

The use of multimodal narratives to explore English language learners' identity construction and re-construction

Zsuzsanna Dégi¹

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania

The present paper aims to provide an insight into English language learners' beliefs, their ideal foreign language self and their language learner identity formation and transformation presented during the analysis of a set of visual and written narratives. The research involved 56 pupils who were asked to draw two portraits of themselves, one before being able to use English and one after, when they can already use the language. In order to better understand and interpret the drawings, students were also asked to provide a short, written description or explanation of their drawings. Results show that development in English as a foreign language comes with physical, professional, relational, experimental and psychological changes. Moreover, students' answers suggest that they consider English language knowledge to be valuable and needed for understanding different applications, movies, TV-series, songs, books and other cultures. They believed that lack of English language knowledge excludes them from participating in such activities.

Keywords: learner identity, multimodal analysis, ideal self, envisioning, EFL

1. Introduction

There is an extensive body of research on learner identity, identity construction and learner beliefs (see e.g., Wenger, 2000; Danielewicz, 2001; Luk & Lin, 2007; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013; Dufva et al., 2011; Inözü, 2018). Wenger refers to identity as a "lived experience of belonging (or not belonging). A strong identity involves deep connections with others through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection and mutual commitments" (Wenger, 2000, p. 239). Learning other languages involves the construction of new identities, since using a foreign language will re-construct and shape the individual's sense of self (Benzehaf, 2021).

According to Danielewicz, identity is "our understanding of who we are and who we think other people are" (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 10). Identity defines how individuals understand their relationship to the outside world, and how this relationship is constructed across time and space. Identity is not seen as something fixed and finished, but it is seen to be in constant change, therefore it is unstable and complex. It is inevitable for individuals to compare themselves to other individuals within the broader society, and to adapt themselves to specific rules, behaviour and principles that a culture or a society holds. This means that one's identity is in constant negotiation and formation (Norton, 2013; Trent, 2012).

¹ Author's e-mail: degizsuzsanna@uni.sapientia.ro

What is learner identity? This concept is defined as the process of becoming and being a learner. Learner identity is all about understanding how learners' emotions, motivations, actions, thoughts and learning are interconnected (see e.g., Barcelos, 2006; Dufva et al., 2011; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013; Inözü, 2018). Dufva and her colleagues (2011, p. 72) state that "in articulating their beliefs about languages and language learning, people draw on, first, their own personal experiences (their unique "language learning history"), second, socially and culturally available (verbal and visual) representations, and third, various situational factors that are present in the situation at hand (including the task and the modality of the expression)".

Luk and Lin emphasize, a person's identity is "highly fluid, sometimes incoherent, fragmented, multiple, and conflicting" (Luk & Lin 2007, p. 21). Moreover, Block (2003, p. 4) also claims that being in contact with other languages and "a new and different cultural setting causes irreversible destabilization of the individuals' sense of self". In other words, it is impossible for a learner's identity not to change while acquiring an additional language, therefore a possible construction and reconstruction happens during learning and acquiring this foreign language. Inözü best summarizes the content of current research studies pointing out that "beliefs bear traces of these multiple contexts, revealing thus their contextual, dynamic and social character" (Inözü, 2018, p. 179).

A number of studies have used interviews, questionnaires, and students' written accounts to discover learner identity and learners' beliefs towards foreign languages. Among these researchers, Ahn (2019) used multimodal analysis to explore students' language learner identity construction and reconstruction. According to her, students' identity changes happen at multiple dimensions, therefore the investigation of their transformations needs to be done through a multimodal analysis, namely to use a combination of different semiotic resources, such as written narratives, images, drawings, even sound or taste, as datasets.

As Brooks (2009) maintains "drawing involves not only one's imagination, but also one's perception of the past and present experiences and observations" (quoted in Inözü, 2018, p. 177). In addition to drawings, written narratives and other modes of communication also help the creation of meaning, through which a student's language learner identity formation can be followed.

In a similar effort, the present research also uses multimodal analysis to discover Hungarian native speaker students' English foreign language learner identity construction, motivations and beliefs. Through the examination of students' self-portraits and their written descriptions, we can get a deeper insight into students' future self (regarding English language use) which mirrors their expectations, needs, attitudes, and motivations. Exploring the way students create their language learner identity clearly gives clues to language teachers on how to understand their motivations and attitude towards a second language. In our opinion, this motivation and desire that a language learner carries and his/her vision about himself/herself when the second language is acquired can be captured using multimodal analysis. Moreover, the task itself, to draw their future selves, might help students to create and establish their vision of the future, which might contribute to their motivation in learning and becoming more proficient in the language.

