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Identity alignment on an ESOL class blog

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[Forthcoming in International Journal of Applied Linguistics]

ABSTRACT

This paper concerns a multilingual adult learner of English, Shahedah, and her written interaction on the class blog of her English language course. Lesson observations revealed that the pedagogic use of the blog did not enable the development of new learner identity positions for students in Shahedah's class, often cited as an affordance of electronic media in language learning contexts. Moreover conventional classroom hierarchies were reproduced in interaction on the blog. Comprising an analysis of online written discourse, spoken interaction and life history interview, this study examines how blog interaction displays identity alignment – that is, identity positions offered and claimed online align with those in other learning contexts. Shahedah aspires to further study, and the paper points to implications of electronic media for academic literacy.

KEYWORDS

identity; ESOL; blog; migration; literacy

Este artículo concierne una estudiante adulta de inglés, Shahedah, y su interacción escrita en el blog de su curso de inglés. Observaciones de la clase pusieron en manifiesto que el uso pedagógico no posibilitaron el desarrollo de posiciones nuevas en la identidad de los estudiantes en la clase de Shahedah, algo citado a menudo como una facilidad de los medios electrónicos en contextos del aprendizaje de idiomas. Además las jerarquías convencionales del aula eran reproducidas en las interacciones el blog. Constatando de un análisis del discurso escrito en línea, la interacción oral y una entrevista biográfica, este trabajo examina como la interacción expone alienación de identidad – es decir, posiciones de identidad que son ofrecidas y reclamadas en línea se alienan con esas en otros contextos de aprendizaje. Shahedah aspira a más estudios, y este artículo señala a implicaciones en habilidades académicas en los medios electrónicos.

PALABRAS CLAVES

Identidad; ESOL; blog; migración; lectoescritura

INTRODUCTION

Global society in the post-colonial age is characterised by international movements of people, many of whom come to English-dominant countries with a need to learn English. One might assume that life in a new language and culture will also entail new ways of constructing identity in discourse. For example, while on a course of study, migrant learners of English might encounter types of electronic communication that open up new options for the expression of identity. Conversely, despite the new context, identities might align with more traditional, established relations between a teacher and her students. This paper investigates identity in a class of adult migrant learners, as constructed in the class blog of their English language course. Within the case of the class blog, I focus attention on one particular student, Shahedah, and her use of the blog, particularly in interaction with her teacher, Carol. Recent research into the pedagogic use of blogs in language learning contexts has tended to emphasise the way new literacy technologies can enable students to claim identity positions that extend beyond the limited ones offered to them by policy and institutions. With reference to blog posts,

informal talk in class, a life history interview, and interviews with her teacher, I conclude that rather than offering Shahedah a broader range of identity positions, interaction on the blog actually serves to reproduce well-established classroom hierarchies. Because Shahedah has ambitions for further study beyond her English class, the findings have implications for access to academic literacy for Shahedah and students like her. I maintain that to be successful, Shahedah needs to move beyond a model of literacy that focuses on surface accuracy in writing (Street's 'autonomous' literacy), and develop her identity as a writer on a deeper, more critical level.

BACKGROUND: MIGRATION, LEARNER IDENTITY AND BLOGGING

Adult migrants who find themselves in English language classes in the UK come from a hugely diverse range of geographical, social and economic backgrounds, and include refugees seeking asylum, people from well-established communities, so-called economic migrants escaping poverty in their home countries, and people joining their families. For adult migrant language learners, identity is far from being a banal matter. For identity – who and what you are – is constructed both *by* and *in* language, and in migration contexts, the doing of identity happens in a new culture and a new language. As Block says of migration:

It is in this context, more than other contexts, that one's identity and sense of self are put on the line, not least because most factors that are familiar to the individual – sociohistorically, socioculturally, sociolinguistically and linguistically – have disappeared and been replaced by new ones. In this situation individuals must reconstruct and redefine themselves if they are to adapt to their new circumstances.

(Block 2007: 5)

Given the social and political debates that surround migration, its intersection with language learning and identity is an area of current relevance for applied linguistics, and there is a social and pedagogical need to understand the linguistic expression of migrant identities.

