studied not as natural biological

difference but as contextualized form of social and psychological behavior.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

To Wenger (1998:176) imagination is a significant part of identity formation, which is, "a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves". The term 'imagined communities' was first used by Anderson (1991) and later adopted by many applied linguists (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). The term references language learners 'desire and investment to adopt imagined identities in their target language communities (Norton, 2013). On similar lines the psychological construct of 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986) denotes the learners' desire to become something and their fear of becoming what they don't approve of. Nevertheless, Norton (2013) believes that the construct of imagined community better defines the socio cultural dimensions of L2 learning. Mai, a participant in Norton's (2010) study has a strong desire to become an officer and a competent speaker of English, which counteracted her investments in the language classroom and ultimately made her drop out of the course. Therefore, Norton (2013) contends that language learning must take into account the imagined identities and CoP of the learners.

Pavlenko and Norton (2007) have demonstrated learners' desire to join community of multilingual individuals worldwide and tore imagine their gendered identities particularly in patriarchal societies. Following a case study approach McMahill (2001) conducted feminist classes for women with dual purpose of teaching them English language as well as feminist agenda. McMahill's (1997, 2001) study investigated how Japanese women in an English language class experienced being empowered by participating in feminist CoP. The participants were given empowerment by letting them decide the course content, the instructors to be hired, classroom pedagogy and translating feminist books. The study is significant as it shows the interaction of an EFL course with feminist studies on the sense of self of female learners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is grounded in social constructivism set within qualitative case study approach. The study employed in depth semi

structured interviews and focused group discussions to for data collected. The data was collected over a period of one academic year that is two semesters from 12 female learners from third and final year female ESL learners. The participants belonged to lower, middle and upper middle class families and came from both urban as well as rural areas of Sindh . For the present study, interviews were conducted at IELL at the end of second semester. Each interview lasted for about 60minutes, whereas focused group discussion took place four times, twice at the beginning of first semester and twice at the end of second semester with 6 participants, comprising of three participants each from third and final year linguistics. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, privacy and anonymity of the participants was ensured as many of the participants initially had reservations regarding being tape-recorded. The focused group discussions were a great opportunity for me as a researcher not just to confirm the findings of the data but they also allowed the participants to connect with each other because of similar experiences.

Since, the present study aimed to empower the female learners by incorporating their own voices in the research. Therefore, during the interviews, I time and again shared my own experiences with the learners to establish a relationship of mutual trust and openness. Once the data was collected it was transcribed. Coded and thematically analyzed to identify recursive themes which were combined together to make sense of the findings. Towards the end of data analysis process, I also gave an opportunity to some of the participants to go through the data and its interpretation to maintain trustworthiness of the research and give a sense of power to the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Past education appeared as a factor in this process of negotiation as participants' agentive engagement helped them participate effectively in their new CoP and develop a sense of belonging to this academic community of practice. Learning career of most of the participants began with disadvantaged past in terms of academics and moved towards constantly towards their future possible selves as competent speakers of English.

As pointed out by Asia, she said "My school life was disappointing, the teacher hardly spoke English and learning was limited to reading of the text, finding meaning of words and grammar.

We hardly learnt anything in school or even in college (Asia, 4th Year, and Interview).

The participants adopted various subject positions as members of different CoP and social groups through the discursive performance of their linguistic and interactional discourse (De Fina, 2006). The data revealed commonalities in the accounts of the participants regarding their initial subject positioning and later linguistic and academic positions they adopt as they enter and take part in a new community of practice with its rules (Wenger, 1998).

Learners' transition in university life marked an important phase in their learning careers which offered them a variety of subject positions to take and to become members of a new learning CoP. This stage marked many critical points. Identity negotiation and renegotiation was a significant part of this transition as the learners adopted different subject positions in relation with their changing investments in new learning community. New subject positions such as feminists, competent learners, legitimate speakers, critical learners, good daughters emerged from the data. Sahar, Zara and Azaadi called themselves feminists and critical thinkers.

Zara said, "I am different since I have joined university. After second year I judge things critically. I read feminist literature which made me realize our subordinate position in the society. Now I am a feminist and want to make myself live in history. My issue is not my issue, but issue of all women is my issue. I am concerned with the society and other women (Sahar, 4thYear , Interview).

