

# Interactivity in Second Language via Social Identity and Group Cohesiveness<sup>1</sup>

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## **Resumen**

Se describen y analizan la influencia de la identidad y la unión de grupo como factores que facilitan o dificultan los procesos interactivos en el aprendizaje del inglés como segunda lengua. Se señala la conexión entre el aprendizaje interactivo de un idioma y factores como identidad social, personal, y unión de grupo. El efecto de la integración del grupo y la identidad en el aprendizaje de un segundo idioma son esenciales dado que pocos estudios se han referido al efecto de tales variables en la interacción de grupo. Con el estudio de un caso realizado en dos grupos de estudiantes adultos se diagnosticó el estado de cohesión del grupo y su impacto en el aprendizaje interactivo.

## **Abstract**

This research explores the influence of identity and group cohesion as factors that facilitate or hinder interactive processes in ESL classrooms. In particular, this paper addresses the connection between interactive language learning, social and personal identity, and group cohesiveness. The effect of group cohesion and identity in second language learning has been addressed in relatively few studies on the impact of those membership variables in determining interactivity in communicative language teaching. A case study carried out in two college level classes diagnosed the status of group membership and its impact on interactivity.

**Palabras clave:** unión de grupo, interactividad, identidad social, identidad, trabajo en equipo, adscripción, aprendizaje de idiomas.

**Keywords:** group cohesion, cohesiveness, interactivity, social identity, identity, teamwork, membership, language learning.

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Speech has a social function, both as a means of communication and also as a way of identifying social groups, and to study speech without reference to the society which uses it is to exclude the possibility of finding social explanations for the structures that are used.

**Hudson**

This study addresses the influence of identity and group cohesion as two factors that facilitate or hinder interactive processes in the context of two ESL classrooms. Accordingly, communication is a highly cooperative activity in which the individual's self-identity plays a major role. Feelings of indifference, variations in norms, values and goals, lack of skill, self-esteem, and even motivation are strong psychological variables which may affect group bonds.

This paper addresses the relation between ethnolinguistics and communication along with the connection between communicative practices and social and personal identity with an emphasis on the analysis of group cohesiveness. The main contribution of this research is its exploration of the effect of group cohesion and identity in second language learning in Costa Rica, where relatively few studies have addressed the concept of cohesiveness, defined by several researchers as “the force bringing group members close together,” and its impact in determining interactivity in communicative language teaching. It is widely accepted that cohesiveness and social identity are closely interrelated. Social identity, as Peirce uses it refers to how people see themselves in comparison with others<sup>4</sup>. It becomes a strong force that influences an interpersonal attraction among the members. In other words, just as cohesiveness correlates with membership, social identity is “a configuration of memberships constructed in our communicative dealings with others.”<sup>5</sup>

Our case study will reveal the main findings of a survey and questionnaire applied in two college level TESOL classes. This analysis is

<sup>4</sup> Bonny Norton Peirce, “Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning”, *TESOL Quarterly* 29, 1 (1995): 9-31.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Riley, *Language, Culture and Identity* (London: Continuum, 2007) 8-122 (113).

intended to diagnose the status of group membership and its relation to interactivity. Three professors were asked to provide their opinions about the two groups under study and their opinions are analyzed in the interpretation of results. In sum, the study suggests that membership variables such as group cohesiveness, along with social and personal identity could have a significant impact on interactive language learning. This paper proposes the following research questions: 1. Do social identity and cohesiveness play a role in second language learning?; 2. Are there any differences or similarities in group cohesion and social identity among adult ESL learners?; 3. Do those differences or similarities have an impact on classroom interactivity?; 4. What is the relationship between ethnolinguistics and interactive adult language learning?

## Literature Review

Ethnolinguistics is a science that studies the relationships between a language, society, and culture. One of the major concerns of ethnolinguistics is the notion of identity and its relation to language and communicative behaviour. As discussed by Hilles and Sutton (who name Trosset, for example), it is widely accepted that “learning a second language changes one’s social identity.”<sup>6</sup> This relationship between social identity and language education has been central in recent research since it involves the ascription of individuals to the group or speech community to which they belong. According to Riley, “identity is a quality which is ascribed or attributed to an individual human being by other human beings; it is as much the product of the gaze of others as it is of our own making.”<sup>7</sup> Social identity, understood as individuals’ shared characteristics others and memberships, is addressed here as “the sum of all the subgroups of which a person

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Hilles and Andre Sutton, “Teaching Adults,” Mariane Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2001) 397.

