

Migration, language learning and identity formation: personal growth in the part-time PhD journey

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Abstract of the Article

The personal motivation behind my PhD journey is deeply connected with my own experiences as a migrant and language learner. Having relocated to England with the aspiration of teaching English as an additional language, I faced significant challenges, not least of which was mastering English and building the confidence to teach it as a non-native speaker. These challenges mirrored some of those of my research participants, allowing me to approach my study with empathy and insight. The PhD process has been instrumental in encouraging my self-assurance and legitimizing my role in the academic and teaching communities. It has not only advanced my professional development but also enriched my personal growth, enabling me to realise my lifelong dream with a renewed sense of purpose and confidence.

My PhD journey has helped me grow both personally and professionally by overcoming some of my long-lasting as well as some newly developed insecurities. This article will elaborate on the three key areas. First, how my studies helped me find my own sense of belonging. Second, the connection between learning about my research participants and learning about myself. And third, how this journey has helped me reflect on, understand, and appreciate my cultural heritage and subsequently made me a more confident teacher of English as an additional language.

The purpose of this paper is to critically reflect on how my PhD journey has facilitated personal growth, deepened my understanding of the connections between my research and lived experiences, and enhanced my confidence as a non-native language teacher, while contributing to the broader academic discourse on reflexivity, identity, and pedagogy.

Keywords

language learning
identity formation
migrant experiences
non native teachers
language investment
self reflection
cultural identity
belonging and identity

Introduction

To understand the role of my PhD journey, its impact on my personal and professional development, my insecurities and how my PhD has helped me face them, it is important to understand my background.

I was born into a Russian-speaking family in Lithuania in 1986, during the Soviet Union era. Yet, even though Lithuania was our home and our home country, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992 it became not unusual for myself, my family and my friends to be called 'occupants' because of our Russian decent. Additionally, it was not uncommon for us to be called foreigners when visiting our extended family in Moscow since we were traveling on a tourist visa and spoke Russian with a Baltic accent. Therefore, this identity conflict in my childhood left me questioning where I belonged, and it became even more acute after I moved to England in 2009.

At the time of writing this reflection, I feel content living in England, living with my spouse and two children, aged eleven and thirteen. Although we wanted our children to be able to speak both Russian and English, this did not happen for a variety of reasons, and they do not speak Russian today. There have been times when I have felt guilty, ashamed, and embarrassed for not persevering to preserve our cultural identity in our children sufficiently. This feeling was especially exacerbated when con-

ducting interviews with some of my research participants who shared their experiences of putting a lot of effort into making sure their children spoke their heritage language well. A more detailed explanation of my PhD project will be provided in a following section.

Another significant insecurity was related to my career. I work as a teacher of English as an additional language, a profession I have aspired to since the age of six, even though I could not speak English at that time myself. Nevertheless, I enjoyed learning it and was good at it at school. I later received a scholarship to attend a private American/International University in Lithuania, and I gained a BA degree in English Language and Literature. At that time, I had no problems with my confidence using English and even finding English tutoring jobs. However, upon relocating to England permanently and seeking a stable teaching position, I began to question my legitimacy as a teacher of a language that was not my mother tongue. This struggle with self-perception is common among many non-native English-speaking teachers (non-NESTs) while feeling the pressure to meet native-like proficiency standards with a fact that applications for teaching posts from even highly qualified and experienced non-NESTs often get turned down in favour of NESTs with no comparable credentials' (Medgyes, 2020, p. 36). However, how did these obstacles shape my academic journey, and what role did my PhD research play in overcoming them?

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In the following section, I will discuss the insights and strategies that emerged from this process, offering a closer look at how they helped shape my approach. I will also provide an overview of my PhD project, detailing its objectives and relevance to this journey.

What is my Ph.D. about?

The title of my project is: Baltic female migrants, their language experiences and their investment in language learning. By utilising the Model of Investment first developed by Bonny Norton Peirce in 1995 (Peirce, 1995) and then further extended by Darwin and Norton in 2015 (Darvin and Norton, 2015), I am aiming to answer the question - To what extent my participants invest and are invested in language learning of the host country?

Thus, by investigating the role of identity, ideologies, and capital, I aim to understand my participants' decisions, priorities, and their investment in learning English. Darwin and Norton (2015) describe ideologies as 'dominant ways of thinking' (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p. 44) shaped by communities and governments, influencing language policy and migrants' motivation to learn. Capital that can include linguistic, social, and material resources, is personally held by migrants but can lose value through migration. Identity, meanwhile, is fluid and shaped by personal aspirations and societal expectations based on factors like gender and ethnicity (Darvin and Norton, 2015). Together, these dynamics shape learners' investment as a 'negotiation of power in different fields' (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p.37).