2. The use of narratives and multimodal analysis

The use of narratives as a research tool has been an important part of humanities and social sciences. Narratives have a fundamental role in the construction of the human self and in the construction of identities. De Fina and Johnstone (2015, pp. 159-160) speak about a “narrative turn” (see also Kalaja, 2015; Barkhuizen, 2011, 2013; Benson, 2014; Barkhuizen et al., 2014), which took place in the 1970s as a challenging alternative to quantitative research methods prevalent in research methodology. From the 1990s narrative-based studies have exponentially grown across the different fields of social sciences, anthropology, psychology, education and applied linguistic research. Although using narratives as methods of collecting data has received several criticisms, its impact “has been generally positive, as it has opened the door to more in-depth qualitative-oriented analysis” (De Fina & Johnstone 2015, p. 160).

In analyzing narratives, the focus can vary from establishing facts to understanding personal, subjective experiences or identity discursive constructions as produced by learners or teachers during their talk, writing or other modes of communication (Kalaja et al. 2013 p. 106).

Current research trends focus on how using narratives can be further developed. One such development suggestion is multimodality, namely the use of a multimodal narrative analysis that takes into account and captures different forms of communication, the interaction of different semiotic modes (such as texts, sounds, images, etc.) combined in a given discourse.

According to van Leeuwen (2015, p. 447) “multimodality designates a phenomenon rather than a theory or a method – the phenomenon that a discourse is almost always multimodal”. Multimodal analysis thus focuses on the similarities and differences of these different semiotic resources and the way they are combined and integrated in multimodal texts. Current interest in multimodality is a result of current ways of communication, making use of multimodal resources such as graphics, images, illustrations etc. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explained that each semiotic mode – written and visual – has its possibilities but also limitations as some things can only be expressed visually, while others rather verbally. Therefore, they suggest that “it might be advisable to complement one type of narrative data with another type or by other types of data altogether, such as interviews, questionnaires and classroom observations” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 46).

Kalaja and Pitkänen-Huhta also underpin the effectiveness of multimodal analysis; as they claim, “visuals are often thought to offer participants an alternative to verbal means to express their experiences and feeling and to reflect on their language practices, identities and learning and teaching processes” (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018, p. 3).

When reviewing studies using narratives and/or multimodal analysis as a method of research in learners’ language identity and learner beliefs we need to take into account the work of Paula Kalaja and her colleagues from Finland, as well as research conducted by So-Yeon Ahn in South Korea.

Kalaja, Alanen and Dufva (2008) explored the possibilities offered by visual narratives by studying first-year university students. Students were asked to draw a portrait of themselves as learners of English (This is what I look like as a learner of English) and they were also asked to interpret their drawings in a few sentences. Later the same research team, Kalaja, Dufva and Alanen (2013) also used drawings and self-portraits “as a less traditional research methodology” (2013, p. 105) in order to examine the learning and teaching of English.

Ahn and West (2016) explored how South Korean learners depict and construct their vision of the identity of good English teachers. The authors used both written and visual narratives to investigate teacher identity and the ideologies related to the notion of a good English teacher. Asking for learners' comments along with the use of visual narratives ensured that the interpretation of the drawings was accurate. Later, Ahn (2019) used multimodal analysis to explore language learner identity construction of university students in South Korea. Data collection involved the drawing of 2 self-portraits, before studying English and what they would look like after mastering the language, both portraits were complemented by written commentaries. Ahn (2019) draws the conclusion that multimodal analysis proves to be effective in getting valuable insights into "the complex dimensions that comprise the English learner identity and the meaning of learning English" (2019, p. 134).