<sup>7</sup> Riley, 86-87.

is a member.”<sup>8</sup> These subgroups might include age, cohort, gender and family, occupation, political affiliation, residence, leisure activity, among others. They form the social identity system that makes individuals relate to one another in terms of social interaction, including social involvement and speech. Thus, social identity is “made up of the configuration of memberships” and membership is “knowledge-and-language based.” To build up membership, an individual thus needs to be connected to a group because one’s “identity is constructed by other people.”<sup>9</sup> Group cohesiveness enhances this connection.

Cohesiveness involves two dimensions: emotional (or personal) and task-related. The emotional dimension is derived from the connection that members have with other members and with the group as a whole. Several questions arise from this, such as the amount of time that members like to spend with other group members and whether they look forward to the next group meeting.

Task-cohesiveness refers to the extent to which group members share group goals and work together to meet these goals including whether the group works smoothly as one unit or the extent to which different people pull in different directions (Group Cohesiveness).<sup>10</sup> In fact, Senior states that “one aspect of cohesiveness is based on group members’ liking for one another and on their desire to be in the group,” and a major aspect is the extent to which the group helps its members reach important goals or participate in desired activities.<sup>11</sup> Researchers identify this aspect as ‘task-based’ cohesiveness (Group Cohesiveness).<sup>12</sup>

Other researchers such as Adelman and Taylor have inquired more deeply on the role of cohesiveness in language learning specifying that “there are definite advantages for a group to have members that

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8 Riley, 88.

9 Riley, 113.

10 “Group Cohesiveness,” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 26 October 2007. Web. 18 October 2008.

11 Rosemary Senior, “Transforming Language Classes into Bonded Groups,” *ELT Journal*. 51.1 (1997): 3-11 (6).

12 “Group Cohesiveness.”

are attracted to it... [since they] improve the functioning of the group,”<sup>13</sup> and trust and build confidence in one another. Senior states that learners believe they learn more efficiently “in the sheltered, nurturing environment of a bonded class group.”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Fraser argues that cohesiveness also provides the potential for a group to work at its fastest and most productive levels. When cohesive groups have members who enjoy being together, interaction in a friendly group creates good feelings and the entire cohesive group experience brings satisfaction.<sup>15</sup>

Cohesive groups have also been described as ‘bonded groups,’ and this type of group also affects teaching styles. According to Senior, “Language teachers appear happier and more comfortable when they find themselves teaching friendly classes where students have formed bonds with one another and work well together.”<sup>16</sup> Consequently, instructors teach more enthusiastically and spend more time preparing interesting materials and activities.

### **Ethnolinguistics and interactive experiences via language**

Ethnolinguistic research has largely focused on the nature of language and its relationship to society and culture. It has been the core of many studies and still is a main issue in the discussion of communication practices of speech communities around the world. Ethnographic studies may explain how people shape their identities through speech. Riley approaches ethnolinguistics as “the study of a group’s experience of life as it is organized and expressed through the group language tools and as a science whose aim is to examine the relationships between languages on the one hand and society and culture on the other.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor, “Classroom Climate,” *Encyclopedia of School Psychology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005) 411.

<sup>14</sup> Senior, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Barry J. Fraser, “Classroom Environment Instruments: Development, Validity and Applications,” *Learning Environments Research* 03 November 2004: 7-34 (17).

<sup>16</sup> Senior, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Riley, 8.

Riley has also pointed out the contribution of Dell Hymes regarding the ethnography of communication, and describes it as, “the study of intercultural communication in the categorization of communicative situations and their constitutive communicative practices.”<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the communicative competence of a speaker (an individual in a community) will have a great impact in what other individuals may think of him. It represents a real challenge for the individual to adapt to the situation. The ethnolinguist, as Riley explains, “tries to describe and understand the role of language in shaping the ways in which members of a group relate to the world, to one another and to others.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Social and personal identity**

Identities are mainly constructs of what people perceive of others.<sup>20</sup> This refers to language and communicative behavior because an individual’s identity is intimately related to the perceptions of other people that define who we are as members of a group by means of discourse and social interaction.

As far as adult learners are concerned, Hilles and Sutton agree that they “have a maturity and an understanding of priorities that many younger students do not” which increases their ability to direct their own learning.<sup>21</sup> A major factor that may affect adult learning regards to the individual’s previously constructed identity which implies that they have already formed a strong sense of who they are. In fact, Hilles and Sutton suggest that “adult learners have a great deal invested in their identities as proficient speakers of their first language.”<sup>22</sup>

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18 Riley, 11.

