

The Construction of Identity in L2 Academic Classroom Community: A Small Scale Study of Two Saudi MA in TESOL Students at North American University

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Abstract

Second language (L2) classrooms are venues for learners to construct their identities, which are socially, culturally, politically and historically situated. Informed by the theory of community of practice (COP), this paper examines how two Saudi first-year students who are pursuing their master degree in TESOL at American Universities shape and negotiate their identities (i.e., participation and membership) in their new academic communities, mainly in a L2 academic classroom. The data was collected through (1) a personal narrative which traces each student's first-year experience and view toward American oriented classroom participation, and (2) an individual interview to explore in-depth information missing in the narrative accounts. The findings suggest that both Saudi students experienced difficulties and challenges in negotiating competence, identities, and power relations, which was crucial for them to participate and be accepted as legitimate and competent members of their classroom communities. Based on these findings, this paper argues that newcomers' (i.e., international students) socialization in a certain academic discourse community is conflictual and complex process, which involves struggle, negotiation and construction and deconstruction of identities. Possible implications for instruction are discussed.

Keywords: Identity, community of practice, participation, legitimacy, peripherality and membership

1. Introduction

Among other things, second language (L2) classrooms, by and large, are venues for learners to construct their identities, which are socially, culturally, politically and historically situated (Gee, 2000; Luke, 2003). L2 classrooms of MA in TESOL, for example, are considered as important venues for learners to acquire L2 (e.g., English) in a formal or an instructional setting where teachers scaffold students to gain particular linguistic and academic competencies altogether. In this regard, participation in the classroom is seen as one of the efforts for students to acquire those competencies. This notion (i.e., classroom participation) implies that students act as engaged actors on socio-cognitive planes. Socio-cognitive interactions become more complicated in a classroom setting where there is a population of linguistically and culturally diverse students (Hirst, 2007). For instance, Morita (2004) points out, “understanding how these students participate in their new academic communities and acquire academic discourses in their second language (L2) has become critical” (p. 573). This criticality of acquiring academic discourses in L2 needs in depth analysis. The argument is that understanding how first-year MA TESOL students, for example, participate in their academic classroom communities will not only help instructors in the host culture to accommodate these students needs (e.g., linguistics), but it will also facilitate the teaching and learning process both inside and outside the classroom.

Thus, in this paper, examine the case of how two Saudi first-years MA TESOL students participate in academic classes at American universities might help me understand the issue of identity construction in ESL contexts. The reasons behind choosing these two Saudi first-years MA TESOL students are twofold: (1) there are no previous studies investigated how first-year Saudi MA TESOL students attending American universities construct their identities at American-oriented classrooms and (2) there are remarkable linguistic and cultural diversities between the Saudi and American educational systems, so these diversities may have negative and /or positive impacts on Saudi students learning L2. In the next section I will elaborate on these issues in detail.

1.1. Significance of the Study

Saudi first-year MA TESOL students attending American universities often experience a number of challenges as they attempt to negotiate and construct their identities in academic classroom settings. In this regard, immersing themselves into a new L2 academic classroom atmosphere different from that in their Saudi universities, Saudi first-year MA TESOL students have to struggle to be legitimate members of academic discourse community. From the perspective of linguistic competency, they face difficulties of expressing arguments appropriately in classroom discussions, understanding reading materials critically. The difficulty might rest in the students' cultural backgrounds (i.e., lack of match between their old background and the new environment in the classroom). Among other things, they believe that teachers should not be questioned and an expression of disagreement in classroom discussions with teachers or peers is a sign of disrespect. Consequently, Saudi first-year MA TESOL students may often struggle in attempting to “invest” (Norton, 2000) in the identity of engaged students in a freedom of orally-oriented classroom participation (i.e., open-ended discussions).

