Language learner identities: A *perezhivanie* perspective

What this research was about and why it is important

Language learner identities are related to how students engage in language learning and what they intend to achieve. Past studies have focused either on personal factors or social influences to understand language learner identities. In this study, the Vygotskian concept of *perezhivanie* (*perezhivaniya*, plural) or emotional lived experience was adopted to provide a holistic perspective to examine Japanese students' learner identities and identity transformation in English language learning, highlighting complex influences derived from both personal and social realms. This study described the participants' *perezhivaniya* in English language learning and analysed the factors and conditions that affected how these students made sense of their lived experiences. The findings showed that the participants' *perezhivaniya* brought forth different language learner identities, as these students participated in English language learning in different settings.

What the researchers did

- Two Japanese university students, Misaki and Hina (pseudonyms), were selected for this study because they had experienced identity crises in English language learning. These participants were typical cases of high achievers drawn from well-off families in Japan where English language learning was highly valued.
- Data collection activities targeted the participants' English language learning experiences, their feelings, and sense-making with a particular focus on their understanding of themselves as language learners.
- Data collection included long interviews, informal interviews, a series of observation on online and face-to-face language sessions, and a collection of the participants' postings on a course online blog.
- The analyses focused on identifiable instances of *perezhivaniya* or emotional lived experiences associated with personally significant events or moments in relation to English learning in school and university settings.
- The analyses examined how the participants experienced English language and how these experiences brought forth different learner identities.

What the researchers found

- This study found that the participants' language learner identities were closely aligned with their *perezhivaniya*.
- Misaki's identities in learning English were built on a series of *perezhivaniya* around struggles of 'getting the right answer.'
- Hina's identities involved a series of *perezhivaniya* in English language learning wherein a search for personal purposes in English learning was the key concern.
- The participants' *perezhivaniya* were dramatic, emotionally-fused, and affected simultaneously by personal considerations and contextual influences.
- These cases of *perezhivaniya* demonstrate that language learner identities and their transformation processes are complex, encompassing personal considerations, social influences, and transactions between these two realms.

Things to consider

- Language teachers should understand students' *perezhivaniya*, particularly personal and social influences that individual students use to make sense of their language learning experiences.
- A good rapport with the participant is critical to understanding *perezhivaniya*, as the research process involves highly personal information related to one's experiences, feelings, and interpretations.
- A limitation of the current study is that it remains unknown whether the emerging identities of Misaki and Hina could be firmly established.
- The role of peers and other important people in assisting students to make sense of their language learning experiences needs additional research.
- Future research should also examine complex relationships between identity, engagement, and language learning, as the concept of *perezhivanie* highlights a sense-making process that is experiential, situated, and evolving.