19 Riley, 11.

20 Riley, 8.

21 Hilles and Sutton, 386.

22 Hilles and Sutton, 387.

Hilles and Sutton mention a number of studies concerning what occurs in the second languages.<sup>23</sup> Ethnographic research conducted by Trosset, for example, of an adult learning Welsh as a second language reveals that adult learners often experienced anomie, defined in turn by Lambert et al. in Hilles and Sutton's study as "the feeling of social uncertainty or dissatisfaction which characterizes not only the socially unattached person but also, it appears, the bilingual or even the serious student of a second language and culture." Hilles and Sutton also state that Trosset also found that "the process of learning a new language temporarily takes away people's ability to talk, and the resultant sense of inadequacy leads them to experience shame." In addition, they mention Stengel who had observed years before that "speech is an accomplishment of the ego... acquiring a new language in adult life is an anachronism and many people cannot easily tolerate the infantile situation."

An individual's identity and personality are manifested through social interaction and communicative style. Learners of a second language deal with changes in their identities as well as their social behavior since they must cope with a new form of thinking, living, and socializing.

### **Group Cohesiveness**

Ratzburg defines cohesion as "the degree to which members of the group desire to remain in the group... [and] the resultant of all the forces acting on the member to remain in the group," and group cohesion, as "the degree to which a group exists or operates as a unified entity."<sup>24</sup> Ratzburg considers it vital in group decision-making, goal attainment, identity, and member satisfaction. Cohesion is often viewed from an affective perspective; as interpersonal attraction

<sup>23</sup> Hilles and Sutton, 387.

<sup>24</sup> Wilf H. Ratzburg, "Wilf's Homepage," *Organizational Behavior*. N.p., 20 October 2004. Web. 17 October 2008. <<http://www.geocities.com/frtzw906/htmlgroups18.html>>.

among members or to the group. However, cohesion can also be envisioned as “attraction to a collectivity,” as opposed to an attraction to the individuals who make up that group.

Current research discusses the positive outcomes of high group cohesion including group satisfaction, increased expression of feelings, interpersonal influence, self-confidence and self-esteem, increased attendance and participation, perseverance toward goals attainment and willingness to take responsibility for group functioning. The main factors that influence group cohesiveness include members’ similarity, group size, entry difficulty, group success and external competition and threats. Often, these factors work through enhancing the identification of the individual with the group he or she belongs to as well as their beliefs of how the group can fulfil their personal needs.<sup>25</sup> Since it is easier for fewer people to agree on goals and to coordinate their work, smaller groups are more cohesive than larger groups. Task cohesiveness may suffer, though, if groups lack enough members to perform their tasks well enough.

Difficult entry criteria or procedures to a group tend to present it in a more exclusive light. The more elite the group is perceived to be, the more prestigious it is to be a member in that group and consequently, the more motivated members are to belong and stay in it. This is why alumni of prestigious universities tend to keep in touch for many years after they graduate. Group success, like exclusive entry, increases the value of group membership and influences members to identify more strongly with the team and to want to be actively associated with it. When members perceive active competition with another group, they become more aware of members’ similarity within their group as well as seeing their group as a way to overcome the external threat or competition they are facing.

Another important aspect that has to do with group cohesiveness is classroom climate. According to Aldeman and Taylor, “classroom

<sup>25</sup> “Group Cohesiveness,” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 26 October 2007. Web. 18 October 2008.



climate sometimes is referred to as the learning environment, as well as by terms such as atmosphere, ambience, ecology, and milieu. The impact of classroom climate on students and staff can be beneficial for or a barrier to learning.”<sup>26</sup> Classroom climate is seen as a major determiner of classroom behavior and learning. It is perceived easily that in a classroom where the environment is suitable for the learning process to take place, social interaction will be more efficient among members and will help contribute to the order and organization of the group. For example, studies report strong associations between achievement levels and classrooms that are perceived as having greater cohesion and goal-direction, and less disorganization and conflict. Research also suggests that the impact of classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against.

Another relevant aspect is group development, cooperative learning, group cooperation and the quality and quantity of group interaction. Dörnyei mentions three meta-analyses which addressed “the relationship between group cohesiveness and group performance found a significant positive relationship between the two variables, indicating that cohesive groups, on average, tend to be more productive than noncohesive groups.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, according to Dörnyei, other studies confirm that “members of a cohesive group are more likely than others to participate actively in conversations and engage in self-disclosure or collaborative narration, student behaviors that are necessary for efficient communicative task involvement.”<sup>28</sup> In addition to promoting interaction, cohesiveness also affects cooperative learning and achievement because “students will help one another learn, care about one another and want one another to succeed.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Adelman and Taylor, 411.