Migration and learner identity

For some time academics have taken an interest in the linguistic experiences and identity construction of migrants (Norton 2000, Barker and Galasinski 2001, Baynham and de Fina 2005), although in policy and practice the diverse backgrounds of migrant learners of English are not well appreciated or understood (Cooke and Simpson 2008), let alone the nature of their emergent linguistic and language learning identities. When attempting to achieve an awareness of the identities of people whose lives are in flux, it is appropriate to view identity itself as flexible and non-permanent, as something that is constructed in discourse. A broadly constructivist approach to identity and its continual remaking is taken by many sociolinguists and applied linguists currently studying migration and identity (e.g. Block 2006, Clary-Lemon 2010), and follows a well-established constructivist understanding of identity in social sciences generally. Some writers extend the study of identity (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004; Blommaert 2005), still viewing it as an interactional accomplishment, produced and negotiated in discourse, yet incorporating an explicit concern with power relations. This line of enquiry – pursued in this paper – “illuminates ways in which particular identities are legitimized or devalued in the context of global and local political economies” (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004: 13).

Broadly constructivist accounts of language learner identity have highlighted ways in which learners of all stripes claim new identity positions (Norton 2000 in relation to investment in language learning; Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009 regarding motivation and the L2 self). A constructivist understanding of learner identity also needs to account for occasions when identities in interaction align with identity positions claimed in other discursive events, for example in an autobiographical interview. Identities may be newly constructed in a particular event; however, they may well have been rehearsed on other occasions – perhaps many other occasions – and over time may have become quite stable for the teller (cf Butler 1999: 43 on the ‘congealing’ of gender in discourse). Participants in a particular practice bring with them their “aggregate experience of practice” (Scollon 2001:7), the ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1990) or the ‘historical-body’ (Nishida 1958, in Scollon 2001). Established identity positions are thus brought in to ongoing talk and indeed interactive writing using online learning tools (Baynham 2006; Lytra and Møller 2011; Simpson 2011).

This angle invests an understanding of identity with a constancy that is lacking from some constructivist accounts, where identity is continually up for grabs in ongoing interaction. It also allows for admitting other discourses – such as those emerging in the course of the life-history interview referred to in this paper – into an analysis of situated interaction.

Blogging and identity online

Textual identity is a shorthand term for an individual’s identity as constructed in their writing (Ivanič 1998). An *online* textual identity is constructed when an individual engages in electronic literacy practices: plural social practices involving the use of ICTs such as email, social networking and – in the case of this paper – blogging. Communication using new literacy technologies has profound implications for the notion of authorship and the construction of identity: electronic communication offers the opportunity to develop and emphasise different aspects of identity with new sorts of writing, and in new, multimodal, multilingual and globally-spread social spaces. Temporally also, configurations of participants are novel. Electronically-mediated written interaction often takes place in real time, with only a minimum of reflection and editing before posts are sent, even in supposedly reflective asynchronous forums, for example communication using email or blogs.

Blogs (from ‘web log’) are “frequently modified webpages containing individual entries displayed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring et al 2004). Herring and Paolillo (2006: 442) note that: “Several studies have characterized weblogs as a new genre of computer-mediated communication”, citing common characteristics such as dated entries displayed in reverse chronological sequence, sidebars containing links and calendars, a culturally-recognized name, and the purpose of sharing content with others over the internet, and of forming and maintaining social bonds online. (see also Myers 2010).

Regarding purpose, their uses are varied, including employment in language learning and teaching. Despite their relatively recent arrival as part of the technologically-minded teacher’s array of tools, blogs, and descriptions of their implementation in language learning and teaching contexts abound (Ducate and Lomicka 2008, Murray and Hourigan 2008, Bhattacharya and Chauhan 2010), as do hints and tips for their creation (Godwin-Jones 2003). Bloch notes that for language teachers, “blogging would seem a potentially useful tool for creating a space to discuss issues that may not be the focus of the traditional classroom” (2007: 129). A consensus in pedagogic descriptions of blogs is that they lend themselves to easily accessible publication and dissemination of student writing, to information-sharing, to the collaborative construction of meaning, and,

significantly, to learner control (Trajtemberg and Yiakoumetti 2011; Simpson and Gresswell, 2012). This latter assumption should not, however, go unquestioned. As we see later, it can indeed be that the recontextualization of a blog into a pedagogic frame can reinforce classroom hegemonies and traditional relations of power.