Therefore, as a participant-observer, investigating how Saudi first-year students construct their identities in American-oriented classroom communities will help me gain deep understanding of issues such: (1) the ways some institutional practices sometimes marginalize Saudi students, (2) the ways in which meaning is negotiated for Saudi students in the learning process, and (3) the ways in which membership, participation, and identity are negotiated and constructed in classroom communities. This might further help me to elaborate some misconceptions and stereotypes about Middle Eastern students in general and Saudi students in particular that depicted them as passive, dependent, and lacking initiative and critical thinking in classroom communities.

Informed by the theory of community-of-practice (COP) by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), I examine how two Saudi first-year students who are pursuing their master degree in TESOL at American Universities shape and negotiate their participation and membership in their new academic communities. More specifically, this paper explores the negotiation and construction of two Saudi first-year TESOL students' identities in a L2 academic classroom at U.S. based universities. Thus, the primary goal of the paper is to provide an empirical evidence on how those Saudi

students participate and negotiate membership in their L2 academic classroom communities at American universities. It is worth noting that classrooms should not be perceived as “descript entity that is independent of larger communities” (Morita, 2004, p. 577). Instead, investigating those Saudi L2 students’ experiences and views within the classroom will reveal how the classrooms can be an essential forum where members of the classroom community negotiate their roles, identities, and positions in different levels of the academic communities that surround them.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Operational Definitions of Identities

The term “identity” has been defined in different ways by established scholars in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (i.e., Block, 2007; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2003). For example, West (cited in Riely, 2006) defines identity as a concept related to desires, that is to say, desire of recognition, safety, membership, and materials acquisition. As Norton (2000) defines identity deals with “how people understand their relationship to the outside world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 410). Ivanić (1998) argues that identity refers to the characteristics an individual shares with other members of societies, and it occurs as a result of social interaction and affiliation to a certain community. She elaborates that the development of a certain identity involves the struggles with the powerful ideological and discursal domination.

Identity is also defined as “an inherently social product that is jointly created by interactants, rather than as a pre-determined, psychological construct that is lodged within each individual’s mind” (Park, 2007, p. 341). In this respect, the construction of identity rests on how people interact with others and identify themselves through turn by turn participation within a particular COP. Thus, “social identity is the sum of all the social subgroups of which the person is a competent and recognised member—age, sex, religion, profession, region and so on—which confer on the person the capacity to occupy various discursive positions” (Riely, 2006, p. 296).

Informed by Norton’s (2000) work, in this paper, I define identity in L2 academic discourse as how Saudi students see their personal and social relationships with their new

academic discourse atmosphere; how such relationships are constructed and co-constructed within spatial, temporal, social, and cultural dimensions; and how such students see their possibilities for the future success as legitimate members of L2 academic discourse communities. It is also important to pinpoint that identity should be seen as how the Saudi students identify themselves as potentially competent individuals in a new academic discourse community where linguistic and cultural diversity prevails.

In this respect, I argue that the use of a different language or English has implications for how the Saudi students build their individual and social identities within English inherent cultures. Indeed, such cultures differ from those students bring from their home academic discourses. This idea suggests that language and identity should be seen as a single entity, which suffices to identify student membership in a given group. In other words, language acts as a mediating tool for constructing and deconstructing individual and social identities.

2.2. Identity and Language

As some scholars point out (i.e., Kramsch 2002; Norton, 2000), identity and language are interrelated. Atay and Ece (2009), for example, argue that “the relationship between language and identity is complex, contradictory, and multifaceted, dynamic across time and space, co-constructed, contextualized in larger processes that can be coercive or collaborative, and linked with classroom practice”(p. 26). As Kim (2003) argues, language serves as a main vehicle of “expression,” “transmission,” “adaptation,” and “transformation” of culture. This idea implies that language, a linguistic device, mediates the maintenance of one’s own culture and the acquisition of new culture and knowledge. Furthermore, Kramsch (2002) argues that language serves as a tool for gaining membership linguistically negotiated in a particular community of practice to immerse oneself into the community’s systems, socio-cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs. Because identity affects communication in some aspects, communication can create and change one’s identity (Abrams et al., 2002). This idea implies that language is a primary tool for communication and identity construction and deconstruction.

