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Chapter 6
Speak for Your Self: Second Language Use and Self-Construction during Study Abroad

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Abstract

Communication plays an integral role in an individual's construction of the self in society. Second language (L2) learners, whose communicative competence in the new language is less advanced, may experience a compromised sense of self when using the L2. The subsequent conflict between the "real self" one is able to convey and the "ideal self" he or she would like to convey may cause a learner to reduce L2 use and potential L2 acquisition in self-threatening interactions. This chapter explores the role of the self in L2 use and several factors that affect learners' ability to construct the self in the L2. In conclusion, the chapter considers ways in which teachers and administrators may help learners navigate their new identity in the L2.

In the fall of 1990, a college junior was preparing to study abroad in a country thousands of miles from her home. It was to be her first trip abroad and the crowning achievement of her foreign language major. Being the good student she was, she just knew that she would make the absolute most of her academic journey, using every available opportunity to interact with native speakers. She had been told that by doing so, her language skills would grow exponentially because living in-country increases language use, and language use improves language skills.[1] Within the first two weeks of her four-month stay, however, Leila[2] realized that she wasn't speaking nearly as often as she had anticipated. This normally gregarious, energetic young woman often found herself feeling timid, allowing others to speak for her or avoiding conversations that she would normally enjoy in her own language or even in her language classroom. By the end of the first month, Leila felt frustrated and misunderstood by the native speakers around her—misunderstood not only linguistically, but personally. It seemed that others thought her to be stupid, childish, or inadequate in some way because she could not express her true thoughts, ideas, and charming sense of humor succinctly and accurately. (Of course, she couldn't truly know the opinions of others, but her own perceptions, not objective reality, proved the most informative.) The person she believed herself to be in her everyday life was not the person she could present to others in her new language and new culture. Consequently, to protect the image she preferred others to see, Leila often minimized speaking and avoided interactions under intimidating circumstances.

The story of Leila may be familiar to many who have studied abroad or learned a language in-country. As foreign language teachers and program directors, we

may have met and worked with Leila many times. We may have even been Leila. Language plays such an integral role in the public portrayal of an individual's self-image—from the words we choose to the intonation we employ to the use of language to convey ideas and ideals. As adults, we have spent years constructing our public "self" through communicative interactions with others, and language serves as a fundamental instrument of that construction. So what happens to an adult's self-image when she or he must construct that self-image with language skills that are incomplete for the task at hand? Even if the individual's language skills are technically quite satisfactory, how does an adult create an adequate self-image through the lens of the second culture? And most importantly for teachers and students of a second language (L2), how does that "impaired" self-image affect the individual's language use? After all, if our students are to invest time and money in study abroad to increase "time on task" in language use, shouldn't we make every effort to maximize that language use? This chapter explores the phenomenon of self-construction in an L2 and the role of the university supervisor and coordinator in helping students manage their foreign self-construction.

The Self Defined

As an intangible concept, the "self" seems to confound many who try to define it. In a generic sense, the "self" may be defined as "the total, essential, or particular being of a person; the individual" or "one's consciousness of one's own being or identity; the ego" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). However, from a research perspective, it is important to note that the very nature of the self is based not on objective fact, but rather on an individual's personal reflections on his or her own qualities, as well as the individual's projections of how others perceive him or her to be. As these perceptions filter through the mood of the moment and the achievements of the day, an individual's sense of "self" remains fluid and amorphous, ever adapting to new input. Memory serves to build a system of knowledge and beliefs about the self. This system, or "self-concept," is the paradigm by which an individual defines his or her own self. However, and most importantly, the self is virtually impossible to define in isolation from the social environment. In fact, because the self is based on subjective impressions alone, it may be said to exist only in the light and reflection of the relationships and culture that foster its development.

Erving Goffman (1959), the noted social anthropologist and ethnographer of the self, considered society to play a preeminent role in the creation and maintenance of the self. For him, communication is an invaluable factor in self-construction in that individuals convey the self through both the verbal message they utter and the nonverbal signs and behaviors they exhibit to others. Through these communiqués, individuals form a social presentation of the self they wish others to see; simultaneously, they look to others' responses, real and perceived, to those messages. The responses of others help individuals assess and shape their self-image. The result is a collaborative development of the self between individuals and their environment, a self that relies on communication for its existence and growth.