Blogs, in their original form as online journals for individual self-expression, were once emblems of uncontrolled and unregulated space on the internet. In the current case, the blog is not a journal: it has been recontextualized, adapted for a new educational context. Recontextualization, notes Blommaert (2005: 254), adds new metapragmatic frames to a text. That is, by placing a blog in a pedagogic context, new indexical levels of discourse are invoked, entailing new expectations about language form and usage (e.g. surface accuracy of written content).

Linguists studying electronically-mediated discourse have, in the past, concentrated on examinations of ‘the language of computer-mediated communication’ (e.g. Crystal 2006), and of where various types of electronic discourse can be located in relation to prototypical written and spoken discourse. However, more recent sociolinguistic work on computer-mediated discourse has stressed the desirability of an orientation towards user-related (as opposed to medium-related) research (Androutopoulos 2008; see also Georgakopoulou 2006): there are now a number of socially-situated applied linguistic studies of individual and group computer-mediated practices (beginning with Cherny’s groundbreaking work, 1999, and now including Harklau 2003, Lam 2004, Hinrichs 2006, McGinnis, Goodstein-Stolzenberg and Costa Saliani 2007, Thurlow and Mroczek 2011; cf the survey of online ethnography by Garcia et al 2009). In the present study, the focus is clearly on the users and the role of the blog within the broader context of their interaction with each other and their teacher. We should also recall that any research into electronic literacy practices implicates the affordances and constraints of the particular medium of interaction and the particular type of electronically-mediated communication platform involved.

Research question

The question this paper seeks to address is: How does the use of a blog for language teaching purposes reproduce established classroom hierarchies between a student and her teacher?

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Context

Here I outline the context of the study and its analytical approach. The concern is with a student, Shahedah, who studies in a class originally observed as a case study embedded in a larger project¹. It is an Entry Level 3 (i.e. intermediate) class of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) – henceforth the E3 class – which takes place at the main site of a College of Further Education in a northern industrial town in England. Ten students regularly attend the E3 class: seven women and three men. The students are aged between 25 and 50, and all but two are married with children. When asked, the majority of students categorise themselves as members of the Kashmiri and Gujarati communities which make up the largest proportion of the migrant population of the town. Shahedah herself is Gujarati. One student is a refugee from Kurdistan, and another is a Japanese woman married to a local-born man. Their tutor, Carol, is an experienced and well-qualified ESOL teacher. The class meets on three mornings a week. As a researcher I observed and audio-recorded lessons once a month over the period September 2007 to March 2008. Every observed lesson was two hours long, and each included some time spent in the college’s ICT suite.

Interaction on the E3 class blog

Carol has integrated the blog into the E3 course as a space where students can post homework and classroom writing, as well as a tool to circulate homework and classroom tasks and activities. The E3 class blog contains many of the structural features of blogs, partly because it was created using a template from the Blogger.com site. It has hardly any of the links in sidebars so characteristic of journal blogs, and it includes no blogroll, or list of links to other blogs.

When considered as turns in an exchange, posts to the blog can be labelled (following Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) either *I* (initiation or opening) or *R* (response or answering), a terminology I adopt in this paper. *I* posts are the main blog entries, sent straight to the blog by teacher or students without responding to a previous entry. *R* posts, conversely, are sent in response to *I* posts, and appear as comments on the blog. Interaction levels on the blog varied over the seven month observation, petering out towards the end. The overall number of entries peaked in November (33 posts), the monthly number of *I* posts peaked in October (16 posts), and that the monthly number of *R* posts peaked in November (22 posts). By March the monthly number of posts had dwindled to three.

In terms of patterns of participation on the blog, the balance of participation between teachers and students on the E3 class blog was in the students' favour: 53 of the 135 entries were sent by the teacher, accounting for 39% of the total. 29 (47%) of the *I* posts were sent by the teacher, as were 24 (33%) of the *R* posts. This pattern bears out findings earlier studies of computer-mediated communication in language classroom contexts: participation tends to be more equal in electronically-mediated contexts compared with oral classroom discussion, and levels of learner participation online can be greater than in equivalent oral classrooms (Warschauer 1996, Sullivan and Pratt 1996). Shahedah herself posted to the blog 13 times.