Kalaja (2015) conducted a study among Finnish university students but this time she focused on envisioning the future rather than recollecting past events and experiences. In this study visual narratives were used for envisioning, an issue related to motivation (see Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). At this point, it is necessary to explain the connection between vision and motivation, the motivational dimension of vision. The current socio-dynamic period of foreign language learning motivation research is framed by Dörnyei's self-system theory (2005, 2009). Within this dynamic approach the human self and human action is linked and "the notion of possible selves offers the most powerful, and at the same time the most versatile, motivational self-mechanism" (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014, p. 11). Dörnyei's self-system (2005, 2009) is a complex theory comprising the future/futuristic ideas learners have about themselves, what they would or wouldn't like to become and how the target language can help them in attaining their ideal future self. From an educational perspective, learners' ideal self, which represents their hopes and aspirations, are of utmost importance. As Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014, p. 12) state "someone who has a powerful ideal self [...] can use this self-image as a potent self-guide with considerable motivational power", thus the envisioning of the ideal future self has the capacity to motivate action.

Narratives can therefore be used not only to talk about past events and memories but also to imagine and visualize the future. They help individuals to recall and preserve memories, to connect people with their past and present and envision their future (Barkhuizen, 2013, p. 4).

According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries online a vision in this sense is "the ability to think about or plan the future with great imagination and intelligence"² or, based on the Oxford powered Lexico site, it also carries the meaning of "a vivid mental image, especially a fanciful one of the future"³. Based on Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014, p. 9), it is "this directional nature of the vision, the pull towards an imagined future state that makes the concept useful within the context of human motivation, because the attractive visionary target mobilizes present potential in order to move in the preferred future direction, that is to change in order to appropriate the future". This is how vision and drawing future-self portraits might capture the psychological concept of possible selves or changing learner identity (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014, p. 20).

² <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/vision?q=vision>

³ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/vision>

3. Data collection procedure and analysis

In order to explore the construction and possible reconstruction of Hungarian native speaker students' English foreign language identity, their self-portraits and written accounts were analysed.

A total of 56 elementary school students participated in the research: 20 students from the 8th grade, 18 from the 9th grade and another 18 from the 10th grade. All the students are Hungarian native-speakers and learn in one of the prestigious schools in Csíkszereda (Miercurea-Ciuc). All the students started learning English as a foreign language in the 3rd grade, so by the time of the research they had been studying English for 5 to 7 years. All the participants have two English classes a week. Based on their teachers' account, the students' level of English ranged between pre-intermediate and intermediate, therefore when the students were asked to provide a written explanation of their drawings, they were allowed to use either English (the target language) or Hungarian (their mother tongue).

Data collection was carried out during April and May 2021. Unfortunately, in this period, due to the COVID-19 situation, most of the schools in Romania were required to perform education online. Therefore, in all cases the form masters were contacted and asked for help in distributing the task. The instructions were sent online to the students and they were asked to complete it, and then, take a photo of it and send it back. A document was prepared with two columns and students were asked to draw self-portraits to present themselves 'before' and 'after' mastering (being able to use) the language. The instruction was the following: *Please draw how you see yourself before you learnt English/when you couldn't speak English and how you see yourself in the future when you have already learnt English (Me when I didn't speak English and Me in the future, when I can speak English)*. No clues were given to students how to complete the task; anything they drew was done based on their personal beliefs and experiences throughout the years of learning the language. When the self-portraits were done, students were asked to give a detailed written explanation of the two self-portraits.

We took into account the size, the posture and the salience of figures and items in the self-portraits and the all the associated objects in the picture as well as the narratives embedded in bubbles or without bubbles. Self-portraits were analysed based on the multiple dimensions discussed by Ahn (2019), namely: emotional, physical, vocational, relational and experimental. First, the differences between the 'before/after' drawings were examined in an effort to identify those territories where change can be detected, then self-portraits were also checked for common features that might shape a general belief that these students hold. After analysing the self-portraits, the students' narrative accounts that were to explain their drawings were also examined. Some additional information could be decoded regarding their experiences and beliefs and how they see themselves as English language learners. Through this multimodal analysis, we could get a deeper insight into the students' vision, future language-self and their beliefs regarding the use or non-use of English as a foreign language.

4. Results and discussion

In what follows results will be presented and discussed along the multiple dimensions listed above: emotional, physical, vocational, relational and experiential ones (see Ahn, 2019). The aforementioned dimensions refer to their everyday meaning, while the data analysis aims to exemplify and clarify them below.

4.1 Emotional or psychological changes

The most predominant change was emotional or psychological, as most students expressed their mood changes from sadness to happiness. Out of the 56 respondents, 22 students expressed emotional changes in their self-portraits (eleven 8th graders, seven 9th graders and four 10th graders).



