BETWEEN "BECOMING LIKE- NATIVES AND "MULTILLINGUAL": A POSTSTRUCTURALIST ORIENTATION TO IMAGINED IDENTITY AND AGENCY

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Abstract: Do learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) develop imagined identities in target language learning? Are their identities affected by their use of other languages? How do relations of power foster the complexity and multiplicity of the developed identities in language learning? To explore these questions, an interactive theatre course was carried out at a university in Algeria. The students who took part in this course were undergraduates aged between 19 and 31 years old. The participants have a rich linguistic repertoire as they are multilingual, who make use of Berber as their mother tongue; Arabic as their first language; French and English as foreign languages. This study aims at promoting change in the way students learn English through introducing innovative tasks to the EFL classroom. The study adopted a poststructuralist framework, which is highly grounded in Norton's perspective on identity (Norton, 2000) and Bourdieu's concept of power relations in language use (Bordieu, 1991). I applied interpretive phenomenology as a research design, where in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants. Their scripts written in the three languages: English, French, and Arabic were considered in the analysis. The findings of this study revealed the effectiveness of using narratives and drama tasks in the EFL classroom. The findings also revealed that the proposed method involved the participants in an interactive and imagined space where they empowered themselves, constructed their agency, and developed new self-understandings which covered their multiple and imagined identities.

Keywords: imagined identities, multilingualism, post structuralism, power relations.

1. Introduction

The spread of English worldwide, and the need for a global communication created a shift in the approaches and system to English language teaching in Algeria (Bouazid, 2014). In her thesis Bourouba (2012) believes that new approaches are used in teaching English to fill in the gap created by traditional methods of teaching. The latter aimed at realizing language mastery through exposing the students to fully learn the target language (i.e. English). These include the 'grammar-translation method', 'audio-lingual method', and structural situational approach. These traditional methods were later replaced by other new approaches that were highly

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emphasized by the English language reforms in Algeria. These have encompassed the communicative language teaching (CLT) and Competency-based approach (CBA). The former focused on language competence, discourse, and grammar (Morandi, 2002). The latter, which is called CBA, is a continuous approach for the CLT (Bourouba, 2012). CBA's aims at enhancing communicative competence among EFL/ESL students, but what makes it distinctive from communicative approach is that it focuses on functional and interactional aspects of language learning rather than emphasizing interaction only. CBA allows students to interact with others to express themselves, discuss their culture and interpret their opinions using the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) competently (Bourouba, 2012).

In effect, being in the context and observing teachers' way of instruction, learners' status in the EFL classroom and what students learn, is different from what explanations and English curriculum say about these new approaches. My experience as an EFL student at this university, and the background knowledge that I gained from my experience as a teacher-trainee provided me with a general view on how English is taught, and on the gap, which might result in students who are not aware of their identities, their voices, and their roles in the classroom. According to my observation, some teachers of English still dominate their classrooms, and the students still attend their classes to consume information and use it back in the exams. Therefore, traces of traditional approaches are still present in the teaching and learning processes. Bringing authenticity to the EFL classroom and making learning more social then structural may allow students to voice themselves and to raise their awareness of the power and agency they can achieve in learning English. Fielding and Rudduck (2006) suggest that students who impose their voices in the classroom can promote change and empower themselves in terms of becoming decision makers, responsible, reflective, and more interactive, and build their character. These features give them self-empowerment and foster their identity in learning (Fielding & Rudduck, 2006).

Taking this further, this paper, which adopted the poststructuralist understanding of language learning and identity, sets out to explore whether interactive theatre can serve as a social and imagined space for Algerian EFL learners to bring their social experiences and dreams into the classroom, and whether it allows them to gain a self-positioning and agency to master English like native speakers. The linguistic profile of the participants in this study drove my attention towards the different social roles they perform as being the son, the daughter, the sister, the teacher, the student or the parent of somebody. It also made me consider the identities they develop in each language they use while performing those social roles. These research thoughts and reflections enabled me, as an interpretive, to explore whether the new identities that might emerge from learning English as a foreign language are different from the identities they formed when they used other languages such as Arabic, French or Berber. Therefore, I have included theatrical tasks where French and Arabic were used in both writing and performance to further explore this aspect.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Theatre in Language Learning