Faria said on similar lines, "I like my Sindhi identity also, I am secular and feminist because of my English studies here in University. In Pakistan state a, laws and religion are not separate I k new it when I studies books of history of Urdu and Pakistan. These books are madam in English so English opens doors of knowledge. Religion also supports men" (Faria, 3rd Year, Interview).

On the whole, all the participants demarcated their social positioning in social interactions inside and outside the classroom. Their performance as L2 learners and members of different CoP were closely linked with their gender positioning. Moreover, these subject positions were embedded in the advancement of congruent identities within different groups and CoP (Scott et.al., 2013). This demonstrates

that identity negotiations of female learners must be understood in the light of their self-positioning as members of different CoP / groups.

The present study contends that higher education forms a discursive place where identities are built, imagined and contested. Thus, identity formation is implicated in how we learn linguistically. It is a site where cultural understandings are contested and an enabling ground of an emergent identity is formed transition in university life exhilarated the process of identity negotiation of the participants and broadened the subject positions available to them. For example, Azaadi herself as a collective L2 learner, who after her transition to university, became a competent member of the academic CoP. She worked discursively with more efficient learners of the academic community, thereby claiming the right to speak.

Gender appeared to be as a major influence on how these young women approached their academic paths to graduate education which was loaded with socio cultural burden that women carry in Pakistani society. Even after obtaining membership of academic community as learners and competent speakers, the participant's identities were negotiated and renegotiated because of the discursive practices of others around them like family members, male class fellows and teachers which created a conflict between how they wanted to project themselves and how others perceived them. Hence, the interconnectedness of language learning and identity building which was emphasized in Norton (2013) study was confirmed in the accounts of the participants o f my study.

AGENTIVE ROLE OF FEMALES AS LEARNERS AND SPEAKERS IN COP

The language learning stories of the participants present a nuanced picture of their emergent gender subject positions in social interaction and the changing dynamics of their relationship with ESL learning. The diverse subject positions the learners took up represent their subjectivities which remained fixed, fluctuated, developed or transformed over a period of time (Block, 2007). The participants (positioned themselves within wider socio cultural discourses displaying a disdain at patriarchal values and social threats to their agency but also showing a compromise with the family values. However, they develop a powerful voice in L2 owing to their learning. Agency entails how these women seek membership of different communities of practice and how they resist discrimination. The

learners also developed discourse of resistance as a result of acquiring membership of this new community.

The participants' new learning environment at the university, their interactions within and outside classroom and their engagements / investments authenticated and sustained their desired future selves. The identity performance of the participants as language learners may be plotted alongside their learning trajectories from learning English as merely a subject and memorization to developing a genuine interest in learning it and finally development of a desire to join the community of L2 speakers worldwide. As learners and users of English they all displayed different levels of participation and investment in their academic CoP which were also connected with their future imagined CoP (Anderson, 1991; Kanno & Norton, 2003).

As Huda pointed out , "English is lingua franca , I have English than I can get many things like jobs , status in my society like Everything . I can apply any job. It will take me to any place. I want to do an administrative job and become a career woman" (Huda, 3rd Year, Interview).

Nabeehasaid in a similar vein, "Now I have decided to become a teacher not a like my school teacher but like you and others so I open up minds of my students. I will give awareness to my students as much as I can. I also now want to be politically aware. Language influence social cultural our all aspects not only one. I am a different girls now. I was timid but now I am not" (Nabeeha, 3rd Year, FGD).

Hareem said, "I expect a bright future for myself and independent life. I would be a working woman. Teaching, researching any job, I don't mind. Any administrative job will be good. English was not, my choice first. I started taking interest in English after I came to university. I read philosophy, novels, fiction, and politics so I read extra things. I am happy with my study and myself" (Hareem, 2nd Year, Interview).

Norton (2000) points out that imagination alone doesn't lead to action but alignment does. It's this sense of belonging or alignment which they learners develop which is crucial for the construction of their future possible self (Dornyei, 2009; MacIntrye et.al., 2009). For example, Azaadi invested in her identity as a learner to gain access to the community of English speaking people and in future adopt the identity of a professional English teacher. This position worked

positively for her as she outgrew the feeling of disappointment at not being placed as a legitimate speaker within the classroom. She was able to position herself favorably in the classroom through this strategy (Norton, 2001; Morita, 2004). Her story demonstrates that future L2 vision can be a positive motivator and mediate language learning and participation in different ways.