Furthermore, it may be said that the self is not a monolithic entity. James Tedeschi (1990), a researcher in the psychology of tactical communication, distinguishes the "ideal" self (i.e., the image one wishes to convey) from the "real" self (i.e., the image one is able to convey). As the distance between the "real" and "ideal" selves grows, self-esteem may be lowered. Individuals' assessment of their two "selves," however, relies principally on their interactions with society and the culture at large. Their "ideal" self sprouts from their perceptions of models of successful others (i.e., what is socially acceptable or desirable), as well as from their wish to avoid that which is awkward or unattractive. Their "real" self emerges as a reflection of their social performances based on what they believe others' perceptions to be.

According to Tedeschi (1990), as individuals navigate their social interactions, they do so with the goal of minimizing the gap between the "real" and "ideal" selves in order to maintain self-esteem and to amass power in relationships. Through effective communication and manipulation of the self-image, individuals exert social influence, thus creating an affable environment for the presentation of the self. In other words, controlling others' impressions is key to controlling the gap. It is this phenomenon of self-construction and language use that is the central focus of this work, particularly what happens when individuals' ability to communicate effectively is in jeopardy (due to diminished control over the language or incomplete understanding of the cultural situation, for example).

Studying the Self Abroad[3]

The topic of self-construction emerged as the central focus of research I conducted during the mid-1990s with American students studying abroad in Russia. In the 1995–96 academic year, 76 students studying at American universities and colleges traveled to St. Petersburg and Moscow, Russia, on programs sponsored by the American Council of Teachers of Russian. All but one of the students agreed to participate in data collection for the study. That study was to look at three broad issues: (1) what factors aid or hinder students' L2 use in spontaneous interactions, (2) what strategies do students draw on to speak or circumvent L2 use, and (3) what is the impact of L2 use or avoidance on further interactions? This primarily qualitative study employed a wide variety of instruments, including general demographic information, narrative journals, oral interviews (with students and student caretakers, such as teachers and resident directors), questionnaires, and classroom observations. The transcribed data totaled thousands of pages of narratives, rich in descriptive detail about the study abroad experience with a special focus on language use.

The methodology followed in the collection and analysis of these data was the Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This qualitative methodology is quite rigorous in its design compared to other qualitative approaches and goes beyond description to build theoretical models of a studied phenomenon. Using GTM, the researcher continually collects data, the analysis of which informs further data collection and literature review. The nature of GTM

requires broad research questions without preconceived hypotheses, and data collection, analysis, and theory building occur in constant alternation with each other until theoretical saturation is reached. The resulting theory emerges well grounded in the data themselves.

From the data collected in Russia, six primary case studies and eleven secondary case studies were selected. The primary case studies were selected on the basis of the volume and richness of the data they provided (these individuals participated on virtually all data collection instruments) and the representative nature of their demographics compared to the cohort group. As data analysis continued, the secondary case studies were included to illustrate further various aspects of the emerging theory. A comprehensive description of the data and the case-study participants is available in Pellegrino Aveni (2005). Complete data analysis, discussion, and further exploration of the literature may also be found in that volume.

From these data, a number of interesting findings arose. Of these, I discuss two sets of findings here: (1) the four dimensions of self-construction that affect L2 use and the factors that shape them, and (2) the strategies students develop and employ for overcoming barriers to self-construction and L2 use. In particular, I also focus on how these issues impact foreign language program directors and coordinators and consider ways in which we may improve our students' L2 use, both at home and abroad.

Four Dimensions of Self-Construction and the Factors that Shape Them

According to the data, there are four areas of discrepancy between the real and ideal selves that can threaten language learners' sense of self when speaking. Learners tend to experience a denigration of the real self when their sense of status (e.g., linguistic, intellectual, or social) is threatened in an L2 interaction, when their control over the interaction or their environment is compromised by L2 use, when they feel a lack of validation from others in the course of an L2 interaction, or when they fear their safety (physical or emotional) is in jeopardy. When language learners' real self is threatened in one of these four ways, learners tend to reduce their language use in order to preserve their self-image as closely as possible to their ideal self. For example, in the following diary entries written on consecutive days, Rebeccah described such experiences when her sense of status relative to her peers and interlocutors shifted:

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Last night, I went to the Smolny Sobor w/ June, Madge & Hannah. Hannah's *muzh* [husband] was there too. I could not bring myself to say boo to him, I don't think I've ever even introduced myself! How rude! (if he noticed) I spoke english [*sic*] the entire evening.... so did everyone else. So he could not participate in the conversation. I am always vigilant about not excluding people from a conversation, but last night I felt too self conscious.

I didn't want to speak Russian in front of everyone. Actually, maybe I was nervous because Hannah was there, and 1) I've never spoken Russian in front of her & 2) she speaks so well & I didn't want to make mistakes. And I know that's an irrational reason—yet it was strong enough to keep me from being polite to Mr. Hannah. I aspire to attain her language level someday, I really admire her . . . . so that makes me want to impress her w/ my Russian to gain her praise. . . . Maybe. This is all pop psychology. Who knows?