In observed lessons, Carol would begin the phase of the lesson devoted to computer use by directing the students to the blog and posing a question or setting up an activity. For homework tasks revolving around the blog, students would be prompted to answer a question or carry out an activity which involved making a blog post. Hence many of the students' *I* posts were actually sent in response to a spoken request from the teacher that they post to the blog. Therefore in terms of learner agency, this particular blog is not a site where control of learning is in the hands of learners themselves, as is the case with some online language learning groups (Simpson 2005; Simpson and Gresswell 2012). More equal participation between teachers and students, compared to prototypical classroom discourse, should not be confused with an equalisation of power relations in terms of control of topic or turn-taking.

To exemplify this, my preliminary example is a typical exchange between Carol and Shahedah. Carol posted the following to the blog:

(1)

[...] Last week you had only 7 spellings to learn. Do you get everything correct? If not, why not? Did you spend enough time studying? Or is there another reason?

In response, Shahedah affirms that all her spellings are correct. Moreover, there is a tight correspondence between Carol's questions in her *I* post and Shahedah's responses in the subsequent *R* post:

(2)

Yes, my all spellings are correct. No, I don't think so enough time spend in study because I have too much housework and my son keep busy to me.

Shahedah's sentences each respond to the teacher's questions in turn. In the questions and topic of her *I* post, Carol signals the nature of the practice she is constructing, with its associated identities and orientations of teacher and students. Shahedah aligns herself with her teacher both in the content of her responses ("my all spelling are correct"), and, in terms of discourse structure, in the way they match up with the teacher's questions. As with the classroom order, this subject positioning corresponds with the socially recognizable categories of teacher and student. In the example, this alignment is evident in two ways: at the level of topic and of discourse organisation. In this and other posts, she positions herself as willing to submit to the teacher's suggestions, corrections and control of her writing: she engages with the social practice of 'being a student'. I exemplify and discuss this issue below, after sketching out the approach to the study.

Data, approach and methodology

Data for this study comprise:

- Field notes and audio recordings from seven lesson observations;
- Shahedah's posts on E3 Class blog, September 2007 – March 2008;
- interviews and informal conversations with Carol, the teacher (recorded; transcribed);
- informal chats with Shahedah during lesson observations; an individual interview with Shahedah (transcribed and translated from Gujarati).

Adopting a case study approach (Casanave 2010) my framework for analysis draws on linguistic ethnography (Rampton et al 2004, Maybin and Tusting 2011), which when concerning literacy, involves an analysis of *what is written* and *what is said about what is written*. This approach is adopted by others investigating the textual identities of migrant language learners (Kramsch 2000; Lam 2000, 2004) and of writers of academic English (Ivanič 1998). More generally, linguistic ethnography advocates attention to language in interaction examined in combination with more reflective narrative accounts gained through interviews. This allows for the study of identity trouble (cf Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema 2008), where social contexts of interaction are inconsistent, or – conversely – an examination of identity continuity, where contexts are aligned.

The focus of analysis is a particular point of social action on the class blog, where Shahedah is writing a blog post. The question posed above is addressed through considering what participants in the action are bringing in, and how the action itself – and other interaction like it – contributes to the maintenance of the hierarchies inherent in the class. This action is integrally connected to the following:

- the remainder of the exchange between a teacher and a student on the class blog;
- other interaction on the blog between the teacher and her student;
- the student's expectations of the interaction on the blog, and how these relate to her understanding of the roles and typical behaviours of teachers and students: what the student is bringing in to the interaction;
- the teacher's creation of the blog and her understanding of its use in the class: what the teacher is bringing in to the interaction.

INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION ON THE CLASS BLOG

The first part of the analysis is devoted to a description of the focal action of the study. I then discuss what the participants are bringing in to the interaction: the intersecting

perspectives of the student and her life-history and migration trajectory, and the teacher and her rationale for implementing the blog.