<sup>27</sup> Zoltan Dörnyei, “Psychological Processes in Cooperative Language Learning: Group Dynamics and Motivation,” *Modern Language Journal* 81, 4 (1997): 482-493 (485).

<sup>28</sup> Dörnyei, 485.

<sup>29</sup> Robert E. Slavin, “Research on Cooperative Learning and Achievement: What We Know, What We Need to Know,” *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 21 (1996): 43-69 (46).

In view of the above arguments, group cohesiveness becomes one of the most important attributes of the successful communicative language class. It is therefore particularly critical for language teachers to understand how it evolves among learners. According to Dörnyei, “group cohesiveness develops gradually throughout the existence of the group.” It means the amount of time spent together and the shared group history are key factors that tend to develop stronger intermember ties. By far, the most crucial way of consciously fostering cohesiveness is to help students learn about each other by sharing genuine personal information. Dörnyei explains that “acceptance of another person does not occur without getting to know that person well; enemy images and a lack of tolerance often stem from insufficient information about the other party.”<sup>30</sup>

## A Case Study

The main theoretical issues outlined above were explored in a case study involving English majors at the regional campus of the Universidad de Costa Rica in Liberia, Guanacaste. The two groups chosen for the exploratory analysis are made up of undergraduate students in two different areas of specialization: bilingual primary education and English. An empirical observation reveals a few differences between both groups. The English majors seem to have more pride in their specialty, better group cohesiveness, and a stronger sense of independence and self-sufficiency. In contrast, the Education majors appear to be less united and not as proud of their academic choice. Indeed, even initial observations indicate a significant difference between the two groups.

For the purpose of eliciting information on their personal background, as well as on individual and team membership, a survey and a questionnaire were designed and implemented in both groups. The survey included two major areas of concern: team and individual

<sup>30</sup> Dörnyei, 492.

membership whereas the questionnaire included open-ended items such as the following: “Could you tell us something about your social background?”, “What is your opinion of the major you chose?”, “How do you feel in this class?”, etc. In addition, three professors wrote a few remarks comparing and contrasting both groups in terms of cohesiveness, social identity, motivation, and interactional tasks, and indicating which group is easier to teach.

The first group was made up of 15 students (53% women, 47% men) from 19 to 23 years of age, who were enrolled in the B.A. in English (B.E.) The second group included 11 students (82% women, 18% men) also from 19 to 23 years of age who were enrolled in the B.A. in Primary Education (P.E.). Figure 1 compares the levels of integration of the students in both groups.