11/17/95

Today after 1st *para* [class period], I asked "***" what score she got on her 1st OPI[4] exam. I asked because: 1) we're in the same class, 2) it would give me an idea of where I am, comparing myself to her. I was <u>really</u> surprised to know we got the same score. I couldn't believe it. I already knew that 1 other girl in our class got a 1+, therefore I assumed the other 2 girls were 1+ too. I felt they were so much better than me, and that they knew it. Then "***" said she thought I was better than her! Far Weird! Anyway, at the 2nd *para* [class period] I shone in class. I tried to talk a lot & I used a new word & was happy with my speaking. All because I knew that I wasn't the lowest in the class. Perhaps when you think you're lowest, you fulfill that subconsciously. I was really willing to go out on linguistic limbs today – I even made a phone call in Russian! (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, pp. 40–41)

Rebeccah establishes her ideal self through comparison with those around her. Having chosen a role model in her resident director, her real self must closely approximate this high standard, or at least not fall below the level of her own peers, in order for her to pursue spontaneous L2 interactions comfortably. When her linguistic status is threatened on the first day, she avoids speaking Russian entirely despite the fact she knows she should, both for educational purposes and to be polite to her host. When the situation changes on the second day and she discovers that her "real" self is closer to her "ideal" than she had anticipated, she is energized not only to speak but to take unusually high risks, such as trying new words and making a telephone call in Russian.

Another student, Jim, describes how the controlling behaviors of his friend's host mother cause him to curtail his L2 use. Rather than give in to the woman's well-intentioned demands (such as eating particular foods or making sure his head is covered before leaving the house), Jim prefers to shut down:

You know, and, I don't react to that well at all. So sometimes when she's talking, I'll just kind of nod and say yeah, yeah. . . . And I go on and, and it's like, "yeah, yeah. . . ." Which is too bad because at the start of the semester I had some really nice talks with her, like every once in a while I do, on rare occasion, but it's. . . this controlling thing is, that, is, part of it is the irritation thing, like, I get irritated, so I lose comprehension. . . . (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, pp. 42–43)

Later, Jim describes an English class he is teaching to small children. After his students' parents left the room, he felt that he had gained control of the classroom:

> . . . it was like having, like at work, having your boss taken away from standing over your shoulder watching you work. I mean, it suddenly went from being just somebody who's trying to teach a few things to us being in charge. Also, once we're in charge and in control, and I think it was probably the control thing, made it a lot easier to speak both Russian and English. (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p. 45)

As with the loss of status, the loss of control threatens to lower an individual's self and increase the gap between real and ideal selves.

When learners believe they have lost the support of others, that their efforts and abilities are invalidated by their interlocutors, the self also becomes threatened. The comments of Reanna, a student who never seemed to fear interactions with Russians, illustrate this point. She explained, "I tend to be less of a risk-taker [in speaking Russian] when I have a pretty good sense that I'm not going to be well received. That either they're going to completely ignore what I said or laugh at me" (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p. 46). When learners accept that others see them as worthy individuals, they experience less threat to their self-image and, thus, can pursue L2 use more freely. Similarly, when learners believe they are physically and emotionally safe in their L2 interactions, they need not reduce their L2 use to protect their self-image.

The narrative data often show students in comparable situations of reduced or enhanced L2 use due to changes in their sense of status, safety, control, and validation. A wide variety of factors can affect learners' interpretation of their real self. Although all of these factors are filtered through learners' subjective interpretations, some factors originate in sources external to learners, such as the behaviors and attitudes of others toward them and their L2 use, as well as the age, gender, and even physical appearance of others. Other factors originate in sources internal to the learner, such as individuals' own attitudes toward themselves (e.g., toward their own personality, self-image, and L2 abilities) and their capacity to predict the outcome of their L2 use through their own familiarity with the interaction (e.g., familiarity with others, the environment, the topic of conversation).[5]

As learners gather information about their self-image through these external and internal sources, they continually assess the risk L2 use presents to their self-construction. Often they fear that speaking in the L2 will put their self-image at greater risk than if they remain silent or use their L1. This phenomenon is especially true if a learner believes that his or her self-image is more greatly controlled and influenced by external factors than by internal factors. For example, learners who harbor negative impressions of the self they are projecting will have a difficult time interpreting and managing the behaviors and perceived attitudes of others around them. They are more likely to construe others' reactions to their L2 use negatively and, thus, sense greater risk to their self-construction, than learners who maintain a positive sense of self from within. The previous example of Rebeccah illustrates how easily external sources can affect learners with poor internal control over their sense of self. Rebeccah's drive to speak in the L2 was so

greatly affected by how others might see her that she went from utter silence to a high degree of risk-taking in the course of mere hours. Learners such as Rebeccah may be considered to have an "extrinsic sense of self."