Shahedah: Doing being a good student

Here I focus on a particular classroom event which exemplifies identity alignment, recorded during a visit to the class in November 2007. The lesson takes place in the college's ICT suite. Students have been arriving gradually through the first fifteen minutes of the lesson. The beginning of the lesson also involves Carol having to go to the college's reception to collect a new student and bring her back to the class. My field-notes read "so a slow start". My notes on the session continue:

When students arrive in the class they log onto their computers – one per student, around the room. Some students go to the library to borrow a book – they will be writing book reviews on the class blog today. [...] Carol tells the students they are going to write a book review based on their recent or current class reader. The task is to write a plan of the review on a blank book review form and then to write it in full on the class blog.

(Field notes, 19 November 2007)

I take a seat near Shahedah, a student to whom I have spoken informally during earlier observations, and who has also taken part in a group interview with three other students about their ICT use in and out of class. In the first half of the lesson, working on her own in front of the computer, she first writes a draft of her review on a paper form, then copies it onto the blog. While Shahedah is completing its first draft, I record an informal conversation with her. Here is an extract, with turns numbered²:

- 1 J: *can you read what you've written (.) can you read it out*
2 S: *ah (.) I'm still change here*
3 J: *oh OK yeah*
4 S: *I will read it then change it*
5 J: *please*
6 S: *the setting of this book is in England and the Greek island of Santorini
this book's main plot is how people fall in love xxxx some people broke
another peoples heart xxxx the main character is Tony and Victoria*
7 J: *yeah*
8 S: *I'm sorry (.) change here*
[...]
15 S: *I am making mistakes*
16 J: *well we all make mistakes I I make mistakes all the time (.) it's good
that*
17 S: *you make mistake and they learn by mistake*

During that conversation Shahedah demonstrates an anxiety that her writing is not correct, and a concern with accuracy (turn 15). Not only that, she also displays a teacher's and learner's view of mistakes, as something you can learn from (turn 17). It can also be noted that the relations of power differ between a student and an observer, just as they do between a student and a teacher. Initially (turn 2) Shahedah refused my request to read what she had written, then – possibly in recognition of an imbalance in this relationship – acceded (turn 4).

As the first half of the lesson draws to a close, Shahedah posts the final version of her review to the blog. This reads (in part):

(3)

TYPE OF BOOK:Romance

The setting of this book is in England and the Greek Island of Santorini (A Place in the Sun).

This books main plot is How people fall in love,what is they expecting to there partner.Some men play with womens heart,they broken there heart and they can't bother.[Victoria and Ben]

While the students are having their break, Carol posts a response to Shahedah's review, with questions, inviting further comment (extract 4):

(4)

Very interesting Shahedah. Remember to put a space after a comma and full stop :)

Also, can you say something about your opinion of this book? Did you like the characters? Did you like the story?

In the second half of the lesson, most students are finishing their own book reviews. Carol encourages early finishers (including Shahedah) to respond to other students' reviews, using the comments facility of the blog, and to reply to her own response. Extract 5 shows Shahedah's response to Carol's comment about her review in (4) above:

(5)

It's my common mistek, I'm always forgotten.Sorry.

I like this book beacause it's gave me infomation about greek Island, rilelationship, differant tipes people.

I like victoria's and Kelly's characters.

Intresting story.

Each of Shahedah's moves in turn responds to one of Carol's questions or comments, in the order in which they were asked. Her overall position is one where she addresses the demands and questions of her teacher: an attentive student, with a sense of accuracy and of her deficiencies in producing accurate writing (though due at least in part to the lack of time available for checking her comment before sending, this post is noticeably inaccurate at a surface level). Moreover, through the comments she makes and the questions she asks, Carol positions Shahedah interactively as a student, which Shahedah ratifies and aligns with reflexively (see Davies and Harré 1990 on interactive and reflexive positioning: you position yourself 'interactively' by what you say, and what another says positions you 'reflexively'). Actually it would seem that she has little choice: neither Carol's questioning technique nor the nature of the activity itself enable a wider set of identity options. Indeed Carol's questions present Shahedah with a normative template within which she positions herself – and is positioned – as a diligent, obedient student.