In today’s globalized world, English has dominated the international academic discourse communities. Researchers such as Crawford (2006) argues that the use of

English as a “lingua franca” (Phillipson 2002) is not because those whose native language is not English has to negotiate their participation, struggle with gaining legitimacy, and membership in English medium academic discourse communities. Drawing from this viewpoint, language is seen as a linguistically mediating tool for gaining participation, legitimacy, and membership in L2 mediated academic community discourse. Such participation, legitimacy, and membership, indeed, involve negotiation, construction and co-construction of identity that students have.

2.3. Identities and Academic Discourse Community as Community of Practice: Participation, Legitimacy and Membership

The community of practice (COP) model in language learning, by and large, is complex and multifaceted as most L2 researchers argue (Cox, 2005; Morita, 2004; Toohey, 2000). The terms “practice” and “community” are ambiguous in a sense that they cannot be defined clearly. As a result, various studies on COP have addressed this concept in different ways (Cox, 2005). However, Wenger (cited in Toohey, 2000), for example, explains that “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p.1). In this regard, membership in a community of practice locally situated in an English medium academic classroom always alters as newcomers (i.e., international students) interact with members of the host culture. This interaction involves language learning and socialization in such a discourse community where competency and membership are badly needed to participate in the discourse community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Morita, 2004). Indeed, the process of participation, known as “legitimate peripheral participation” (LPP), as coined from Lave and Wenger’s model (1991), has a significant implications for the membership of the discourse community.

Wenger (1998), further argues that the notions of “peripherality” and “legitimacy” are vital in a sense that both notions facilitate newcomers’ actual participation (i.e., in the classroom) which in turns leads to second language learning. Peripherality provides “an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37). This idea suggests that individuals can be

members of the COP in various ways and their roles and positions in the community are subject to change over place and time.

Because both peripherality and legitimacy are mutually complimentary, legitimacy affects how individuals gain access to particular COP. In a sense of legitimacy, newcomers should be given sufficient legitimacy in such a way that they can be seen as legitimate and potential members. Wenger (1998) pinpoints that "...only with legitimacy can all their inevitable stumbling and violations become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect, or exclusion" (p. 101). Thus, legitimacy also plays vital role in teaching and learning in a sense that it facilitates English learning. The higher the level of legitimacy granted to the learners in a certain classroom setting, the more they will be able to negotiate, construct and deconstruct their identities in the COP (Leki, 2001; Toohey, 2000).

Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (1991) maintain that COP is transformative in nature, that is to say, alteration is natural in COP and its related activities because "the participation of individuals involved in it, their knowledge, and their perspectives are mutually constitutive" (p. 117). From this viewpoint, newcomers' (i.e., international students) socialization in a certain academic discourse community is conflictual and complex process, which may involve struggle, negotiation and construction and deconstruction of identities. The conflictual and complex process of international students' socialization in a certain academic discourse community has been spelled out in some empirical studies.

Morita (2000), for example, in here 8-month study of discourse socialization through oral activities in a TESL graduate program, observed the ways TESL graduate students socialize and participate in classroom community. She found that "both nonnative and native speakers gradually became apprenticed into oral academic discourses through ongoing negotiations with instructors and peers as they prepared for, observed, performed, and reviewed oral academic presentations" (p. 279). She further concluded that academic discourse socialization is "a complex, locally situated process that involves dynamic negotiations of expertise and identity" (p. 304). This description calls to mind Lave and Wenger's model, in which learning is locally situated and entails both interaction and change between and among experts and novices.

In another study of academic discourse socialization, Morita (2004) examined how Japanese graduate students attending Canadian university negotiated their participation and membership in their new L2 classroom communities (i.e., open-ended discussion). She reported that major challenges faced by those Japanese graduate students rest on “negotiating competence, identity and power relationship, which was necessary for them to participate and be recognized as legitimate and competent members of their classroom communities” (p. 573).