Figure 1 is a snapshot of one of my slides that I presented at the Research Students' Education Conference (RSEC) at the University of Leeds on July 18th, 2024. This snapshot outlines my theoretical framework, my data collection and data analysis.

To answer my empirical research question, I decided to conduct a longitudinal narrative inquiry with six women (two from Lith-

uania, two from Latvia and two from Estonia). To generate the data, I utilised three different tools: the clock task, three weekly journal entries, and three semi-structured interviews, conducted over a period of eighteen months from start to finish. The first round of interviews took place in around October 2023. Five interviews took place online and one interview was conducted face-to face, in my participant's home. Before our interviews I asked my participants to complete the clock task which was two pages with two empty clock faces. My participants had to indicate what they would do during any two chosen days hour by hour and what languages would surround them during those activities. This task gave me a good idea of their daily routines and the languages around them. It was also a good way to prepare my participants to start writing their journal entries. In their journal entries, they were asked to write about similar things but in more detail and to do this for seven days, three times over a period of approximately eighteen months, which was approximately the time between our first and last interview. Despite my worries that my participants would find these tasks burdensome and would not wish to complete them, most of my participants embraced them with enthusiasm and the information they shared in these tasks, gave me a more intimate insight into their daily lives, their emotions, feelings and reflections. This was also a good way of staying in touch with my participants between our interviews.

What did I learn while doing my research and how did it help me develop myself and deal with my insecurities?

Identity and belonging

While conducting my literature review, preparing for my data collection and subsequently for my data analysis I learnt that

'... identity is a struggle of habitus and desire, of competing ideologies and imagined identities' (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p. 45)

About my PhD Research

Title: *Baltic female migrants, their language experiences and their investment in language learning.*

6 participants

18 months

To what extent my participants invest and are invested in language learning of the host country?

Theoretical Framework

DATA COLLECTION:

- The Clock Task
- Three interviews
- 21 Journal entries

Data analysis

Empirical Question

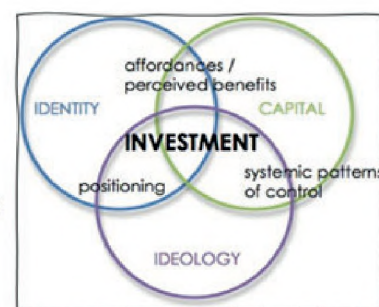


Figure 1. Darwin and Norton's, 2015 Extended Model of Investment.

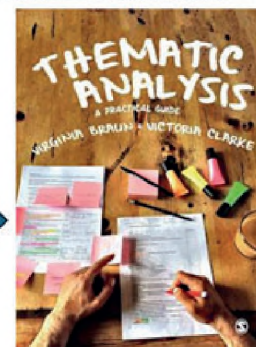


Figure 2. Braun and Clarke, 2021. Thematic Analysis.

and after listening to my participants' stories, some of their points really struck me. For example, Mila (a pseudonym chosen by the participant) explained that home, for her, wasn't tied to a specific geographical location but was wherever she was with her husband and son.

Ana

А как вы себя... Где ваш дом? (original, Russian)

How do you ... Where is your home? (translation, English)

Mila

Там, где моя семья. Где мои мальчики. (original, Russian)

Where my family is. Where my boys are. (translation, English)(P6 R3 Transcript, Pos. 255-258)

As a result, in response to the question of my own sense of belonging - whether I am Russian, Lithuanian, a Russian from Lithuania, or perhaps now British - I found myself choosing not to attach too strongly to any of these identities. According to Darwin and Norton's (2015) Extended Framework of Investment, belonging is shaped by the investments we make in social groups and communities, as well as the recognition we receive in return. My decision reflects an awareness that investing too much into any one identity might lead to a sense of exclusion if that investment is not shared or valued. By not fixing myself too firmly to a particular cultural or national identity, I am seeking a balance that avoids the potential risks of feeling unanswered in my efforts to belong. This way, I can maintain a degree of psychological safety, staying open to the multiple facets of my identity without feeling limited to a single category or community.

This realisation led me to shift my thinking: understanding that my sense of belonging and identity are more closely connected to the relationships and bonds I share with my family rather than any specific country, culture, or nationality. My family's consistent support and shared experiences have become the core of my sense of belonging, providing a form of security and validation that is independent of national boundaries. This focus allows me to appreciate the fluidity of belonging, where identity is not bound by rigid definitions but can adapt and evolve with the meaningful connections, I hold most dear.