Theatre promotes social interaction and communication between individuals, which may not be enhanced through reading and writing only (Pinkert, 2005). My study adopts one of interactive theatre techniques known as 'forum theatre. This method allows the use of imagination, critical thinking, and problem-solving capacities. It serves as a space where individuals can perform multiple roles such as being the narrator of the story/scenario, the audience who interacts with the characters, and the actor. This drama technique is designed for achieving various needs including change in organizations, creativity, and other needs in educational settings. It gives the chance for non-heard voices to become observed by others. It

lets them make decisions on what they dream to become or plan to be in their future career. It is also an opportunity to master the target language through the interactive space it provides. Applying this in EFL learning may help the students to enhance the plurality of EFL students' voices/identities in the educational context (Kore, 2014, pp.4-5). Additionally, when both teacher and learners walk into their classroom, they should not leave their experiences and desires outside of the teaching/learning processes. Rather, the social being that lives inside the teacher/learner should walk with him and it is up to the teacher to introduce interactive tasks that make the learners travel with their desire to navigate the power relations and invest their different desires in learning (Norton, 2001).

The scenarios designed by the participants in this study are reflections of the experiences they lived in the past, present, or stories they formed as their future dreams/desires. These personal stories may result in identity development. As Somers (2008) notes, personal writing can drive the person into three basic dimensions: organising recent experiences into a set of memories; being able to forecast future events, and here I refer to the concept of imagined community and the notion of becoming.

Furthermore, dramatic activities such as theatrical plays afford students with the chance to bring their voice and self-empowerment into the classroom. Hence, they can make their selves visible to others, as Thompson states: "I believe that the writing of a play is the writing of the self, and the acting of the role is the acting of a deeper and invisible part of the self" (Thompson, 2003, p. 31).

2.2 Identity and Self-Positioning

Ivanic and Camps (2001) state that the features of speech a person uses can all be considered as signs of building the notion of 'who I am' in the context of English language learning. They also claim that all genres of writing contain features of self-representation and self-positioning which indicate the voice of the writer and his agentic self in his social group (Ivanic & Camps, 2001). Thus, revealing our voice in writing does not end only in the notion of self-representation and providing a self-positioning to our self, and other selves we construct, but it has also to deal with the negotiation of our identities as they are socially and discursively formed (Matsuda, 2001). Matsuda (2001) also claims that voice and identity are not constructed in a unique language only, but every language being the person's mother tongue, his second or foreign language, all give the person various possibilities of shaping his/her own voice and identity. This is because the linguistic elements that may exist in a language might not exist in another language. The learner then gains power and agency when he decides what linguistic capital and which symbolic resources he/she would like to learn (Bordieu, 1991). These types of capital strengthen power relations and shape learners' identities.

2.3 Language and Power in the Poststructuralist Approach

Individuals put their agency into practice when they decide what accent, genre, language codes to use in their speech, and being a multilingual or a bilingual offers the speakers a range of identities that they can use according to their social context and self-representation. It is in this social context that the individuals possess a range of social roles and gain different characteristics depending on the social groups they interact with, their duties and the languages used in their interactions (Vasilopoulos, 2015). Selecting the appropriate language to interact with people in the context is one aspect that allows identity construction as people use language to access the social group they desire to be part in (Norton, 2000). Interaction in the target language community is a sign of language learning, but also a sign of forming one's linguistic capital (Bordieu, 1991; Norton, 2000). Norton (2000) in most of her works on identity recommends that language teachers should encourage their students to be aware of their right

to interact with each other as this fosters their role, identities, and positioning. This can be achieved through classroom tasks that the teacher designs and get the students engaged in.

Talking about identity and capital, poststructuralists (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Weedon, 1997) believe that people possess a range of identities and multiple selves that change according to time and space. When constructing these identities, or demonstrating self-empowerment in the social group, the individual uses 'agency' to control these tasks and invest in the language they desire to learn or access (Norton, 2000; see also Bourdieu, 1991). Duff (2015) states that the notion of 'agency' is crucial in EFL settings because it allows the learner to imagine, accept, or refuse other roles or identities. This can be viewed in their use of language, contribution to the social group and any type of resistance during their interaction Duff (2015). Additionally, Pavlenko and Blackedge (2004) state that imagination underpins the construction of different types of identity. Norton (2001) used the term 'Imagined communities' and 'imagined identities' as key concepts in her work to support students' awareness of their right of using the foreign language in the classroom dynamically. According to Norton (2001), imagination is all a "creative process of producing new images of possibility and new ways of understanding one's relation to the world that transcend more immediate acts of engagement" (Norton 2001, pp. 163-164). Poststructuralists (Norton, 2000; Norton, 2001; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) perceive language as symbolic features that are used by individuals to empower themselves and impose their agentive selves in the society, which are, in turn, elements that embody identity construction (Zhao, 2011).