In essence, the above empirical studies indicated international students attending graduate school often encounters a wide variety of challenges (i.e., identity construction in classroom participation). Newcomers’ (i.e., international students) socialization in a certain academic discourse community is conflictual and complex process, which may involve struggle, negotiation and construction and deconstruction of identities. Informed by those empirical studies (i.e., Morita), the current study examines the following issues:

- How do Saudi first-year MA TESOL students shape and negotiate their competencies and identities in US-based academic discourse communities?
- What does it mean to be silent for the Saudi first- year MA in TESOL students in the US-based academic classroom communities?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of this small-scale study are two-male Saudi students who have completed their first year in pursuing a master of arts (MA) in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) at American Universities. Both participants were born in Saudi Arabia, and Arabic is their mother tongue. The participants obtained their Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in English from Saudi Arabian universities, and none of them have overseas learning experiences. For ethical consideration, the two participants were informed of whether they would like to participate in the current study or not via a consent form (See Informed Content Form).

Although the participants were homogeneous in the sense that they are native Saudis and have the same cultural and religious backgrounds (Islam), that there are some differences between them. The first participant (Ali—pseudonym) comes from the

community of “Bedwin” Saudi (i.e., people who live in rural areas in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) and has six years experience of teaching English at secondary school. Bedwin people also have conservative traditions which stem from Islamic conservative interpretation of Kura’an. As a result, they always show great resistance to western values, beliefs, and cultures. Another participant (Refat—pseudonym) is originally from Jeddah where many Western communities reside, and has four-year experience of teaching English at Technical College. Saudi people who live in modern cities like Jeddah to some extent are less conservative and often welcome diversities of other cultures and beliefs. From those differences, the chosen participants may have unique learning experiences (i.e., cultural, religion and identities) in American-oriented classrooms regarding their classroom participation.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

The empirical data of the present study were collected through a personal narrative, which traces the Saudi students’ first-year experiences, and their views toward American- oriented classroom participation (i.e., how they negotiate competence and identities in classroom participation). It is worth noting here that the personal narrative helps participants to document their changing feelings and experiences of classroom communities (Morita, 2004) as they narrate their past experiences. In addition to the personal narrative, an individual interview was conducted to elicit an account of their lived experience and a sense of “how [these] people define their world” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 9). In other words, the interview was conducted to explore in-depth data or information missing in the narrative accounts and is also seen as a tool for gaining a better understanding of how the Saudi students negotiate and construct and deconstruct their identities in classroom participation at American universities.

4. Data analysis

Adopted from Creswell’s qualitative data analysis framework (2007), I analyzed the data based on these four core activities: (1) data coding by classifying the findings based on the questions; (2) data display by reexamining the findings for data reduction and verification; (3) data reduction by screening out the findings relevant to the research

questions, and (4) conclusion drawing by looking at the entire findings for idea generalizations. I went through such activities back and forward to allow for an emergent, careful, and detailed data analysis.

In other words, I categorize the participants' personal narratives and transcribe the interview in a form of "folk categories" (Delamont, 1992, p. 150). By "folk categories" I mean reporting directly from the students' thoughts, feelings about classroom participation (i.e., feelings of anxiety, and insecure). Thus, the qualitative data were analyzed using an interpretive framework in which I made use of theoretical and empirical accounts as the basis for interpreting the data coded. Thus, in the interpretive framework, empirical evidence was connected to relevant theories and previous studies in such a way that the findings were interpreted whether they support, complement, or expand the existing theories and previous empirical studies.

5. Findings and Discussions

In order to address the research questions of this study, I, firstly, highlight the overall findings with regard to those Saudi students' experience of classroom participation (i.e., legitimacy, and membership). Then, I address each participant's experience with regard to difficulties, struggle, and challenges he had faced in America-oriented classroom participation in order to explore the commonalities and differences between those two participants.