Figure 1 & 2. Emotional changes from sad to happy

In Figure 1 and 2 above you can see some examples in which emotional changes predominate. While Figure 1 is simpler, the student's face changing from sad to happy, in Figure 2 a student expressed his emotions by the means of weather conditions. His past or current language learner identity is expressed with the use of dark clouds and rain. We can see how colours also add to the meaning-making process, as the student used dark colours to present how he feels about not knowing English. As opposed to the 'before' part, in the second picture we can see the use of bright colours to express the happiness of the student. The sun and sunshine mirror the satisfaction that is the result of his being able to speak English. From his written explanation we could find out that the image of the student accompanied by another ghost-like person in the back was meant to suggest that he has basically two identities, one Hungarian and one English, which unite in one person. The caption written by the student "I have become two people" also suggests that being able to speak two languages means having double identity. If we take a closer look at the portrait, some physical changes can also be detected, namely, in size, expressing physical growth and the fact that acquiring a language takes time.

4.2 Physical changes

Regarding the size of the body and the clothing, many students drew themselves taller in the ‘after’ part and their appearance suggested a more mature person. Out of the 56 participants, 19 students indicated some kind of physical change in their ‘after’ portraits.



Figure 3 & 4. Physical changes associated with language learning

As shown in Figure 3 and 4, both students see themselves as children or youngsters when they did not speak the language; they see themselves as people with limitations, doubts and questions. This is expressed by the use of many question marks around their body and in the thought bubble as well. In the after pictures, when they are able to use the language, they are depicted as mature people, with their hair arranged, wearing make-up, elegant clothes and even high-heels (see Figure 3). These after pictures also suggest, similarly to Figure 2 above, that language learning takes time and brings about developmental changes – from a young childish identity to a mature grown-up person. The question marks also disappear from the after parts suggesting that instead of being lost and insecure, they are more self-confident adults who can address the audience or their conversation partner in English. Examining the written accounts, it also turned out that the stylish, classy look, in case of Figure 4, also referred to the students’ language knowledge. As she explained: “It is more stylish and classier to use well elaborated English sentences”. Besides the self-portraits depicted in Figure 3 and 4, many other learners presented their identity construction through physical growth and becoming adults dressed in business-style clothes. Therefore, changes in age, hair-style, look and clothing might also be related not only to growth in terms of age, but also professionally.

4.3 Vocational changes

Respondents’ written accounts helped us better understand their self-portraits. Out of the 56 participants, only 2 students indicated the importance of English in their life in terms of an easier life, profession and job, writing that “English takes you forward in life”, “you can get a job more easily”, “you can get a job abroad”. The small number of students reflecting on the job or work-related advantages of speaking English can probably be explained by the respondents’

age. The age of participating students ranged between 14 and 16 and it might be possible that the use of English from a vocational perspective is not among their utmost concerns.

The two students whose self-portraits include such a vocational dimension were 10th graders. One of the students drew and wrote that when he did not know English, it was out of the question to think and plan outside of school (see Figure 5 'before' part). In the 'after' part of the self-portrait, he drew himself sitting in an office at a table and working with computers and papers. He also explained that he imagined himself as an employee of the Apple company where he had a good position and was a respected person (see Figure 5 'after' part).



Figure 5 & 6. Vocational changes

The girl, whose self-portraits can be seen in Figure 6, drew a rather complex picture which suggests that before learning English she couldn't understand online contents when surfing the internet, couldn't buy ice-cream while on vacation (possibly abroad), couldn't have a conversation with foreign people and needed to dictionary to understand song lyrics. The more mature woman, as she presented her future-self, is shown as having money (or a well-paid job), being able to travel all over the world, graduating university, having friends or being among (possibly foreign) people and being able to read books, probably in English. Therefore, being able to speak English, in the girls' perspective, means traveling, relations, money, studying, and success in education.

4.4 Relational changes

As it could be seen in Figure 6 above, conversation with and being around foreign people seems to be important for many of the respondents. Next to the emotional and physical changes, relational changes could often be traced among the self-portraits gathered from participants. 22 students' portraits indicate such change. In the vision of numerous students, learning English equals with a wide social network, therefore from our participants' perspective, being able to speak English is shown to offer the chance to establish relationships with people from other cultures. Due to the ability to speak English, the portraits of desperate and lonely students were transformed into confident individuals engaged in active conversations with people from other countries. Relational changes are most often visualized by being alone in the 'before' part and being surrounded by people in the 'after' part of the self-portraits.

