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Ego Boundaries as Determinants of Success in Foreign Language Learning — A State-of-the-Art Perspective

1. Introduction

Following Selinker's opinion that "a theory of second language learning that does not provide a central place for individual differences among learners cannot be considered acceptable," (1972: 213) the goal of the present paper is to shed light on the issue of ego boundaries and the influence they exert on foreign language learning.

The concept of *ego* is by far one of the most widely analysed and applied notions, from traditional psychoanalytic school, through social psychology to educational studies (Ehrman 1998). Linked with various terms, such as the *self* or *identity*, it has become a blanket term applied in numerous characteristics of human individuality and socialization. Identity development takes place in three general dimensions — referring to personality, cognition and environment, and the combination of these three variables decides about people's approach to external events — some individuals prefer to change them, whereas some allow the events to shape their identities (Berzonsky 1990).

Ego boundaries, a term stemming from ego psychology, can be analysed from two perspectives — as a personality variable and a cognitive style — and as such determine individual successes and failures in second language learning. Firstly, ego boundaries tend to be described as a personality trait enabling individuals to compartmentalize different experiences and emotions, protect their identities against miscellaneous influences from the outside world and preserve fragile balance between various conceptual divisions (Ehrman 1999). What is more, the degree to which boundaries influence people's perception of themselves and the world

around them depends on the permeability and flexibility of the boundaries (Hartmann 1991). Secondly, when considered a learning style, thin or thick boundary structure determines learners' qualities and preferences — from conceptual rigidity to cognitive flexibility (Ehrman 1999).

Second language learning, which in some cases can be seen as a possible source of ambiguity and stress, hence, a threat to the learner's positive self-concept, appears to be influenced by the structure of one's ego boundaries. Suffice it to say that learners struggling to master a second language not only face complex cognitive tasks, but also take part in various social interactions, for which, because of their limited second language resources, they are not always prepared. According to Brown (1991), in their attempts to master a new tongue, second language learners construct separate *language identities*, whose formation and functioning will be also addressed in the following sections of the present paper.

2. Ego boundaries as a personality variable

Understanding the mind equals being able to predict, analyse and interpret human motivations and behaviour, the reasons people undertake or abandon certain actions, find certain tasks easy and amusing, whereas other difficult and boring, and, finally, sometimes feel tense or uncomfortable while performing them.

One of the researchers interested in human mind was the psychologist Ernest Hartmann, who coined the term *ego boundary* to describe yet another personality trait allowing us to understand individual development (Hartmann 1991). In the course of his research into personality dimensions among individuals with sleeping disorders, he came to a conclusion that since so many subjects are similar with respect to their intelligence, learning styles, introversion/extraversion, social background, etc., there must be room for another individual difference that would comprise many already existing factors, but which would also shed some light on the reasons of people's complaints. According to Hartmann, "one's identity — the inner, not entirely conscious, sense of *self* — involves a number of important boundaries" (1991: 40). Ego boundary is not a homogeneous term, but contrariwise, a complex dimension encompassing various, often bipolar, categories such as openness/reserve, autonomy/dependence or defensiveness/defenselessness. In other words, this "mental map" (Hartmann 1991: 20) describes the way people build relationships with others and view the world. Some people construct demarcation lines and group feelings and experiences. Other individuals are the reverse — they enjoy closeness with others and are open to miscellaneous happenings. Another thing is that people's boundaries decide about the degree of their autonomy (Rapaport 1958). Rapaport, however, pointed out that there can never be complete autonomy, as both inner and outer factors always exert some degree of influence on the individual. It is also unlikely that some people lack any ego boundaries;

nevertheless, in some cases the boundaries are not strong enough to predominantly determine human actions.

3. Ego boundaries as a learning style

Ego boundaries, apart from the role they play in psychology, were diagnosed to exert important influence on language learning. According to Ehrman (1993), the importance of this factor is directly proportional to the complexity and lack of structure of the learning task. The same author introduced a relationship between ego boundaries and four abilities to:

- absorb new information,
- store contradictory data without censoring or rejecting any,
- sustain interest and critical enquiry into incomplete information,
- reorganize the already existing intellectual, emotional and social schemata when confronted with new information (Ehrman 1993).