5.1. Negotiation of Competencies and Identities in Classroom Interaction

The findings indicate that both participants generally constructed various identities pertaining to their experiences of competencies in classroom interaction. One common identity reported by both participants was being less competent than others, particularly English native speakers and more capable international students in classroom interactions. This finding pertains to how English serves as a mediating tool for gaining legitimacy and membership in the academic community of practice (Crawford, 2006). Moreover, the development of such an identity might be attributed to some difficulties they have encountered in classroom participation, such as (1) the ability to understand the reading materials, (2) the ability to construct an argument to meet the audiences' way of

thinking, and (3) the ability to fully understand the lectures and ask relevant questions to contribute to the classroom discussion (Morita, 2004).

In the case of Refat, he had four-year experience of English teaching at Technical College in Saudi Arabia and joined the MA TEOL program with high motivation to gain linguistic and academic competencies. However, as he narrated in the following excerpt, the ability to construct argument in classroom discussion was a major challenge for him.

I often found it hard to speak in classroom discussion, as a result, I always felt stressed in freedom of orally-oriented classroom participation, particularly open-ended discussions (Refat's Personal Narrative, April 2009)

Refat added that because of the inability to spontaneously express ideas in English, he dislikes classroom discussions, as stated in this excerpt: "I do not want...umm to participate in classroom discussion (.) because I feel pressured to express my ideas ((thinking)) due to my inability to articulate such ideas in English ...as a Master's student I do not want to lose face in front of other students" (Refat, Interview, April 2009). This finding indicates that Refat seems to be afraid that he would not meet his classroom communities' expectation with regard to linguistic and academic competencies. He felt threaten that his instructors and peers may view him as a less competent student so he would lose his face in the classroom community. What Refat experienced can be related to the construction of identity regarding to the desire of safety (Riely, 2006).

Refat also had difficulty in fully understanding the lecture and reading materials due to topic unfamiliarity and difficulty. As a result, he found it hard to contribute to classroom discussions. He reported that "having a number of native speakers of English in my classroom was really frustrating. What makes the matter worse is that even if I prepared for the class, I found it hard to participate" (Refat's Personal Narrative, April 2009). In this regard, Refat's challenges seem to be related to a linguistic issue accompanied by psychological issues, particularly anxiety and lack of confidence. This might affect his language acquisition when negotiating competence and membership in classroom (Morita, 2004; Tsui, 1996). Despite his feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence, Refat seems to have a strong desire and motivation to participate and become legitimate member of his classroom community, as articulated in the following excerpt:

..oh..yes..as I mentioned earlier, the amount of reading was one of the obstacles that I have encountered in my first months (.). (thinking) ...to overcome this problem in some classes I searched for a source that covers the same material in Arabic and read it to get the main points.umm but even though I became familiar with the theme, I was not able to participate in class discussions. ..I am not sure if linguistic incompetence was the only reason for not participating in the discussions (Refat, Interview, April 2009).

The finding above suggests that Refat seems to be negotiating his competence tirelessly in order to be a legitimate member of his classroom. In other words, he seem to have a strong sense of personal investment in his study i.e., searching for Arabic version of his course materials that might help understand and participate in classroom discussion (Norton, 2000). This finding is also supported by Refat's assertion that "...umm..sometime before I speak, I used to rehearse my points in classroom participation (.) so that I cannot make any mistakes" (Refat, Interview April 2009). It can be said that rehearsing is one of the strategies for not losing face and building self confidence, and this finding also implies that Refat tried to construct his identity as being a valued student in the classroom (Riely, 2006).

Further, another classroom interaction event somehow gave him a positive feedback and helped him to construct his identity as a legitimate member in classroom participation, as Refat narrated in this excerpt "in one of the classroom participations he made a point and two native speakers students agreed with his points" (Refat's Personal Narrative, April 2009). Refat, further, reported that "I got encouraged and (oh)..felt sometime students can understand my arguments" (Refat, Interview April 2009). In this regard, it could be said that Refat was able to develop his identity as a relatively competent classroom member. This starting point can be seen as a motivation or drive, which helps him participate more actively in classroom discussions. Thus, Refat started to get confident and become a peripheral member is an indication that socially and academically conducive atmosphere can help students build their identities as potential engaged actors in the classroom (Gaith, 2002).