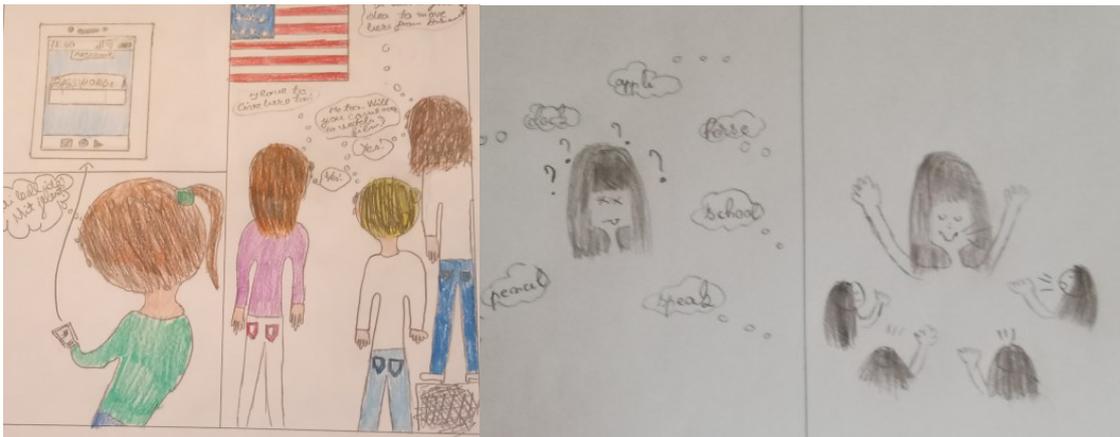


Figure 7 & 8. Relational changes

Taking a look at Figure 7 and 8 above, we can have a glimpse of how these relationships with foreign people might form the language learner identity of our students. As we can see in both portraits, the ‘before’ part presents learners who are alone, searching for words, with the tips of the mouth turned downward, suggesting sadness. In Figure 7 we can see a puzzled girl, standing alone with her back to the audience. She is trying to use her phone but, according to what she wrote in the speech bubbles, she couldn’t manage using it. The student presented herself as a person who cannot succeed alone, without English language knowledge. The text she wrote into the speech bubble is: “What do I have to write here? What does it mean?”. In the written explanation she stated that she “can’t even use an application on her own”. However, in the ‘after’ part of the portrait the student drew herself surrounded by other people and expressed her willingness to move to the USA. She seems confident about establishing relationships in the States as well.

In the second set of portraits (see Figure 8), we can observe the struggle of a school girl. Instead of two open eyes, there are two X letters which might suggest that she is puzzled, as she does not understand the meanings of the words in English surrounding her. As opposed to this picture, in the ‘after’ section, we can see a happy girl with her arms open and waving. She drew herself as being in the middle of a group of people who are talking with one another.

Self-portraits visualizing these relational changes suggest that the students who drew these portraits perceive the ability of speaking English as access to the world and as a possibility to establish relationships with people from abroad. An earlier study published by Dégi and Kovasch (2021), which analysed university students’ motivations for learning English language, found that the participants wanted to become global citizens rather than integrate with a native speaking community (2021, p. 581). Our participants’ drawings, especially those in which relational and experiential changes can be traced, also tend to offer an image of global citizens, as students drew their envisioned selves as being surrounded by foreign people, talking to them in English. Moreover, participants’ visual and written accounts often contain the image of a globe, or the notion of the world. However, in Figure 7, the student’s wish to move to the US might also suggest some willingness to integrate into the native speaking community.

4.5 Experiential changes

The visual and written narratives which were grouped under the experiential category contained images and expressions related to travel, shopping, online and broadcast media consumption, listening to music, surfing the internet, etc. Out of the total 56 narratives received 13 respondents visualized or worded such experiential changes.