What Shahedah is bringing in

Shahedah, like most adult language students, possesses a notion of correctness (turns 2, 4 and 8 in the conversation with me, above; *u3a* her blog posts); moreover, as with most migrants to English-dominant countries she knows very well that judgements and assumptions are made about her based on the language that she uses. The notion of correctness is deeply ingrained in language and literacy learners and educational systems around the world, and people's beliefs about the importance of standards are equally internalised (Cameron 1995). This idea of correctness is clearly evident in Shahedah's two

posts above, and is confirmed by her discussion with me during the writing of those posts.

To complement the analysis of the particular event I now turn to a life history interview with Shahedah. I ask how closely aligned is her identity as constructed in her classroom-based online interaction – electronically-mediated and in a new language though it is – with the identity positions claimed in the course of the interview.

The interview took place in Gujarati, Shahedah’s expert language. Relying on a translated interview risks signalling “an assumption that stories and interviews are simply descriptions of facts, whereas in reality the presentation of events may vary greatly with the language of the telling” (Pavlenko 2007: 172). Thus the interview must be understood as an attempt to uncover aspects of ‘subject’ reality that are important to Shahedah at a particular time and with a particular interlocutor. In their study of adult learners’ lives, Barton and colleagues (2006: 11) found it useful to think in terms of four constructs: “history, current life circumstances, current practices and identities, and imagined futures”. Shahedah presented each of these during the interview, and I take each in turn. The interviewer, a female bilingual Gujarati-user some years younger than Shahedah, was born in the town where Shahedah now lives and studies.

Shahedah is from a small town in the state of Gujarat, north-west India. She grew up as the youngest of eight children in a family environment where education seems to have been valued: there was “an educational atmosphere.” She positions herself as a good and successful student: “always I was first and got A grade.” She describes how, upon returning home after completing her B.Ed degree, she founded and managed a private coaching class where local children could supplement their schooling:

I also opened my own tuition class [...] and I had three staff in the coaching class so before my job, tuition 8 till 10 and then 11 in school 11 to 5 and then from 6 tuition again until 8 o'clock

Thus in the interview Shahedah claims identity positions as both a good student in an educated family, and as a teacher.

When talking about her current studies Shahedah again identifies herself explicitly as a teacher as well as a student. In this respect she notes that she is similar to her own teacher, Carol. “We are both teacher student we do that and it’s good”. Carol is currently working towards an MA, Shahedah is an ESOL student, and both are trained teachers. She has a firm idea of the characteristics of a good teacher: she says she likes her teachers to be strict, because unless they are she will not progress As she says:

if they are strict then there is the benefit that we learn if they are soft then we think alright let it go and I've learn nothing ... since I was little I've know I want to be someone, I want to learn something, so because of that I've always liked strict teachers because they will take me forward

Her ambition is to move on to a higher level course, which she would use as a springboard to a better job: “I should improve my English first and then if I want I can go for higher study and then I will get a job no problem.”

In class, Shahedah uses the class blog when prompted by her teacher. She views the blog in a positive light, as pedagogically useful for a number of reasons, many of which harmonize with her teacher’s expectations (see below). Firstly, it is public, and work can be read by other students and the teacher:

the blog's main thing is that if we have our own comments and work then we are able to publish it for other students to see and the teacher is also able to see our work and what it needs, what we need to do to it

Secondly the teacher and students can comment on her work:

the teacher gives us tips and if she publishes those they come direct to our computer and then we can read them and give an answer and other students can also give us comments

Thirdly it allows her to read her peers' posts to the blog and to use them as a model for her own writing.

other students' work we are also able to see so we are able to see it and from experience we can think other students write like this, and we should write more like this, and think where our mistakes are, because ourselves we don't see our own mistakes too quickly [...] so then from all those comments we definitely learn something

Her attitude towards her blog postings is changing. At first she was anxious about using the blog. She was concerned with accuracy and with the public nature of the blog space. "Before if our work is in a file only the teachers see it and we show it to who we want but on the blogger everyone sees it which feels strange." She thought that people would make fun of her writing if she made mistakes. She has overcome this fear to an extent, because in class "everyone is really nice", and is now used to sending posts to a public space. This observation is relevant in view of the fact that she started using the blog in September 2007; the blog posts examined here are from Autumn 2007, and the interview took place the following January.