Bordieu (1991) states that all types of linguistic interactions convey relations of power, and every single word or intonation the individuals, that he considers as 'agents', use in their daily communication can promote authority and power. This latter also differs depending on the group where this interaction takes place and the language being used. For Bordieu (1991) not all words express the same power relations as there are words that might exist in a language but not in other ones. Thus, the power relations they convey are distinctive. These relations of power occur only in the social spaces because language is an essential component of social life. Bordieu's approach in linguistics is defined by the concepts of 'habitus', 'field' and 'capital'. Each term has a role in shaping ones' identity (Bordieu, 1991). In language learning, every student develops a certain 'habitus' in interaction (speaking) and in writing, which is not necessarily marking his linguistic competence, but a 'linguistic habitus' that determines his social identity and future desires (Bordieu, 1991). By 'field', he refers to the space where different actions, knowledge and other resources occur. These resources are what he calls 'capital'. Capital can be presented in several types listed by Bourdieu as follows: 'symbolic capital' which refers to the vocabulary the individual uses in a given community to access to their linguistic resources; 'linguistic capital' which indicates the ability of the individual to use expressions to interact in a particular social group (Bordieu, 1991); 'cultural capital' which, as mentioned in recent PhD thesis (Zhao, 2011), refers to knowledge and thoughts that features distinctive groups and classes within a given society; and economic capital related to money wealth, and other properties the individuals own (Bordieu, 1991). These capitals and the individuals' habitus all form relations of power in linguistic interactions, where identities are negotiated, within the social community (Bordieu, 1991).

3. Methodology

3.1 Context and Procedures

This study was conducted at the Department of English at a university in Algeria. 18 EFL students from both Bachelor's and Master's Degrees participated. I designed an exploratory course which lasted for two months covering ten sessions of reflective writing and theatrical

performance. I adopted interpretive phenomenology as an approach for both data collection and analysis (see Frost, 2011; Smith, 2008).

I conducted in-depth interviews with the participants to support the research findings. I also designed drama and narrative tasks in each session to allow the students write about their experiences, write theatrical scripts collectively, and perform them on stage. These scripts and stories were collected to enhance the findings of this study.

3.2 Analysis and Initial Findings

In this paper, I have selected the interview transcripts of three participants that I referred to as cases and excerpts from their scripts. One of these scripts included some French sentences, while; the other ones were written just in English. I gave to each case a pseudo name to ensure their confidentiality. To analyse the data, I adopted Kleiman (2004) phenomenological strategy of data analysis. Kleiman (2004) claims that phenomenological analysis goes through global reading of the data to achieve a general meaning about the transcripts. Then, the researcher should do secondary reading and extract units of meaning. Each unit of meaning should be clustered with those that convey similar sense. However, units of meaning that seem useless to the research should be deleted. Once clusters of meaning are formed, the researcher should start a description making a link to his study, and this is called 'imaginative variation'. The researcher will then create essential units of meaning and start reciprocity, or reflection on his participants' speech, behaviour and any point that was mentioned in his data. The final step is going back to the raw data and making a general structure which will be then an interpretation of the final results.

The table below provides a description for the three cases' in-depth interviews:

Table 1: Description of Passages from the In-depth Interviews

Cases	Description and interpretation
Sali	Sali is a 24 years old student of English at university, based in the school of education. She grew up in a small Berber region. Her native language is Kabyle. However, she speaks French fluently since her childhood due to her mother who was an Algerian migrant in France for 17 years. She also speaks Arabic, which she acquired at school. My interview with Sali, which lasted for an hour, revealed several issues in relation to her experiences and dreams as an EFL student and other elements that are tied to her participation in the theatrical sessions. Sali reported that using English fluently became one of her objectives since she studied English and that her desire is to achieve native-like-accent in learning. The excerpt below demonstrates Sali's speech: *I can say that being a student of English means a lot for me, it means dreams and objectives in life that I started to realise one by one. Before I study English at university I used to listen to my cousins who live in America when they visit us at home I just say to their English wow and I dream to speak like them. Now I am a student of English so I am trying my best to achieve this dream of speaking like native speakers. I want to speak English fluently but I find difficulties, so I just switch to French or Kabyle…but when I came to theatre play on stage and sharing my thoughts with others and learning from them I even developed my accent from some students who speak very well. It let me play roles I never played in society such as being a man, being a mother, a teacher…* This transcript revealed a challenge that Sali experienced in the EFL setting to gain language mastery. It shows how Sali enhanced her English accent compared to how it was before attending the sessions. It also shows that she