Similarly, Ali who had six-year experience of English teaching in a secondary school joined the MA TESOL program with commitment and motivation in order to be a

legitimate member of the academic community. Nevertheless, owing to difficulties (i.e., oral skills and comprehending the course content), he constructed his identity of being a less experienced student, as narrated in the following excerpt:

It was not only the language, but even the course contents as well. I am here contrasting between *language* as a communicating tool and the *academic language*, e.g. books. I think overcoming the language barrier was my main concern....because there are some native speakers and some fluent international students from Arab countries in classroom discussion. I do not want to talk and make an English mistake in front of them...I always try to make myself busy by taking notes or avoid looking at my instructors and peer faces so nobody will address questions to me (Ali's Personal Narrative, April 2009).

The findings above indicate that Ali's challenge also seems to be related to linguistic competency, self-esteem, and anxiety in which he employed strategies such as avoiding eye contact with a teacher and note taking in order to be viewed by his classmates as a member who paid attention to the classroom discussion in a different ways. However, such challenges do not seem to fully stop his investment in gaining the linguistic competencies and become a legitimate member of the classroom communities, as stated in the excerpt below:

..oh ..you know..sometimes in classroom discussion I used to imitate how native speakers students stepped into the stage if they want to participate (..)I used to restate their points based on my own experience and make comments...(thinking)..even though my comments was not very rich I did not care (Ali, Interview, April 2009).

It is obvious that Ali seems to be struggling in attempting to “invest” (Norton, 2000) in building his identity of being an engaged student in classroom participation and in the program as well. Such desire of investment in the identity of being the engaged student can also be depicted from his excerpt:

...umm if I felt that I did not understand the lecture clearly enough I used to visit my instructors during their office hours and ask them..oh..to show them that I am working hard and participating in this program...and sometimes (thinking)I used to meet my classmates in the library and discuss the class topics with them..(Ali, Interview, April 2009).

This finding implies that Ali seems to be negotiating his competent and identity at the same time in order to be a legitimate member of his classroom. By visiting his instructors during their office hours and meeting his classmates in the library for small-group discussions, he seems to attempt to improve his oral skills and participation (i.e., to speak academic English outside the classroom). This finding also indicates that the compensation strategy helped Ali construct his identity as engaged and competent student in the academic discourse classroom community. In this way, he can become more accepted in the classroom participation, particularly in oral communication, as in this excerpt “after I met instructors several times and participate in small-group discussion in the library I moderately become confident to speak in classroom...and I felt that I can make comments sometimes” (Ali, Interview April 2009). In other words, because Ali had support from his instructors and peers in a small-group discussion, he moderately gained confident and attempted to participate in classroom discussion. This indicates that legitimacy plays vital role in teaching and learning in a sense that it facilitates English learning. The higher the level of legitimacy granted to the learners in a certain classroom setting, the more they will be able to negotiate and construct and deconstruct their identities in the COP (Leki, 2001; Toohey, 2000).

5.2. Why am I Silent in the Classroom?

In addition to the linguistic competencies and language learning anxiety, in the current study, both participants provided variety of reasons to justify their passivity in classroom interactions. These reasons include understanding American classroom culture, instructor's pedagogical approaches, and their roles as relative newcomers.

Ali, for example, reported his reluctance to participate in classroom discussion, as seen in the following excerpt:

I don't feel at ease when issues such as homosexuality and sexuality are brought up in class. I always avoid participating in or even listening to what is being said. What I usually do it to write on my notes or read from my book or binder. Yet, I do respect the people, either instructors or colleges, involved in such discussions (Ali's A Personal Narrative, April 2009).

Ali's resistance to participate in such a classroom discussion might be attributed to his cultural background as a Bedwin Saudi. Bedwin people often have a conservative tradition and beliefs in which discussing issues such as homosexuality and sexuality in class is considered a taboo. This finding corroborates with Morrita's (2004) argument that "in the local classroom context—the social, cultural, historical, curricular, interactional, and interpersonal context—is inseparable from learners' participation" (p. 596).