**Figure 1. Group members make me feel like part of the group.**

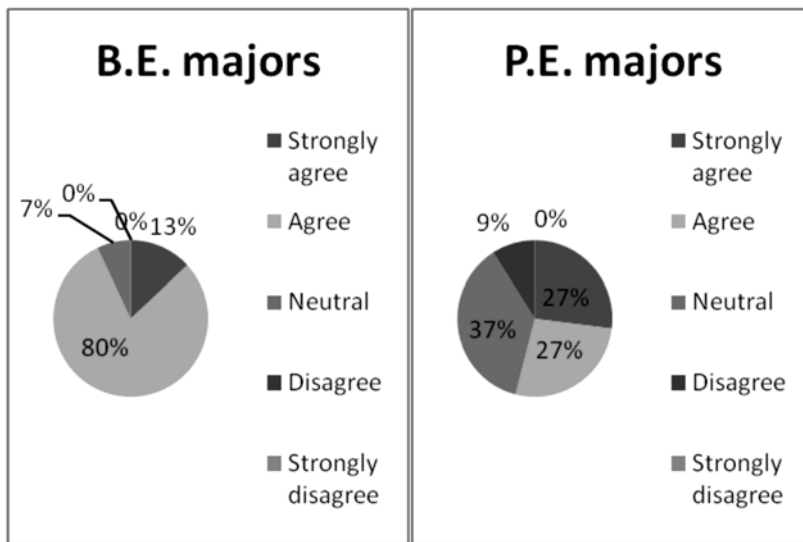


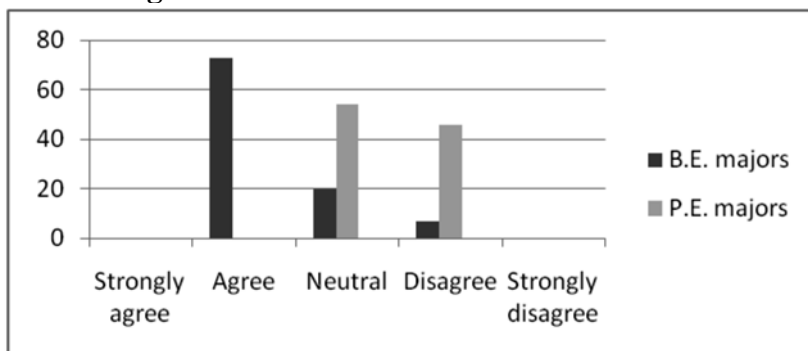
Figure 1 shows several aspects of group membership. The B.E. majors spend time getting to know each other and sharing information.

In regard to their sense of belonging, togetherness and unity, the majority of students felt part of the group and had a stronger sense of identity, as seen in: “I am myself. I feel proud of my identity.” One of the students wrote, “I am different from everyone in this group. I think differently, I dress differently and have different goals in life (...), and I really like that. I think that I am very talented. Because of the way I think, some of my partners think I am weird. ” These views are also evident in Professor Boes’ remarks: “This group is fairly cohesive, but there are several small groups within the group. Nonetheless, they work together well as a class. Social identity and motivation are good. Students carry out tasks well.”

The P.E. majors show more variability in their responses and express more doubt on group integration. Professor Boes thinks that “these students are not very much in tune with classmates or societal issues.” She says that “they are disinterested in the major and have plans to study something else.” The same opinion is provided by Professor Villanea who points out that “these students are not too close to each other.” They have formed two different subgroups, and even sit farther apart.

Figure 2 reveals information on the feelings of satisfaction and acceptance that individuals in both majors experience.

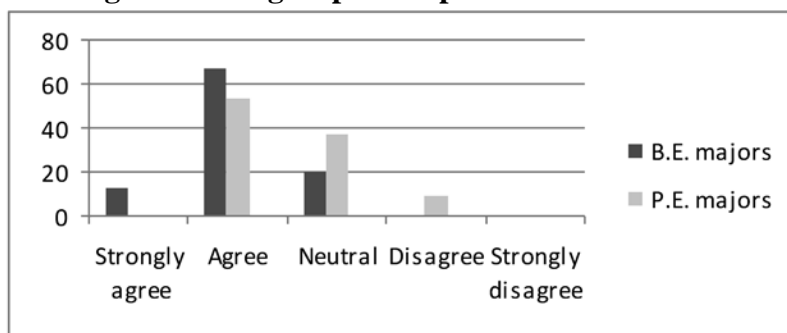
**Figure 2. The members make me feel liked.**



There is consensus regarding the B.E. students that they are accepted within the group. In contrast, the P.E. learners do not feel accepted in their group (as shown by a significant 54% who gave a neutral response). This lack of group bonds is also made evident by the fact that the students feel that no one would care if they miss classes or do not show up to any particular time or event. As Professor Villanea has stated: “This group is not responsive to motivation or interactional tasks. They avoid working in groups and their tendency is to remain passive during a class session. It is hard to create an interactive environment.”

Figure 3 shows group atmosphere as a variable that facilitates coexistence in a unified group.