In her blog posts Shahedah positions herself in tight alignment with her teacher, responding attentively to her questions. On the blog her position corresponds with the identities she claims in the course of her interview, as a worthy, attentive student, and also with a teacher's concern for accuracy. In this respect we see not only identity alignment (between Shahedah and the teacher) but identity continuity, a thread running from her earlier life to her current identity construction.

What Carol is bringing in

Finally I shift my focus to the teacher, Carol, her integration of the blog into the class, and her interaction within it. Immediately before the observed lesson discussed earlier, I had an informal (though recorded) conversation with her during which she offered her rationale for using the blog.

Obviously I like the writing thing [...] I don't really use it for error correction or anything like that it's just getting them to write because I don't think they ever really write unless you've given them a purpose other than class work and improve your English just kind of communicative function [...] I like the communicative thing the fact that I can write something or comment on it or they can comment on each other's [...] you can put pictures up so they can do something pictorial and write something about that

(informal interview, November 2007)

According to Carol, she has not instigated the blog as a forum for the production of correct and accurate language; rather, it provides an opportunity for students to write in a communicative and interactive way, as well as a space for recording their work and an environment for posting and commenting on pictures. Carol positions herself as the

enabler of opportunities to write purposefully in a communicative environment, one free from the pressures of producing accurate language. Yet an examination of blog posts throughout its life-cycle display her over-riding attention to accuracy in surface form and to orthography in blog discourse.

As with her posts cited earlier (examples 1 and 4), the following extracts from Carol's posts to students in the early months of the blog show how attention to the conventions of more formal written discourse and to surface accuracy comprise the content of many of her blog contributions. From the beginning the focus on accuracy is prominent on the blog. Here, from the first posting of the academic year, students are invited to use this blog posting itself as the basis for an error correction activity.

(6)

Hello everyone and welcome to our class blog. this is a place to practice your writing. we will use this throughout the year. first, click the comment icon. write the most important thing you learned last week. Say why this is important to you. second, look at this post. there are some mistakes. what are they?

Carol here establishes an expectation that the blog is a space where students will practice writing, and that part of that practice will include attention to formal features of writing. That is, contrary to much online writing, but in common with more traditional and academic classroom writing, and also with more formal blogs, contributions to this blog are expected to conform to certain conventions, specifically of capitalisation rules.

In subsequent entries, Carol's focus is again textual conventions familiar from traditional academic writing. Here she reviews the writing activity the students have carried out on the blog during the lesson.

(7)

I know it is difficult to write on the computer sometimes. Everyone needs to practice making paragraphs and explaining things in writing.

And in this entry Carol is responding to a student. Accurate writing, which has been the topic of their classroom discussion, carries over as the topic of blog interaction.

(8)

Your writing is getting much better Somia, we just corrected a few things together. I think it helped you to have 3 different sections to write about.

There is, of course, no reason why the teacher should not attend to accuracy in her lessons, for there is a self-evident rationale for a focus on accuracy in language pedagogy. This is not least because many of the students in the class – including Shahedah – aspire to further study beyond their current English course. If they are to progress, they will need to develop accuracy in their writing. But to only concentrate on this area misses engaging with a richer conception of literacy which ultimately might benefit students. Lea and Street (1998) propose an *academic literacies* approach to student writing which subsumes the study skills model that Carol orients towards in her posts. The academic literacies approach involves incorporating into pedagogy the broad range of social, cultural and linguistic practices associated with the academic area students aspire to. It also involves engaging with the ideological dimension of writing; attending to identity and to bringing ideology out into the open, with examination of the hidden

features of academic literacy such as authorial voice and stance (see also Ivanič 1998). One can imagine alternatives to the way the blog is currently used, perhaps as a collaborative space which enables a richer conception of literacy than it currently does (cf Cummins 2009). These might include a level of students' critical exploration of their own language use. In Shahedah's case she might examine her own and others' language on the blog and in other online contexts; in face-to-face interaction in her college; in the academic genres to which she aspires; and in the multilingual milieu of her home and town environment.

