

Study shows social positioning may affect student learning

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Teachers can help their students who are learning English as a second language by understanding how a process called social positioning affects them, University of Arkansas professor Hayriye Kayi-Aydar writes in a paper published this fall in *TESOL Quarterly*.

TESOL Quarterly is the peer-reviewed publication of TESOL International Association. TESOL stands for teachers of English to speakers of other languages.

"We all have assumptions about students," Kayi-Aydar said. "We assign positions to students in our classrooms, but we need to let them have more influence over their positions."

Social positioning theory says that people take on various positions within groups and assign positions to others, mostly through talking, according to research cited in Kayi-Aydar's article. Social status, gender, race and culture may impact positioning, which may change over time as relationships between people evolve.

Positions, unlike roles such as Christian, woman, student or mother, are situation-specific, disputed, challenged, shifting and, therefore, dynamic, Kayi-Aydar said. For example, in a classroom, asking a student the question, "What do you think about this thesis statement?" is at the same time positioning that student as an "evaluator." Some other possible positions that are constructed in and through talk are "contributor," "initiator," "interrupter" and "negotiator."

Kayi-Aydar collected data for her dissertation and subsequent journal articles while observing adult students in an English as a Second Language course over 15 weeks while she was a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin. She recorded interviews with students in the ESL class and their teacher. The students also kept journals for her.

Teachers can shape the positioning that goes on in a positive way, she said. For example, they can create activities for students to help them feel comfortable about talking about themselves and their backgrounds, while encouraging others to appreciate their cultural diversity and bilingual abilities, she said.

"As a classroom teacher, we are not always aware of the power of talk," Kayi-Aydar said. "The way we interact with students and with others is very important because this interaction is one way students create identities for themselves and for others. When students are being positioned in negative ways about their ability to learn, for example, that can be painful for adults, as I saw in my study. I can't imagine how difficult that would be for younger students."

Kayi-Aydar presented case studies of two talkative students in the TESOL Quarterly article. One of the students became an accepted member of the class and the other student was excluded in several ways. Both were knowledgeable and competent in class, but the rest of the group positioned one as an outsider. The group accepted the other student because of his ability to build friendships with particular students and use humor to communicate.

Because the other student was socially accepted, he was able to interact more with his peers in various classroom tasks and activities, Kayi-Aydar said.

"Given the significant role of communication in second-language

acquisition and development, this [student](#) was in a better position as a language learner," she said.

Kayi-Aydar found that positioning can lead to more and better language-acquisition experiences for some students and to few and poorer experiences for others. Her study suggested that positioning not only shapes interactions but also contributes to one's identity over time across various conversations.

Most research on social positioning has been done with students in math and science classrooms in kindergarten through 12th grades, Kayi-Aydar said, making her one of the first researchers to use social positioning as a theoretical framework in a study of an ESL classroom.

"For years, second-language acquisition courses have focused on teaching vocabulary and improving listening and speaking skills, but we are not computers," she said. "It's not just input and output, and we don't live in a vacuum. We live in a social context. When students are learning about a new culture, they are forming new identities as part of the setting. It can be a personal transformation for them. An understanding of identity construction and reconstruction can help immensely in learning a second language. It's really important for teachers to understand who their students are, where they come from and how they negotiate identities in a new cultural setting."

Kayi-Aydar, who is a native of Turkey, joined the faculty of the College of Education and Health Professions last year. She teaches in the department of curriculum and instruction, which began offering a master's degree in TESOL this fall. She expects to continue her research with local classrooms.

"I want to build a relationship between public schools and higher education to conduct classroom-based research to give us a better

understanding of how teachers interact with their students," Kayi-Aydar said. "As teacher-educators, we need to better prepare our students to lead effective classroom discussions."

More information: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ...
02/tesq.139/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/tesq.139/abstract)

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