Identity and ideologies

One of my other concerns was regarding not pushing my children to speak my mother tongue. However, I later realized that my discomfort stemmed less from the fact that they did

not speak the language and more from the commentary surrounding it. To me, this resonated with how Darwin and Norton explained:

'... ideologies are dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion, and the privileging and marginalization of ideas, people, and relations' (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p. 44)

I also understood that while some ideologies or 'dominant ways of thinking' (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p.43) can play a significant role in organizing and stabilizing people and societies they can simultaneously construct 'modes of inclusion and exclusion' (Darvin and Norton, 2015 p.43). Therefore, while shaping the criteria for inclusion and belonging within a community certain ideologies can prescribe certain norms and expectations, such as language or cultural practices. These dominant ideologies can influence how individuals are perceived and accepted by others, and, at times, can lead to the marginalization of those who do not align with these norms. This awareness led me to reconsider my own positioning, especially regarding the societal expectations surrounding my children's linguistic abilities. Rather than allowing the dominant ideology - one that might equate a connection to heritage with fluency in a mother tongue - to dictate my feelings about my children's identity, I chose to reject these external judgments. I decided instead to focus on the broader sense of belonging experienced through my children's, strengths, passions, and their values that define their character. I am proud of my children, not for meeting the criteria imposed by ideologies, but for being confident and multifaceted individuals, whose worth is not limited to their linguistic repertoire or cultural heritage.

Identity, capital and orders of indexicality

Finally, the last insecurity that I mentioned before, was in relation to my career working as a teacher of English as an additional language. However, before explaining how my PhD has helped me to resolve it, it might be important to look into what might have contributed to it in the first place.

At the start of my career, I did not have difficulties finding teaching jobs. I tutored in Lithuania and worked in two summer schools in England before getting married and permanently moving to the UK. However, after relocating to England and starting to look for a more permanent and stable job I started noticing that many of those jobs were looking for native or native-level English speakers. Although the 'native speaker fallacy' introduced by Phillipson in 1992 has sparked a lot of discussion in the academic literature, even in the 21st century, it still appears to persist.

We are currently looking to recruit two professional, pro-active and native-level speaking EFL teachers who are creative and passionate about teaching to start in mid-September 2024. Experience with teaching General English and Cambridge exam classes to young learners, teenagers and adults is necessary. The position is for native-level speaking English teachers with CELTA or equivalent, preferably a degree, and 1 year experience.

FIGURE 2A. JOB POSTING FROM SCHOOL IN SPAIN, JULY 2024.

English & I Co., Ltd. is looking for full time native level English speaking teachers for our Kindergarten and Primary programmes in Lopburi, Thailand. We offer a full-time contract with the salary of 40,000 baht per month* and a performance related bonus of up to 25,000 baht, on the completion of the contract (2 full school terms). Teachers will also get 4 weeks of paid holiday per the year (2 weeks in April, 1 week in October and at least a week around Christmas and New Year) + Thai holidays.

FIGURE 2B. JOB POSTING FROM SCHOOL IN THAILAND, JULY 2024.

On the next page are snapshots of two current job postings from schools in Spain (fig. 2a) and in Thailand (fig. 2b), both looking for native-level speaking English teachers. Although these examples are more current and are not from the time when I started to build my career in England, they still reflect the situation I was facing at that time and therefore I felt it would be appropriate to use them today.

Although it was more than a decade ago when the same prerequisites instilled in me doubt, fear and uncertainty it was only today, at the time of writing this article, that I decided to check and understand the meaning of native-level English speaker. For this, I looked up the definition of a 'native speaker'. What I found was not surprising but unsettling at the same time.

According to the online Cambridge dictionary a 'native speaker is someone who has spoken a particular language since they were a baby, rather than having learned it as a child or adult' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2004) providing with a sentence as an example using this phrase reading - 'All our teachers are native speakers of English' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2004). Therefore, subconsciously knowing that I would never become a native speaker and not knowing the criteria or a definition of a good enough native-level English speaker, now I understand why I started doubting myself and asking if I was a legitimate teacher of English after all.

While doing my PhD, I realised that this resonated with Blommaert's (2007) orders of indexicality, which according to Blommaert are 'stratified and impose differences in value onto the different modes of semiosis' (p.120) and that can 'systematically give preference to some over others and exclude or disqualify particular modes' (Blommaert, 2007, p.120). In my experience building a career as a teacher of English as an additional language, I often felt that my skills, education, and expertise were being measured against, and at times overshadowed by, my status as a non-native speaker. Therefore, I needed something that would be better and bigger than the fact that I wasn't a native English speaker.