Conversely, learners who control their sense of self through positive internal factors, (that is, those who maintain positive attitudes toward the self and trust their own abilities to assess and manage interactions in the L2) need not rely on the opinions of others as greatly to construct their self-image. Although they may interpret an interlocutor's reactions to their L2 use negatively, they are better able to rationalize others' opinions and behaviors and continue to use the L2 without significant risk to their self-image. Such a learner may be said to have an "intrinsic sense of self." For example, Reanna regularly showed herself to be very internally controlled. She rarely seemed to take personal offense at others' misinterpretations of her Russian and appeared quite capable of maintaining a positive self-image despite the reactions of others, often displaying empathy for the difficult position her caretakers were in. For example, she writes that her host brother usually seemed reluctant to interact with her. Rather than interpret his behavior as disdain for her, she writes, "I hadn't said more than 'hi' to him really until this point and figured he probably didn't know what to do with me (my brothers sure wouldn't)" (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p. 133). Whereas some students reported feeling intimidated to speak with host family members who shied away from them, Reanna did not let her host brother's behaviors stifle her. In spite of his apparent disinterest in her, Reanna continued to try to speak with him and ultimately enjoyed lengthy conversations in Russian with him.

Instead of shrinking away from L2 use, internally controlled learners are more likely to persist in speaking in the L2 to remedy problems they've encountered in their self-construction. For instance, Reanna writes:

> Wanted to buy tickets to Sleeping Beauty for the group. Went to the *teatralnaya kassa* [theater ticket office], waited in line and was told the schedule had been changed. One [female] in our group said they could be lying so they don't have to sell tickets to foreigners. Made me pretty upset. Went to *Gostinii* [*sic*] *Dvor* [a local department store] to buy tickets there but they said the same thing, so I figured the theater people don't really enjoy just insulting foreigners. Definitely made me much more aggressive in my speaking and asking ??s. Don't like and refuse to be made a fool of. (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p. 116)

As a learner with an intrinsically constructed self, Reanna does not allow the apparently negative intentions of others to affect her sense of self. Being secure in her own self-construction independent of interlocutors' opinions, Reanna chooses to use her L2 to demonstrate her own strength and worth to others. In this encounter, not only did Reanna prove to herself and others that she was capable of communicating intelligently, she also confirmed for herself the good will of others; in the future, she may be even less inclined simply to assume ill intentions or feel threatened by others' reactions. Thus, she not only managed how others saw her, but she also mitigated further harm to her self-image by rationalizing others' behaviors.

Learners with an extrinsically constructed self, however, may address such threatening situations in a different manner. For example, Rebeccah wrote of a situation similar to Reanna's but with a much different outcome:

> I was at a *teatralnaya kassa* [*sic*] [theater ticket office] today w/ an American friend visiting from Moscow. There was a big crowd of people and long lines. So I made Alicia do all the talking and buying. I don't think her Russian is so much better than mine. I just chickend [*sic*] out since I knew she could buy the tickets. Alicia has balls of <u>brass</u>. She even argued loudly with a woman in the crowd! I would've never done that. (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p. 32)

While a learner who relies on her own attitudes and beliefs for constructing her self-image is willing to pursue L2 use in a threatening situation, a learner who relies on the opinions and beliefs of others may reject such an opportunity to avoid the subsequent risk to her real self.

One explanation for the different L2 use behaviors of learners with extrinsic versus intrinsic self-construction may be varying levels of self-esteem. Learners who are able to construct their self-image relying primarily on internal sources may be seen to have self-esteem that is naturally and more consistently high, whereas those who rely on the opinions and behaviors of others for their sense of self may feel less in control of their self-image and, hence, less secure in their self-esteem. Research in psychology supports the notion that those with high self-esteem are less easily persuaded by the opinions of others and are more likely to take action when experiencing personal threats than those with low self-esteem (Aronson, 1995; Leventhal, 1970). Extrinsic and intrinsic self-construction also bears similarity to the concept of "locus of control," originally developed by Julian Rotter. Rotter's (1966) Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals who believe they can control the outcome of an event through their own actions (i.e., who have an "internal locus of control") are more likely to persist than those who believe the result is out of their control (i.e., an "external locus of control"). In terms of self-construction through the L2, this theory implies that individuals who feel they are able to control the self-image they project when speaking are more likely to continue speaking in the L2 regardless of the perceived reactions of others. Learners with an external locus of control, however, are more likely to believe that their actions will be useless in building a more positive self-image, and thus, are likely to curtail their speaking to cut their losses. Additionally, learners with an internal locus of control are less likely to avoid interacting with strangers (Heckel & Hiers, 1977), are less likely to be influenced by others' opinions (McGinnies & Ward, 1974), and tend to assess their abilities as higher despite objective measures of proficiency than learners who have an external locus of control (Peirce, Swain, & Hart, 1993).