	developed new identities she did not experience before. It is the theatrical course that fostered the emergence of Sali's new identities.
Loundja	Loundja is a 23 EFL student at university, based in the School of Literature and British Civilization. She spent her life in a Kabyle speaking city, while she was speaking mostly Arabic because of her parents who were originally from an Arabic region. Similarly, she claims that English is used just inside the academic setting, while she does not use it in the society, and this hindered her from achieving language mastery. She reported in her interview the following: *I sometimes wish and try to use English as often as possible because we do not use it outside this academic context which then hinders us from improving our speaking though we try that but the context where we live pushes us to use Kabyle or Arabic…* She also added: *I feel I did develop myself and my speaking skill in those sessions like last time when we did the play of somebody in the bus reading a novel and others mocking at him… I said oh my god if I am like this in reality I felt I am ugly, exactly I could see myself in reality and out of my comfort zone looking being a different person.* Loundja wanted to develop her speaking ability and to become able to use English fluently inside and outside the classroom. The theatrical course helped her to achieve this objective. Most importantly, the plays she wrote and performed onstage with other participants let her discover new characters in herself as it made her experience other characters that she did not expect to live. This may have developed in her an awareness of new identities she can develop in language learning.
Bilal	Bilal, who is 22 years old, is a first year Master student of English at university, based in the school of Applied Linguistics. He has a mixed ethnicity. His father is Palestinian, while; his mother is Algerian. Both of his parents speak Arabic, but Bilal lived for 15 years in Bejaia city where he learned Kabyle. Being an English student let him have the desire to master English, and he reported in the interview the following: *… um English, I use it at university and outside as well with few friends because I want to master English especially British one… so I watch TV in English, I listen to radio in English I write in English all what I do at home I try to do it in English to be able to become a linguist …* He added: *I had some fear to act onstage, but it was helpful that I could develop myself and to express my ideas and my personality to the spectators watching me. This let them know me who I am and my personality. I played many roles: sometimes a worker in supermarket, sometimes a father and sometimes a son. It let me be different person each time. I also practiced my English like when I wrote and perform in English I felt I was adapting myself to British culture I was forcing myself to be an English person. But when I wrote in Arabic it was totally different why because in Arabic does not change me I am always the same person exploring the experience in the same language like repetition of*

> *what I did but no development in my personality compared to performance in English. Even last year I got a scholarship to study for six months in France, and I went there with two other students so it was really difficult when I arrived to the residence I was like found that <u>I should speak in French everywhere even outside but at that time I only want to tell people there I want to speak English and I used to ask them in English like when I look for streets and shops</u>...I really I really wished that time if France speaks English and <u>I just felt that English is my native language or second</u> not French...so I mean that that I speak more freely in <u>English I am not productive in French compared to English.</u> Even you know what I cannot write a sentence in Arabic this will take me hours <u>I now just become attracted by English...</u>*
>
> Bilal discussed his objective, which is achieving fluency in English learning. Thus, he took the challenge of learning English inside and outside the academic setting. In the course, he could develop his speaking skill through the practice of the language during performances onstage. He also could develop his character and experienced new ones. However, his talk on comparing his performance in English and Arabic/French revealed that he developed new identities in English. While he felt that when he writes and performs in Arabic/French, he does not get the chance to navigate a new identity. English influenced his linguistic competence. In other words, he feels less productive in other languages while he can freely use English. His last sentences on the experience he lived in France made him realise his need to speak in English. Additionally, a linguistic struggle emerged in his story. He found himself obliged to use French to communicate with others, while he had no desire to use it and he switches to English all the time. This complexity and struggle can be the result of becoming aware of his new facet of identity as an EFL student.