Moreover the teacher instigated the blog, as she says, in an attempt to provide a space for communication free of the traditional pedagogic concerns of a typical classroom. That certainly equates with the purpose of blogs as they were originally conceived, as participatory arenas for personal writing. However, from the outset the interactional patterns in the class blog closely resemble those of teacher-centred face-to-face classroom interaction, in terms of teacher initiation and student response. A consequence is the continuity of the traditional teacher/student power relations of classroom interaction in the online space. Furthermore, by adopting this particular pedagogic stance – by recontextualizing the blog as a pedagogic space – Carol in effect closes down opportunities for students to claim identity positions that vary, differ or deviate from the traditional ones available in face-to-face classroom discourse.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: ALIGNMENT AND CONTINUITY

To conclude I comment on alignment and identity continuity. I first return to earlier remarks about power relations and the legitimization of particular identities. The traditional teacher/student identities enacted on the E3 class blog are part of a hegemonic discourse, a way of talking and writing which promotes a particular view of the world (Foucault 1970; Gramsci 1971). That is, a relationship between teachers and students where teachers are dominant is, for Shahedah, the common-sense or intuitive one. On the face of it there is no reason why Shahedah would want to resist the identity position offered to her (i.e. *legitimized*) in the blog interaction, or to negotiate her way out of it. Given what we know from her interview of her socio-history, she would regard it as to her benefit to stay within it.

Carol's recontextualization of the blog as a pedagogic tool enables her to present students with a forum for practising their written English, gaining useful feedback from their teacher and peers. However, the blog is utilised – in terms of pedagogic focus and teacher control – in a way that offers students identity positions that do not vary from the ones they are used to in class. Students are understandably focused on conventional linguistic behaviour when writing on the blog. Moreover the teacher's power over interactional patterns and topic is evident online; because the recontextualized, pedagogized blog is perceived by participants as analogous to the classroom space (i.e. because the contexts are aligned), the opportunities for development – both of identities and of academic literacies – are limited. Integrating new technologies into classrooms risks the end result of “old wine in new bottles”, suggest Lankshear and Knobel, a situation which will remain “if the underlying assumptions guiding their curricular and pedagogical take-up remain intact” (2006: 188-189). Will the use of the blog as described in this paper lead to the productive language experiences that Shahedah needs if she is to attain her goal of higher study? Interaction on a blog has great potential for the adoption of new identity positions, in Shahedah's case perhaps with a critical perspective on academic literacy. Interaction on this blog, however, aligns with the identities and literacies Shahedah brings in, and opportunities for the development and extension of identity positions are closed down.

So what happens on the blog – in terms of expectations of linguistic behaviour and of established power relations between students and their teacher – aligns with Shahedah’s understanding of teacher/learner relations, as established through her prior experience of pedagogic practice. I return to Block’s comment from the beginning of this paper. In the migration process, contends Block, “one’s identity and sense of self are put on the line, not least because most factors that are familiar to the individual ... have disappeared and been replaced by new ones” (2007: 5). It would seem, however, that for Shahedah certain things are not lost, despite her interaction being in a new language, and being textually and electronically mediated. The pressures of the migration experience do not result in the emergence of a brand new identity, in Shahedah’s case. It is no surprise that Shahedah brings in established subject positions: her memory of childhood, as told in an interview, is present too in her blog entries and her spoken comments around the blog: her memories prefigure her current practices and she is still capable of – and comfortable with – ‘doing being a good student’ – in her adult ESOL class as a migrant learner of English just as a youngster with her educated siblings, albeit with reduced linguistic resources.

Finally, on the usefulness of identity itself as an analytic category, Brubaker (2004: 29) asks: “if it [identity] is fluid, how can we understand the ways in which self-understandings may harden, congeal and crystallize?” This paper has highlighted the need for a view of identity as ephemeral, as constructed in the moment, to be complemented by a consideration of how established identity positions and self-understandings are brought in to ongoing conversations and online discourse.

NOTES

1. Data are from the project *Identity Online: ESOL learners’ textual identities in and out of class*, funded by the British Academy (grant number LRG-45480), a study of identity and electronic literacy in ESOL contexts.

2. Transcription conventions for this paper:

(.) short pause

[...] omitted text

xxx untranscribable speech

[commentary] commentary and explanatory text in square brackets

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