Further, from the excerpt above, he seemed to construct his identity in this class by keeping himself busy (i.e., writing on his notes) instead of getting involved in such discussion. Instructor's pedagogical approaches were also another reason for Ali not to participate in the classroom. In other words, Ali perceived the learner-centered classroom in which students have more opportunities to participate and have their voices heard as "the extreme informality classI think this negatively affects the learning and teaching settings (Ali's Personal Narrative, April 2009).

Ali even found it very hard to talk in such a classroom because he was afraid that "...umm ..if I say something that might encounter professors' view, they might be considered it as personal attack..(thinking).so I will fail the course" (Ali, Interview, April 2009). Such an identity seems to be constructed due to his educational background in

Saudi Arabia which is based on teacher-dominant classroom (i.e., A teacher is lecturing all the time, and students are listening to the teacher). Ali insists on perceiving teachers as a figure of authority, and the only source of knowledge. Thus, he believes that the teachers should not be questioned. This idea implies that student historical-cultural backgrounds have implications for how students construct their own identities in the classroom participation (Hirst, 2007).

Moreover, the difficulties Ali had experienced in American-oriented classroom can also be seen from his reluctance to call his teachers by their first name “I could not call my teachers by their first names. I am not exaggerated if I say that most students, including international students, called the professors by their first names. Even though, these professors asked the students to do so, I could not do it. I feel that it is rude” (Ali’s Personal Narrative, April 2009). Despite these difficulties, Ali attempted to construct his identity as a legitimate member of the classroom community by raising his hand in order to have his voice heard “I remember when I would have a question..(.). I would wait until I had eye contact with the instructor and then I would raise my hand.umm...I consider such a behavior as an indication of respect to the teacher” (Ali, Interview, April 2009).

In essence, it seems clear that Ali employed different strategies (i.e., raising his hand and writing on his notebook) to gain membership. For example, by raising his hand until he had eye contact with the teacher and participate he seems to demonstrate a positive role that newcomer can play. In other words, he believes that those strategies will help him contribute to classroom discussion as a newcomer who potentially had vital role to play in American-oriented classroom settings (Morita, 2004). This also suggests that individuals can be members of the COP in various ways and their roles and positions in the community are subject to change over place and time (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Similarly, Refat provided a variety of reasons for his reluctance to participate in classroom discussion. He reported that “at the beginning of the semester I used to believe that at a master level we will have more lectures from the teachers, so that I can gain more knowledge and improve my oral skills and vocabulary” (Refat’s Personal Narrative, April 2009). His desire and motivation to learn English seem to increase by having the opportunity to have doctoral students in some of his classes “I thought because there are many doctoral students in this course, the professor will give more lectures” (Refat,

Interview, April 2009). This finding indicates that his Saudi educational background shapes his beliefs that teacher is the only source of knowledge, thus, the teacher should do most of the class talk. However, his expectations were counterproductive in which he found his classrooms are student-centered oriented—i.e., students actively engaged in discussion (e.g., small-group) and the teachers encouraged such participations. He found that participating in such classroom interaction is challenging, as a result, he constructed an identity of being passive, less experienced and knowledgeable member in his classroom. He was even shocked when he was required to do presentations with one of the doctoral native speaker students. The following excerpt illustrates Refat's reaction to peer class presentation.

I felt I was really in trouble because I don't know how to present in front of my

classmates and if I did not make that presentation I will lose mark and my classmate

might call me a less competent student. I negotiate with the doctoral student that I will

first introduce the topic of our presentation and he will continue the rest..fortunately

he agreed and that presentation went well (Refat's Personal Narrative, April 2009).

Refat seems to be negotiating his competence and identity in order to gain a membership. In other words, his strategy of asking the doctoral student to allow him to introduce the topic of their presentation, and the doctoral students will continue the presentation indicated that he foreground a positive role that the newcomer plays (Toohey, 2000). This finding suggests that Refat's classmate showed cooperative act, which could allow for partial in-class participation in which more capable student scaffolded a less capable student. In this sense, the more capable student assigned the less capable with less demanding and easier work to get group work done.