Further to the interviews, the following excerpts were taken from the theatrical scripts that the above three participants wrote in the course:

Excerpt 1: 'The last summer holiday'

Loundja*: ah, before I Forget, I brought you some clothes and books, but the most important thing is that <u>I had brought you with the mobile that I promised last year.</u>*

Saliha: *Really, thank you so much dear, really, I have neither words nor expressions to express my joy...*

Sali: *aha me <u>too I have brought a souvenir from champ Elise</u> for the sweetest girl which is my cousin.*

Excerpt 2: 'I lost my soul'

Sali*: Hi Lynda [sadness on her face] ...*

Lynda*: oh! Hello my friend, I think you are not fine! What's happening with you?*

Sali: *oh dear, I still cannot forget my grandmother. She died two years ago. That was a sudden change for me. Her loss was huge because I did not lose just a grandma but a real mother and friend. <u>She always encouraged me in my studies</u>. <u>When I told her I will become a teacher of English she hugged me and said 'I am proud of you'</u>. Now she left and the only thing that keeps me strong is my studies and my dream that <u>I want to</u>*

achieve to make her happy. I will teach English soon and talk about her for my students…

Excerpts 3: 'France but I want English'

Bilal: *Oh! Look Yacine, the 'Eiffel Tower', let's have some pictures.*

Yacine: *Oh! J'adore ce monument. Ci très jolie . [French vocabulary]*

Bilal: *Hey man common! We are not French students why are you using French and not English?*

Yacine: *but we are in France and French people speak French not English. Let's ask this lady to take a picture for us next to the Eiffel Tower.*

Bilal: *[Asking the lady], Bounjour Madam, Vous Vous [thinking about what to say] I mean pictures please.*

Yacine: What happened with you Bilal? That's easy why you couldn't speak French?

Bilal: *I am confused my friend. I lost my French vocabulary. My brain turns back to English unconsciously. It becomes difficult for me to use French because I am more competent in English….*

4. Discussion

The sentences highlighted and underlined in blue in the above data were analyzed and interpreted into units of meaning. The main units that emerged include Sali's and Bilal's challenges to access the resources of English (Symbolic capital), self-representation in English and other languages, and emergence of new identities. I am explaining these findings below.

4.1 Symbolic Capital

The findings of this phenomenological analysis showed how the theatrical course helped the three participants above to improve their pronunciation and interactive competence and made them define themselves as legitimate users of English. The course also allowed them to create a self-representation where they imagined themselves as native speakers achieving different professional and social roles that empowered their symbolic and cultural capitals in language learning. As Norton (2000) claims in the literature, accessing the target language demands strong power relations, such as learning more vocabulary and using it with native speakers, becoming fluent and learning the target language accent (symbolic capital), and learning their culture (cultural capital). My study supports this claim. For instance, Sali developed the desire to access the target language through enhancing her interaction with her native-speaking cousins, who live in the US. This may have allowed her to invest her linguistic competence and take the most of the resources available to her in those English interactions. Therefore, Sali may have gained a symbolic capital that also may have contributed into shaping her linguistic identity (i.e. identifying the self as a native-like speaker). However, Loundja and Bilal could navigate their power relations in language learning through the progress they showed during their attendance in the theatrical course. Both of them mentioned that the course enhanced their vocabulary, pronunciation and made them speak English as much as they could. The latter is one of the characteristics of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991).

4.2 Self-Representation in English and Other Languages, and Emergence of New Identities

The participants in this research mentioned that their identities were highly articulated in their use of target language learning (English), while their use of other languages such as French and Arabic made their identities passive and sometime less articulated compared to English. Here comes the concept of imagination. In other words, using English (either in speaking or

writing) during the theatrical course might have offered the students a discursive and imaginative space where they could get access to different imagined worlds. It is this imagination that opened the door to new identities to emerge. Some of those identities were connected to the participants' future roles (imagined identities), and other identities relate to the different social and academic roles that the participants perform in their social world. For example, an imagined 'career identity' emerged from the data, and this can be seen in Bilal's phrase: 'to be able to become a linguist'. This imagined identity, which I referred to as 'future becoming', also emerged in Sali's transcript. Sali mentioned her desire to become a teacher of English, which is driven by a contextual dimension that is the impact of her grandmother (see Abes, Jons & McEwens, 2007). However, a language struggle is revealed in Bilal's story that he lived in France, and Loundja's claim on the social barriers she faces in English language use. These participants gained agency and power in using English within the academic space, while they show some refusal to use French instead of English outside this space. A resistance in using English and other languages such as French is demonstrated in the data. This means that those participants could use their voices to promote change in the way they want to learn English and to decide where they want to use it, the people they want to use it with (natives) and their need to speak English in different contexts.