**Figure 3. The group atmosphere is comfortable.**

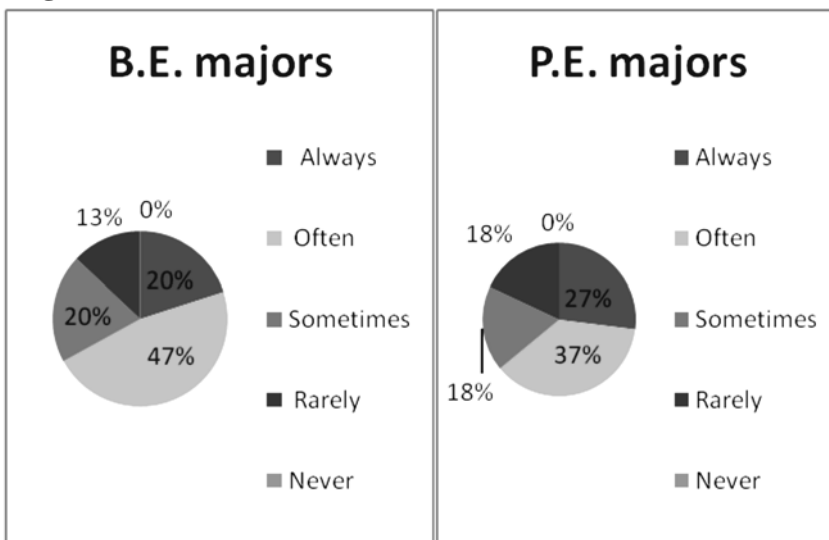


These results are evidence of a very good group atmosphere, rapport, and friendship among the B.E. group. Indeed, most of them reported feeling very comfortable in their major. One of the students wrote: “I can say that I feel comfortable studying English. When I am in class, I say what my mind tells me. My classmates are very good people. I cannot complain about them. They are very special.” This is not always the case in the other group where the feelings of “pleasantness” are clearly lower (54%) as the following remarks

indicate: “I do not feel motivated because some classes are very tiring and routinely.”

Figure 4 shows essential information regarding the aspect of social identity which is in part the focus of this paper. As mentioned before, social identity is a strong force that influences an interpersonal attraction among members. This “configuration of memberships” is determined by the norms and values in the group.

**Figure 4. Members have a common set of norms and values.**



These results reveal the trust and confidence among the B.E. students. Most learners agreed that they are attracted to the group members as they help one another feel part of it. A significant number of students agreed that they look forward to participating in group meetings. The results also are evidence of a sense of safety, confidence, caring and sharing, a sense of pride of their major, and a sense of superiority over the primary education majors. One student expressed this attitude as follows: “I think we are better prepared and

more dedicated than the students in the other major. They chose Education because they were not admitted in the major of their preference, not because they really want to teach. Besides, they never pass their courses.” Professor Carballo agrees that “B.E. students identify more with their major, they like it and defend it.”

In contrast, group cooperation, rapport, dissention, and group communication are not clearly observed in the P.E. group. In fact, opinions differ in terms of whether learners share common norms and values. Some students state that “they do not feel secure and confident” in the group, nor do they have a sense of pride in their major. Indeed, they report not being sure about continuing enrolled in it. Professor Carballo reinforces this issue: “Some students from primary education do not like their major, nor do they show any signs of identifying with it. Whereas the B.E. students are more willing to learn and participate, the primary education students avoid an active role in class and are harder to teach.” All three teachers agreed that they find it easier to work with the B.E. students.

## **Conclusion**

This research has explored the role of identity and cohesion in adult interactive language learning on the premise that a self-concept determines, to a large extent, our need to belong and socialize with language as the main medium. The case study conducted in two adult ESL classes is one of the few carried out in Costa Rica showing that the differences and similarities in social identity and group cohesion are real and may influence an appropriate social climate which is conducive to successful communication. The outcome of this study has supported the view that generating a comfortable, positive, constructive atmosphere might not always be a teacher’s responsibility since positive group dynamics and the resulting success in interaction may depend on the learners’ already formed self-image and the resulting group bonds they establish in the classroom.

In this particular case study, one of the strongest reasons that set apart both groups was the enormous variability displayed in their goals and reasons for undertaking second language learning. Thus, while the B.E. students exhibited a clear direction in terms of academic goals and future perspectives, the P.E. students were at a loss for precise aspirations as many even stated their interest in looking for another academic option. Perhaps this explains why the B.E. learners showed a deeper sense of unity and togetherness, and shared common norms and group objectives. They made attempts to getting together outside the educational context and were easily involved in class and extracurricular activities. On the other hand, the P.E. learners were not likely to foster a positive social climate other than their being immersed in the same classroom and educational context. Results show that although these learners get along well, they lack the necessary level of motivation to engage in extracurricular activities.

As the experts cited in this paper argue, the more cohesive a group is, the more interaction and organization exists, and this in turn facilitates conversation-oriented methodologies. Consequently, since group cohesiveness does not come as an endowment or a gift, the similarities and differences found in both groups of learners suggest the need to approach interactive language learning differently. As Brown and Levinson argue, “speech is one of the most important ways in which one presents a personal image for others to evaluate, both through what one says and the way one says it.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, an awareness of students’ personal identities is essential if one wants to help them socialize harmoniously via language.

Finally, adult language interactivity may or may not be enriched by the identity and personal image that members have been able to build. The language learning experience only becomes a socialization endeavor as long as individuals share a common set of norms and values and integrate an alliance in pursuing common group goals and personal objectives.

<sup>31</sup> Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 56.