Figure 9 & 10. Experiential changes

Figure 9 above was created by a 10th grader. Again, it is a complex drawing in terms of the different dimensions along which changes can be observed. While the 'before' part presents a young girl with a puzzled look on her face, her swirly eyes also suggest dizziness or disorientation. In contrast, the 'after' part shows a mature woman with clear eyes, and images in her brain might suggest the things that she can do after being able to speak English, namely travelling, using the internet and reading; the bright lightbulb is suggestive of knowledge, probably active use of her English language knowledge. The student's written account explains that she considers English important, as it offers plenty of new possibilities, such as making new friends, traveling around the world, seeing the sights. In order to have access to these possibilities, she wrote, speaking English is a key factor, as it is necessary in order to build relationships with people speaking other languages. She also mentioned that her biggest dream is to travel the world, however she wants to speak English well not only because of this, but because she would like to develop personally and she would also like to learn another world language.

As it was previously mentioned, media consumption (watching TV, listening to music, surfing the internet, etc.) was grouped under the dimension of experiential changes. There were respondents who emphasized that speaking English contributes to the understanding and use of different online applications, programs or websites. Figure 10 above is another example visualizing experiential changes. It was done by a 9th grader who, in her written account, explained that speaking English is necessary to understand the lyrics of songs, as well as certain applications. She further mentioned that it is important for one to speak English in order to find his/her own way in life, in order to meet new cultures, make new friends and to read and understand world literature. In the 'before' part we can see a black and white image of a little girl who looks worried and sad. In the 'after' part, however, we can see a young woman surrounded by all the things she can do using English. The objects and symbols around her

suggest what speaking English means for her, the advantages of language knowledge as she perceives them – knowledge (brain), traveling (globe), listening to music (musical notes, guitar, headset, Youtube), new friends and relationships (colourful people).

5. Conclusions

As the self-portraits and their written descriptions have shown, the students who participated in this study have a positive attitude towards the English language. The ‘after’ parts of respondents’ self-portraits express students’ beliefs about language knowledge and motivations to speak English. Interestingly, getting a job abroad and thus earning more money was not among the most often occurring topics; rather, the students emphasized traveling and establishing relationships, interacting with people from other cultures. Some of the students pointed out that articles, scientific content and information in general is more accessible in English than in Hungarian, therefore English language knowledge also contributes to the quality of students’ essays and home assignments. Another student pointed out that the literature on some subjects is richer in English and many expressions are available only in English. A number of students brought up the topic of holidays; these students would like to become more fluent in English so as to avoid or overcome foreign language speaking anxiety when travelling abroad. A number of students are motivated to learn English by the pursuit of free time and leisure activities such as listening to music, watching movies and videos distributed on several social media sites.

As the above presented results show, our students’ language learner identity construction can be traced along multiple dimensions: emotional, relational, physical, vocational and experiential ones. Out of these dimensions, the emotional and relational changes were the most frequently observed; however, as could be seen in the examples above, many self-portraits were rather complex, expressing changes over several dimensions.

A general idea that could sum up the students’ visions of their future selves is that being able to speak English makes them happy and confident. Also, the drawings acknowledge the fact that language learning takes time, as presented through the physical changes recorded between the ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures.

The multiple aspects of the development of a language learner’s identity recorded in the drawings show the potential of multimodal analysis as a tool for examining the way how students construct and reconstruct their learner identity. As we discussed earlier, visual images accompanied by their written description have allowed us to get a deeper insight and understanding of the students’ language learner identity. Especially in the case of the more abstract drawings written accounts helped to understand students’ intentions and ideas.

Applying multimodal analysis has not only allowed us, teachers and researchers, to get an insight into students’ language identity, as well as to learn about how they envision their future selves and what motivational factors appear in their future self-images. This task – asking students to visualize their future – is also said to have a motivational role, by providing driving force that can encourage the participants to pursue the goals they envision in their future self-images (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). Multimodal analysis does not only contribute to uncover students’ identity constructs and beliefs, but the exercise that the students were given may also help them in creating their vision for the future. This relationship between vision,

language identity and motivation can also offer a fresh perspective on language teaching, where teachers are encouraged to adapt this vision-based approach to their specific classroom contexts.

More and more scholars are involved in this line of research concerning vision, future self-images and the motivational side of vision, however there is a need for more empirical classroom-based research in order to see how theoretical insights and proposals can be turned into action and integrated into the teaching practice. Regarding the present study, it would be interesting to see the reactions of these learners after reviewing their portraits one year later, or at certain time intervals. They might want to update or reaffirm their visions, thus ensuring that their self-image is regularly activated – one of the conditions Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014, p. 14) mention as a prerequisite in generating a vision that has the capacity to lead to action.

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