The findings in this realm confirm the presented literature in regards to identity development using different languages (see Matsuda, 2001). It seems that using a different language results in new identities in the person as is the case with the participant Bilal. The distinctive point here is that this participant feels that other languages do not give him the chance to develop new identities compared to English. The findings also support the poststructuralist's perspectives of identity that it is fluid and emerges in interaction (Norton, 2000).
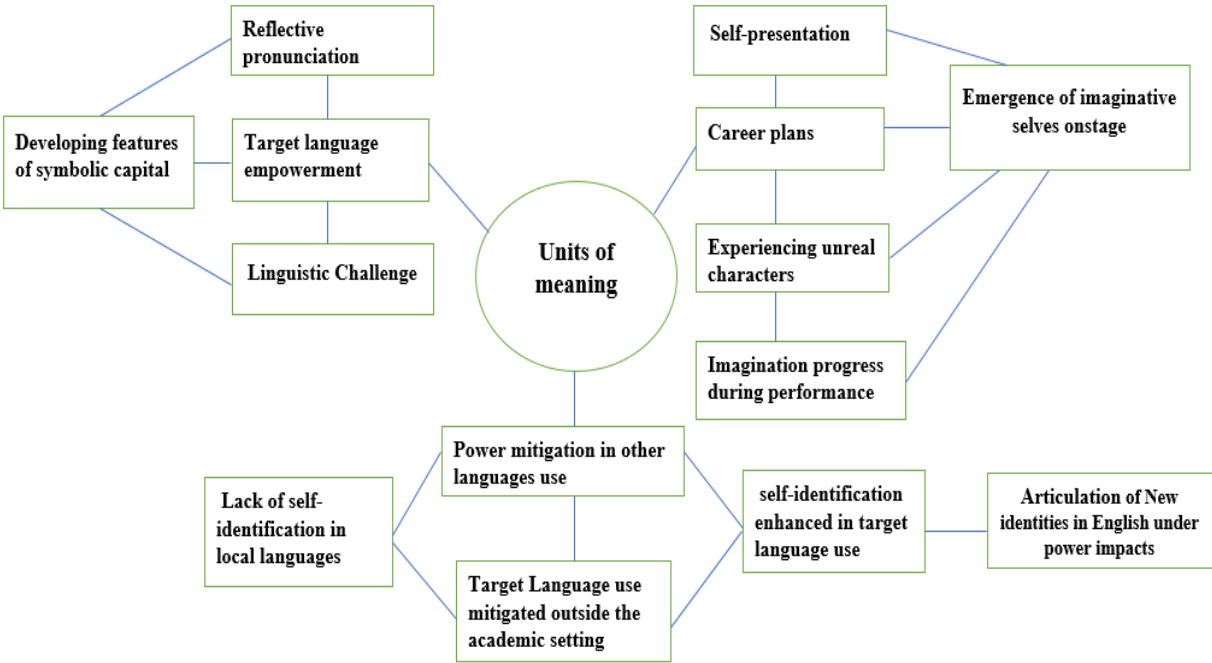

Figure 1: A summary of the Phenomenological Analysis

5. Conclusion and Implications

To sum up, this study aims at exploring imagined identities amongst learners of English as a foreign language within multilingual classrooms, and how power relations affect those identities: English, French, and Arabic. It also seeks to find out the images that these learners provide to themselves, and their language positioning. Furthermore, this study has a pedagogical aim which consists of raising awareness amongst the students towards their identities as EFL learners and towards their need to promote change in the way they learn English. The findings I reached through analysing the data gathered from three cases showed that learning a foreign language enhances students' desires to use the resources of that language in their academic and social settings. Linguistic challenge, collaborative learning, contextual influence, and imagination control their power relations in the target language. Furthermore, introducing the theatrical course developed their imaginative capacities, agency, and enhanced their self-understandings structured through relations of power. The more capitals they navigate in language learning, the more they develop themselves and their identities.

Based on these findings, I suggest that more interactive tasks and theatrical courses should be integrated in the Algerian EFL context to further develop students' identities and investment in language learning and to help them get access to their desirable learning communities.

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