Self-Construction Strategies and the Development of the Self

As was stated earlier, the self is never monolithic, nor is it static. The same can be said for the process of self-construction. No learner consistently and permanently constructs the self extrinsically or intrinsically. As L2 learners live abroad, their ability to construct their self in society through L2 use continues to fluctuate and

improve with experience and growth, and, ultimately, many learners come to rely more consistently on intrinsic self-construction and less on the opinions and behaviors of others. This process happens in three significant ways.

First, many learners undergo genuine improvement in their L2 competence that allows them to communicate their thoughts, beliefs, values, concerns, humor, and so on, more effectively, giving them a more secure sense of self in the L2 environment. Whether or not they demonstrate measurable gain on the OPI or L2 tests, many learners accumulate enough experience to communicate better in the L2 and to understand the cultural nuances of L2 interaction. An example of such a shift comes from Jim, a learner who demonstrated definite extrinsic self-construction early in his study abroad experience. In the beginning of the semester, he wrote that he feared native speakers would think him an "idiot" because of his mistakes and difficulties. Yet, after several months in-country, he writes about a party where the Americans were mostly speaking only English to one another. He was challenged by a Russian-speaker to continue the conversation in Russian, and he explains:

> It was satisfying to know that I could switch like that in front of my peers and in front of Rita [a Russian-speaker]. I know I was comfortable around all, but I also felt a confidence that I know I didn't have at the beginning of the semester. It was (and is) a confidence that tells me I don't need purely comfortable situations in order to use my Russian language capabilities. Along with that comes the confidence which will allow me to ask that things be repeated or said more slowly, without being ashamed. There is much to be learned, but much has also been learned. (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p. 125)

With his increase in confidence, Jim no longer feels that he must have the complete support of his interlocutors to construct his public self; he no longer feels shame that his "real self" is inadequate if he must ask for help or reveal linguistic deficiencies.

Second, learners also come to realize that the consequences of the mistakes they make may not be nearly as dire as they originally feared. Rebeccah, for instance, reports that she has an overwhelming fear of being identified as a foreigner, and, as a result, she often avoids speaking to strangers in spontaneous situations to hide her accent and mistakes. Yet after convincing herself to take the time to listen to strangers who approach her, she discovers not only that she is capable of communicating with them, but also that after miscommunications, no harm comes to her. Upon this discovery, she consciously chooses to relax and participate in these self-threatening interactions, particularly one in the post office:

> You must speak to the woman (as usual) through a glass plate, thereby speaking loudly so everyone can hear your order (and accent!) … So I got on line, and when my turn came I spoke loud and self assuredly. I even asked a few questions that I've wanted to ask but never did. And nobody looked at me funny—(while I was talking), although they did look when I cackled from glee at my small accomplishment. If I could always feel so daring I would get farther in Russian. (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p. 131)

As students come to realize that their errors are often inconsequential to their self-image, their inhibitions to speak lessen.

Rebeccah's encounter illustrates the third, and perhaps the most important, development learners undergo—that of strategy development. With experience, many students learn techniques that allow them to use the L2 spontaneously while minimizing the threat to their self-construction. The strategies identified in the data here are not techniques that are typically taught to students but rather methods they discovered on their own through trial and error, strategies they were not even necessarily aware that they used. Most frequently, learners reported using "self-talk," a technique in which they use their own internal dialogue to encourage and comfort themselves. For example, when Rebeccah came to recognize her own obsession with appearing native, she used self-talk to calm her own fears and remind herself to persevere:

> I'm so worried about keeping my cover that I don't speak at all, getting by with *da, net i* [yes, no, and] please, feeling a nervous tightness when somebody asks me a question on the street or bus, afraid that I won't understand or that my answer will be met by unfriendly stares, etc. So after my epiphany today, I tried not to be obsessed. And I answered people with sentences. And I tried not to worry about keeping my cover. . . . [M]y answers were jumbled & in broken Russian, but I persevered & tried to answer & understand as best I could. And judging by the # of people who spoke to me, you too can tell that my physical cover works very well—therefore illustrating just how obsessed & good at it I am. Anyway, if I could kick this obsession, it would be good as it would give me more language practice. (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, pp. 130–131)