I thought that getting a good education in the UK could be the way forward. Hence, I took up a master's degree in English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Education at the University of Leeds. After my first year of the part time study, I finally managed to get a permanent teaching job, and I am convinced that it was all thanks to doing the degree. However, that wasn't enough as many of my new students would still ask me where I was from when meeting me for the first time. This was still making me uncomfortable. Therefore, I knew I needed to do more, and I decided to do a PhD as I knew that many countries including China, value academia with high regard (China Daily, 2020). In addition, I also needed to improve my English to the level when fewer students would ask or care about where I was from. I am sure I wasn't wrong about that. Even though, at the time of writing this article, I am still in the process of doing my PhD, the situation has already started to improve. Fewer and fewer students are asking me about my origins, and I worry less and less about it even if and when they do. I understand that my English and academic skills have improved substantially, and my confidence has grown perhaps subsequently changing the way I position myself as well as I am being positioned by others. A combination of these factors, alongside many others, has been instrumental in my personal and professional growth throughout this journey. Engaging deeply with questions of identity, belonging, and the influence of ideologies has not only

shaped my research but has also prompted significant self-reflection and personal evolution. Whether or not I ultimately complete my PhD successfully, I am confident that the journey itself has already been a profound achievement. This process has allowed me to confront and resolve some of my key insecurities, find a deeper sense of clarity in my values, and embrace the complexities of my identity. I am immensely grateful for the impact that this journey has had on me - both as a scholar and as an individual - and for the way it has challenged me to think beyond traditional frameworks and embrace a broader, more inclusive perspective. This growth, in many ways, feels like an achievement in its own right, and I look forward to carrying these insights with me into whatever comes next.

Reflection on the conference participation

Reflecting on my participation in the RSEC at the University of Leeds, has been a truly transformative experience. This conference not only encouraged me to think about my personal and professional growth but also prompted a deep, reflective, and epistemological consideration of my own experiences. This reflection has been an eye-opening, enriching, and, to a certain extent, a brave endeavour, as I confronted my vulnerabilities publicly and in front of other academics.

While analysing my participants' experiences throughout my PhD journey has become a routine practice, applying the same level of scrutiny to my own experiences was a novel and somewhat unsettling process. Preparing for this conference forced me to confront my own stories in a way that I had not done before. This process of reflection was both enlightening and unnerving as for some reason, it was easier for me to discuss the experiences of my participants than my own. In preparation for the presentation, I felt as if I was exposing a part of myself that I had kept hidden for a very long time, leaving me feeling as if I was standing 'naked' in front of the audience. Could it be that while talking about my research and my participants, I forgot how to talk about myself?

Despite over a decade of working as a teacher, where public speaking has become my second nature, this particular presentation felt different. In previous academic presentations, I rarely needed to rely on a script, but this time, I clung to it for dear life. I even questioned whether I had lost all my confidence or if I was experiencing some signs of menopause. In hindsight, I realised that it was the anxiety and the fear of judgment or pity that amplified my nervousness.

My anxiety did not lessen during the presentation as it usually does. Typically, my nerves dissolve once I begin speaking, but this time, the nervousness persisted until the end. I found myself wondering if I was more worried about the audience's reaction or my supervisor's feedback. It was only during the question-and-answer period that my nerves began to calm down. My colleagues' interest and lack of judgment were reassuring, and I finally began to feel at ease. This interaction was a turning point, as it validated my efforts and helped me overcome the insecurities that had plagued me throughout the preparation and delivery of my presentation.

Reflecting on this experience, I realise once again that I have achieved something significant. By challenging and sharing my vulnerabilities, I have tackled my insecurities head-on. This presentation was not just about overcoming past insecurities, it was also about facing a new insecurity - the fear of sharing my personal life with my academic colleagues. I realised, that while

speaking about overcoming previous insecurities, I was simultaneously dealing with a fresh one. Perhaps, this dual process of reflection has been one of the most validating experiences of my PhD.

This conference has reinforced the importance of vulnerability and humbleness in my personal and professional development. I always believed that talking about oneself was easy, yet this experience has taught me otherwise. It was one of the hardest tasks I have undertaken so far, but I am immensely grateful for having done it. This experience has made me feel stronger, more secure, and braver. It has renewed my enthusiasm for my PhD work and provided me with a deeper understanding of my participants' experiences. Furthermore, it reminded me that my PhD is not only about my participants and the global research, but also about me, so it should not be a lonely time full of imposter syndrome.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this paper has provided a critical reflection on the transformative impact of my PhD journey. Through this process, I have explored how my studies have allowed me to find a sense of belonging, draw meaningful connections between my research participants' experiences and gain a deeper appreciation for my own. This self-reflection has not only enhanced my personal growth but also empowered me to become a more confident and reflective teacher of English as an additional language. Furthermore, my participation in the RSEC where I presented these experiences has offered an invaluable platform for sharing insights and engaging with broader academic conversations on identity, migration and education. Ultimately, this paper highlights the importance of reflexivity in the academic experience, revealing how research and personal narratives can interconnect to shape both the researcher's scholarly contributions and their own personal and professional development.

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