Similarly, Maleeha's attitude towards English changed drastically when she went to USA for a six-month exchange program.

She said, "My sense of who I am changed, I started viewing myself not just as a girl but as a human being capable in any way with men. My teachers abroad gave me so much confidence that I never even once felt I am a girl whereas in Pakistan at every step people make you realize your limitations because of your gender"(Maleeha, 3rd Year, Interview).

Maleeha's experience of study abroad for UGRAD scholarship gave her immense exposure to English. The best part of her learning abroad was the way she negotiated her membership and participation in various groups and activities and developed her cultural capital (Norton, 2001). The interactional opportunities she got with native speakers in US helped her build a strong vision of her future L2 speaking self. She envisioned herself as a competent English speaker in an imagined community of L2 users. While in Pakistan she had few opportunities of oral practice within or outside the classroom. Though she was always a distinction holder student but somehow felt that she lacked the necessary speaking skills which she desired. However, as she returned to Pakistan, she felt withdrawn from her classroom activities. She realized that the classroom practices at IELL would offer her no interactional opportunities and she would have to pass the exams at any cost. She was pushed into nonparticipation and found the teaching methods of her teachers very rigid. During the interview she told me that she had strong ties with other returnees of UGRAD program and this engagement gave her a strong vision of her future L2 speaking self and a motivation to work for master's scholarships abroad after completion of her studies.

Similarly, Asia invested in her identity as a learner to gain access to the community of English speaking people and in future adopt the identity of a professional English teacher. This position worked positively for her as she out grew the feeling of disappointment at not

being placed as a legitimate speaker within the classroom. She was able to position herself favorably in the classroom through this strategy (Norton, 2001; Morita, 2004). Her story demonstrates that future L2 vision can be a positive motivator and mediate language learning and participation in different ways.

Ayesha was directed by her strong affiliation for English and her vision of her future possible self as a committed and competent member of the English speaking community. Her presentation of herself as an English language learner helped her focus on her potential improvement in English language. She appears as a good language learner as she define herself as one "who writes many essays and paragraphs" (Ayesha, 2nd Year, Interview).

Similarly, through her persistent efforts, Nabeeha was finally able to see herself as a competent and legitimate English user. The interesting thing here is the way she reframes her conceptualization of English and her positions as a user. She seems to have formed her identity more positively by investing in it in multiple ways. This positive transformation of herself contributed a great deal in strengthening the vision of her ideal L2 self.

From the above examples, it appears that through their ESL learning the participants were able to reconstruct their past and present learning experiences and identity positions from a vantage point as a result of which their future possible selves were also altered and modified as members of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991; Kanno & Norton, 2003). This means that positive visions of future selves can prove to be a powerful driving force in learner investment and the past, present and future affiliations of the learners with the target language strengthen and reinforce the future visions of their L2 (Norton, 2013). The participants enacted different identity positions at various stages of their learning careers in which their old subject positions were altered and new ones were formed. It appears that learners' affiliation with imagined communities of practice impacted their investments in L2 learning (Norton,2013) and on the performance of their future possible selves as demonstrated by the data the same way as Norton's (2000) participant Mai's imagined identity of an office worker with good speaking skills impacted her investment in language practices within her classroom. She ultimately left the language course despite being a motivated learner as her imagined

identity collided with classroom learning goals. Norton (2000) therefore, urges that classroom pedagogies must be connected with learners' imagined identities to yield positive outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The triangulated data highlighted the temporal, contextual and situational perspectives on female language learner identity which gave me a nuanced understanding of the participants' identities. Lave and Wenger's (1991) contention that all individuals' experiences within different CoP, which inevitably affect their identity construction may well be employed to investigate the identity construction and negotiation of female learners at UoSJP. Based on this understanding, it can be argued that female ESL learners at UoSJP construct and negotiate their identity across various sites such as home, university and other communities of practice. University provides a space of transition for the female learners. It's through this space that the performance of critical turning points was noticed. The learners located their subjectivities in the wider discourses of their past, present and future and future learning trajectories. The learners' identities signified social, linguistic and academic engagement with ESL learning (discourse) community of practice.

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