Some may use self-talk to rationalize their own mistakes, saying things like "I know I didn't say it correctly, but I feel good for getting my point across" or "when the teacher slowed down for me, it made me feel stupid, but I figure she was only trying to help, so it's okay." Such self-encouragement allows learners to keep practicing their L2 skills despite perceived threats to their self-image. Self-talk has long been recognized by researchers in second language acquisition as a method for reducing anxiety and finding vital encouragement in L2 use (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Young, 1991). However, it is often overlooked by learners and not a technique typically taught, but rather one they must discover on their own.

A second strategy learners come to use is that of "interaction preparation." Not unlike the typical classroom preparations of homework and studying, learners may attempt to apply those same techniques to more spontaneous interactions, by either preparing vocabulary they might need for an anticipated interaction or role-playing supposed conversations before they happen. By preparing themselves, they may feel that their language use will be more successful and, thus, less likely to threaten the self-image they are projecting. Although such a technique may not be particularly surprising, many learners also use interaction preparation to prepare *others* for conversations with them. For example, learners may try to prepare their interlocutors by downplaying any expectations for what the learners may or may

not be able to accomplish in the L2. They may do this by letting an interlocutor know that they might have difficulty saying what they wanted to say or by denigrating their own Russian skills, as Rebeccah wrote:

> I (as usual) put down my Russian as I explained to her that I'd like to be a translator—but didn't think I was good enough. She disagreed. We had a nice conversation, and I was pleased w/ my Russian after that. I've figured out that I probably put down my Russian as to not dissapoint [*sic*] my listener. . . . Anyway—after I let her know not to expect too much, I could relax & speak more easily. (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p. 137)

By criticizing her own language early on, she, in effect, reduced her interlocutor's expectations and, consequently, the ideal self she needed to live up to. In addition, Rebeccah received supportive feedback from her interlocutor that bolstered her sense of the self she was constructing.

A similar technique to preparing others is minimizing one's own apparent ability or knowledge. Several learners reported that they would at times try to make themselves appear more child-like or foreign in their language use to communicate more effectively. Although this strategy is somewhat counterintuitive (actually lowering status deliberately instead of protecting and elevating it), by using it learners can feel they are in better control of the interaction, effectively tricking their interlocutors into simplifying their speech and providing support. Roslyn's self-reported strategy is a case in point:

> I tend to revert to a childishness when conversing in Russian. That is, I use such tactics as sweetness & naiveté to cover for the fact that I don't understand. This displeases me because I don't want to present myself as such to anyone (God forbid I appear sweet!). But I know I use it to help protect my ego. Otherwise, I like taking an active part in Russian speaking but sometimes I use the language barrier to my advantage by keeping heavier issues at bay—not always, however. (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p. 138)

In her language-learning diary study, Deborah Plummer spoke of her own usage of this technique, writing:

> . . . during class I was an adult who struggled to talk about elementary concrete objects in the most simple, childlike speech. Instead of being frustrated by such a dichotomy, I found it much easier to adopt a childlike identity in the new language. I consider this a major factor in promoting the learning of the target language. Because of the threats a second or foreign language class often poses, this new identity helped preserve my adult ego and self-confidence. (cited in Bailey, 1983, p. 90)

Similarly, learners may feign that they are ignorant of information when in fact they do not understand an interlocutor or the response would be too difficult to construct. This strategy is particularly common when learners are approached unexpectedly by others with questions, such as "What time is it?" or "Do you know where the bus stop is?" Answering that one's watch is broken or that one doesn't

know the requested information protects the learner's status as a mature, intelligent adult better than not being able to understand or communicate using common everyday language skills.

Finally, a very basic strategy that learners use is purposeful environment selection. With time, learners come to realize that certain elements of their L2 use environment may threaten their self-construction more greatly than others. For some, there are particular interlocutors they know will listen and support them, topics of conversation they can discuss successfully, modes of communication (print vs. oral/aural, unilateral vs. bilateral or multilateral interactions, etc.), even physical locations or activities that help them relax and speak more articulately and construct the self more effectively. In such environments, learners may be assured that their sense of status is maintained, that others validate their participation, that they will be safe physically and emotionally, and that they have adequate control over the direction of the conversation, over their own language use, and over the development of their relationships. By maintaining a mental database of environmental factors that positively and negatively affect their L2 use and self-construction, learners are better able to pick and choose productive interactions, thus maximizing time on task and speech opportunities.