In sum, both participants' silence has various connotations, causes, and outcomes in which they attempted to construct and deconstruct their identities in different ways in response to the classroom's social, cultural, and pedagogical settings (Morita, 2004).

Both participants encountered significant transformations with regard to their “identity, value about teaching and learning approach to academic socialization” (Morita, 2004, p. 591), particularly American-oriented classroom interaction.

6. Pedagogical Implications and Conclusions

This study has pedagogical implications with regard to (1) how to encourage participation in classroom, particularly with students’ different needs and (2) how to provide equal opportunity in classroom participation. It is vital for educators and teachers to understand that the nature of classroom participation is socially constructed—i.e. they should take into consideration what kind of roles a certain classroom community assigns to members and their impact on shaping students’ role in classroom interactions (Hirst, 2007, Morita, 2004; Norton, 2000). Additionally, educators and teachers should apply different strategies to bridge the social, cultural, historical and power gap between the newcomers (i.e., Saudi students) and host culture (i.e., American universities). This will not only help those newcomers comprehend the classroom discussion, but it will also facilitate their participation. One possible strategy suggests by Morrita, (2004) is that teachers should clearly spell out the purpose of a given discussion i.e., by giving cultural background and summarizing the discussion from time to time to familiarize the international students about the task and help them understand the discussion. Another strategy is that teacher may employ different activities (i.e., small-group discussion) in classroom discussions in order to urge international students (i.e., Saudi students) with different background to participate in classroom discussion (Leki, 2000).

In essence, the findings of the current study suggest the importance of investigating L2 learners’ perspectives, feelings, and experiences in American-oriented classroom discussion. Further ethnographic studies and observations would offer more invaluable insights regarding more in-depth analyzes on the overall interactional patterns of a certain classroom discussion, students verbal and nonverbal behavior, and informal interaction with peers and teachers. In this regard, educators and teachers should take into account the classroom context in which learners participate so as to gain in-depth understanding about their behavior as newcomers (i.e., behavior of Saudi students in American-oriented classroom).

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Appendix

Informed Consent Form

“The Construction of Identity in L2 Academic Classroom Community: A Small Scale Study of Two Saudi M.A. TESOL Students at North American University”

You are invited to participate in this study because you are an appropriate informant. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask.

The purpose of the study is to examine how two L2 Saudi first-year students who are pursuing their MA TESOL at American Universities shape and negotiate their participation and membership in their new academic communities. There will be a pre-study debriefing session regarding the specific goals and procedures for the research, level and type of your participation, benefits, and ethical issues regarding this study. Indeed, your participation in the study will be writing a personal narrative and having individual interviews. Each interview will be scheduled for no longer than 60 minutes. There will be possible minimal risks (e.g., boredom and tiredness) associated with this study.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with me or your school reputation. If you may withdraw at any time during the study, please notify me. Upon your request to withdraw, all information supplied by you or on your personal identity will be completely destroyed. If you choose to participate until the end of the study, all information will be kept strictly confidential; nobody except my supervising professor, Dr. Dan Tannacito and me will have an access to that information. Your identity will also not be disclosed at any time. Thus, your privacy and confidentiality about all information provided by you will be strictly protected in compliance with moral principles for doing research with human participants. If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the statement below.

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Indiana, PA 15701

Cell Phone: 5713150332, Email address: albarnawim@hotmail.com or nvlp@iup.edu

Informed Consent Form

VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:

I have read and understand the information on the consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I also understand that nothing in this consent form aims to replace any applicable government regulations and laws. I have received a signed copy of this informed consent form to keep in my possession.

Name (*please print*): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____ **Phone where you can be reached:** _____

Best days and times to reach you: _____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, possible risks, and other ethical issues regarding his or her participation in this study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

Date: _____ **Investigator's signature:** _____