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**TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE LEARNER
DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNERS' SELF-CONCEPTS: AN
EXPLORATORY PRACTICE APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT

This study arose out of a classroom-based approach to language teaching and learning which focused on the development of learners' L2 self-awareness through a series of Learner Development Activities (LDAs). Guided by the principles of Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2003; 2005) the study involved the use of pedagogic procedures as the investigative tools to provide "opportunities for teachers and learners to work for their local understandings of their classroom lives" (Gieve & Miller, 2006, p. 21). Framed by sociocultural and poststructuralist theories, this study understood learners' L2 self-development as being socially, historically and culturally situated.

Specifically, this study sought to understand: 1) the ways in which the LDAs contributed to the quality of classroom life; 2) the learners' self-conceptualisations as language learners and users as they participated in learning and social contexts (past, present and imagined future); and 3) how the learners negotiated their selves along their learning trajectories. Qualitative data were collected from the learners' visual representations of their language learning experiences created during the LDAs, learning journals, follow-up interviews and the teacher-as-researcher's journal.

The results of the study indicate that the LDAs encouraged the students to reflect on and make metaphors of themselves, their learning trajectories and the significance of their experiences as language learners and users. The findings also suggest that learners' conceptualisations of their L2 selves are multifaceted, dynamic and social and contextually situated, and are formed through the learners' interactions with others and the environment and their reflections and evaluations of such interactions. As such, the learners' self-concepts can be represented as an ecology of interrelated factors, both internal and external to the learner.

The study serves to demonstrate the ways in which language teachers may seek their own understandings of the language classroom and to bring teachers' and learners' experiences to the fore. Further, it highlights the importance of employing an approach to language learner development which recognises them as agentive individuals, with unique identities, personal goals, motives and feelings, all which are reflected the complex system of social and contextual relations and experiences in which the learner is situated.

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She didn't need to understand the meaning of life; it was enough to find someone who did, and then fall asleep in his arms and sleep as a child sleeps, knowing that someone stronger than you is protecting you from all evil and all danger. (Coelho, 1990)

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