With immersion experience, learners come to discover these strategies as ways of maximizing their L2 use while minimizing threats to their self-image. Yet for some learners, these discoveries come only after months of struggling and avoiding wonderfully rich opportunities to speak and socialize in the L2. Some students may never learn these strategies, prematurely giving up their language training due to frustration and intimidation. As teachers and program directors, we have the ability to aid students both in-country and before studying abroad. The following section explores ways in which we can help this preparation happen.

Implications and Explorations

The issue of self-construction is relatively new and unexplored. Many associated issues, such as self-esteem, anxiety, individual learner differences, locus of control, and learning and communication strategies, have been considered and researched independently but have not widely been connected through the topic of self-identity. The contrast of the real self and ideal self creates a new layer of complexity to increasing L2 use and, in some cases, may change the way we understand the above-stated issues. For example, many teachers and researchers assume that anxiety is a causal factor of students' avoidance of L2 use. When considered through the spectrum of self-construction, however, it may be instead that anxiety is simply the symptomatic response of learners to the sense that their real self has been or may be denigrated, increasing the gap between real and ideal selves. Some learners who rely on extrinsic self-construction may under such circumstances reject L2 use, displaying what researchers consider "debilitating anxiety," (e.g., Rebeccah at the ticket counter). Others who are more skilled at intrinsic self-construction may take the attitude that they will repair the damage to their self-image by using the L2 to improve the value of the real self, thus showing "facilitating anxiety," (e.g., Reanna

at the ticket counter). If, in fact, anxiety is not the cause of reduced L2 use, but rather a symptom of a different problem, we must correctly diagnose our students' difficulties in order to aid them most effectively. Certainly, teaching students anxiety reduction techniques will improve their ability to relax and use their L2 skills in stressful situations. However, a more direct approach (e.g., talking to students precisely about the issues of self-construction and teaching them the strategies that experienced students report naturally acquiring over time) may allow students to understand why they feel "anxious," to manage their emotional responses more efficiently, and to improve their L2 use at a faster pace.[6]

The incorporation of self-construction as a concept for research and educational practice requires, first and foremost, an improved understanding of the issues involved. Because the concept of self-construction is relatively new, it is crucial that we explore it in greater depth than can be provided in one article. The fields of social psychology, social anthropology, and tactical communication, to name a few, can provide important insights into self-construction and the L2 learning and use processes. There is also a growing interest among foreign language educators and second language acquisition researchers into the role of personal identity and self-perception in a new language (see for example, Hines & Barraclough, 1995; Juhasz & Walker, 1987; Kinginger, 2004; LoCastro, 2001; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Related issues, such as individual learner differences, motivation, anxiety, and locus of control, have received wider attention in the literature, but their very definitions as well as their role in self-construction may be reconsidered in future investigations.

Although further research is needed, even a basic understanding of self-construction and L2 use will allow foreign language teachers to construct a language classroom environment and activities that promote positive self-construction and strategy training. Intermittent discussion of identity and language use, as well as tasks related to self-expression (emotional, artistic, comedic, etc.) will encourage students to explore their own distinctiveness in both their first and second languages. A focus on the role of culture in self-construction and an exploration of cultural responses to the individual may be important for preparing learners as well. By raising students' awareness of the importance of language in self-construction and the complications they may encounter, students may automatically improve their confidence and sense of self when speaking, both in and out of the classroom. Learners who do not understand why they feel anxious, why they shut down, or why they feel misunderstood may come to feel even more badly about themselves, thus further increasing the gap between real and ideal selves. Those with a basic awareness of these issues, however, may be better prepared to rationalize and compartmentalize their emotional responses and pursue L2 use even when feeling threatened.

As an integral facet of our exploration of self-construction, the role of the self should be considered as part of the definition of communicative competence. Students may have difficulty presenting their self-image appropriately in the L2 and yet be relatively successful in the four areas of competence that are typically considered under the rubric of communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences.[7] Other competence models have also been introduced that expand the expectations we hold for competent language use,

such as van Ek's (1986) additions of sociocultural competence and social compe-
tence and the concept of intercultural competence (Byram, 1995; Deardorff, this
volume; Jensen, 1995). These additions incorporate students' abilities to be empa-
thetic and interact with others as part of the overall picture of language compe-
tence. However, students often have the technical and social capabilities to discuss
numerous topics without being able to convey the very basic elements of their self-
image successfully. Thus, an additional model of "identity competence" must be
incorporated into the overall definition of competence.

As we introduce self-construction as a language-learning concept to our students,
we must assess how well our classrooms and programs meet the needs of student
training, exploring what our current capabilities are and discovering what we need to
improve our students' L2 use and self-construction. We must determine what our stu-
dents' current concerns are about speaking and conveying their identity. Students who
only have studied in classrooms will likely be less aware of the feeling of reduced self
than those who have experienced immersion study. Student assessment should be on
a number of levels: how familiar students are with the issue of self-construction, how
well students are able to articulate their self-image linguistically and metalinguisti-
cally, and how effectively they use learning, communication, and self-construction
strategies. Furthermore, we need to assess the structure of our programs to determine
how well we aid students in self-construction techniques. Certainly, we give students
the linguistic basics of self-description, but how well do we teach them to express the
self in the target language and culture? What do we teach them about the personal val-
ues native speakers tend to hold and how our own cultural and personal ideals may be
interpreted? Are our classrooms set up to allow sufficient personal interaction between
students, and do we give our students adequate personal exposure to native speakers?
Do we provide ample opportunity to practice self-construction through our classroom
materials and activities? For example, do our activities encourage not only expression
of personal beliefs and values, but also of such self-defining linguistic behaviors as
humor, empathy, or sarcasm? Do we, as teacher coordinators and pedagogues, provide
our teachers ample understanding of these issues and guidance for self-construction
training? And for those who run study abroad programs, whether in the U.S. office or
in-country as our students' resident directors or program managers, how well are
these issues addressed with potential interlocutors, such as in-country teachers and
host families?

We may also consider ways of incorporating active self-construction training of
our students and teachers in our foreign language programs. Initially, students may
be taught how to recognize and avoid or politely reject situations that negatively
impact their self-construction until they have had ample opportunity to develop
appropriate strategies for managing such situations. Learners may be taught
instead how to seek out more productive, self-supporting interactions that allow
them to maximize their L2 use and exposure. However, not all situations are avoid-
able, nor should every negative experience be dismissed. Many situations are
beyond the control of the learner and cannot be avoided. Inside the classroom,
learners rarely have the opportunity to pick and choose the interactions they will
pursue. Outside the classroom, learners may have the necessity to interact in

uncomfortable situations because of their constant proximity to interlocutors (e.g., host family members), need for information, or other reasons. Learners must be able to adapt to these situations through the use of self-construction strategies.

To develop these strategies in our students, it is also important for us to adopt new classroom techniques that allow our students to explicitly discuss these strategies and how to use them, as well as implicitly practice them in activities that incorporate them. For example, Foss and Reitzel (1988) discuss their "rational emotive therapy" (RET) in which the teacher guides students through a series of irrational thoughts, such as "if I make simple mistakes, people will think I'm stupid." The teacher then helps the students explore the validity of the statements and discuss how irrational they are. In this way, students build skills in self-talk in a structured and conscious way. For the language coordinator, adopting new classroom techniques also includes teacher training. Teachers who learned their second language at a very young age may not appreciate the importance of self-construction because children may not experience the same inhibitions of self-construction as adults. Furthermore, young teachers are often burdened with syllabi that allow little flexibility and may not be prepared to incorporate strategy training if it seems to detract from, rather than mesh with, curricular goals.

Although the topic of self-construction remains relatively new and raw, much can be done to prepare students for a more successful study abroad experience. Had our friend Leila understood the role her self-image plays in her language use, she may have had a much different experience. She might have anticipated some of the difficulties she would encounter, including occasionally feeling socially isolated and misunderstood. She might have appreciated why interactions with certain fellow students and native speakers left her reticent to speak, whereas others energized her and allowed her to take risks. She may have been better able to rationalize her negative thoughts and manage her interactions in such a way that allowed her to feel both secure in her self-image and successful in her L2 use. Ultimately, Leila became a successful Russian speaker, but not before deciding to change her major upon arriving home to the States. Years later, she returned to her language study and continued on to graduate school. Yet much of her first semester abroad was lost in the struggle to find her self.

Notes

1. For studies supporting the importance of study abroad and second language (L2) use in L2 acquisition, see Brecht, Caemmerer, & Walter (1995), Carroll (1967), Freed (1995), and Stansfield (1975).

2. All student names presented here have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

3. For a complete review and analysis of the data, please see Pellegrino Aveni (2005).

4. OPI = Oral Proficiency Interview.

5. For more complete analysis of these issues, please see Pellegrino Aveni (2005).

6. For a complete discussion of anxiety and self-construction, please see Pellegrino Aveni (2005).

7. For more on communicative competence, please see Savignon (1983).

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