The above abilities depend on the degree of boundary structure, its permeability and flexibility. Hartmann (1991) observed that individuals with thin boundaries adapt easily to circumstances, are cognitively and emotionally flexible, intuitive, creative, open to new stimuli, and, at the same time, less organized, perfectionist, down-to-earth or guarded than thick-boundary individuals. Also Peirce (1995) observed that flexibility of the *self* and, in consequence, motivation to learn a foreign language depends greatly on the circumstances. When it comes to language learning, people with thinner ego boundaries often outperform their peers with thick boundaries, have higher language aptitude, rely on intuition, are less analytic in their approach to learning, but experience higher anxiety (Ehrman 1993). Contrariwise, having thick boundaries may lead to problems with adapting to new linguistic or cultural data (Ehrman and Oxford 1995).

In their research on adult language learning, Ehrman and Oxford (1995) investigated the relationship between one more individual difference, namely language learner preference for the use of certain strategies as measured by the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL) (Oxford 1989) and ego boundaries as measured by the *Hartmann Boundary Questionnaire* (HBQ) (Hartmann 1991). They focused on the use of compensation, metacognitive, memory and affective strategies and compared it to the number of points subjects scored on the HBQ subscales. Compensation and affective strategies correlated positively with high number of points on the thin end of the boundary continuum, whereas metacognitive and memory strategies correlated positively with high number of points on the opposite, thick end. The first finding may suggest that individuals with thin boundaries are able to compensate, as they are flexible, can easily adapt to new circumstances, are creative, emotional and, above all, find little difficulty in dealing with contradictory and confusing data. Such learners, when faced with obstacles or

failure, do not give up; quite the opposite, they try to solve the problem with an appropriate strategy. In addition, referring to feelings and emotions as well as being able to use them effectively was found to be a positive prognostic for success in the case of learners with thin ego boundaries (Ehrman and Oxford 1995).

When it comes to the second group of strategies, the findings cannot be called surprising in the light of arguments already presented in this paper. Metacognitive and memory strategies are preferred by thick-boundary people, who appreciate order, clear rules and planning. Attempting to compartmentalize the learning process as well as evaluating the usefulness of input is characteristic of those learners. Moreover, memory strategies can be effective providing they are designed and applied systematically and in an orderly way.

4. The concept of language ego

Understanding and expressing one's unique identity is one of the most immediate human needs. There is no better or more natural way to express it and to get feedback during social interactions than through the use of language. The moment the first words are uttered, much about the speaker is revealed, for example information about the nationality, social-economic background, educational refinement, age or even various preferences. Fluent first language users, in contrast to second language learners, face almost no difficulty in communicating (Brown 1991).

This situation changes in the case of foreign language learning, when the learner, at least at the beginner level, lacks the resources necessary to communicate freely. As Horwitz and Young observed: "Complex and non-spontaneous operations are required to communicate at all, any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator ... Adult language learners' self-perceptions of genuineness in presenting themselves to others may be threatened by the limited range of meaning and affect that can be immediately communicated (1991: 31).

In line with the above are the general findings by Ornstein and Ehrlich (1989), who stressed that in social interactions, individuals tend to present themselves in such a way as to be perceived by others in a desired way. One of the components of this peculiar manipulation is language and since L2 learners are far from proficient, they are deprived of one of their basic social strategies. On the one hand, the learners may be afraid of being misinterpreted and, on the other hand, their social intercourse becomes restricted to the very basics, which carries the risk of them being accused of socio-linguistic incompetence (Pellegrino-Aveni 2005). Defenseless and vulnerable, they often feel discouraged and succumb to their inhibitions (Guiora 1972). In their discussion on the reasons for the critical or sensitive period in second language learning, Gass and Selinker (2008) also refer to socio-psychological explanations why some adults, more often than children, show

reluctance to learn a new language. They believe that a person's eagerness to relax one's well-established identity to a degree allowing to develop a new *language self* diminishes with age. What is more, learners often feel frustrated (Price 1991), infantilized or ridiculed as well as experience strong *dysphoric tension* prevalent in both naturalistic and classroom L2 environments (Spielmann and Radnofsky 2001). These observations are in line with some earlier theories on foreigner talk by Ferguson and DeBose (1977, in Ellis 2008) or Hatch (1983, in Ellis 2008), according to whom one of the functions of this particular form of interaction may be expressing native speakers' attitudes towards non-native speakers, the attitudes which do not have to be positive (like in the case of *downward divergence*).

Harder (1980) provided yet another instance of possible adverse effect of using L2 by its learners. He wrote about personality reduction and suggested that one of the techniques used by threatened learners is avoidance, which, in consequence, may lead to insufficient practice and further communication problems.

The first researcher who adopted the psychological ego concept to the sphere of foreign language learning was Alexander Guiora who coined the term *language ego* — a notion characterizing the state in which the learner acts “and feels like a different person when speaking a second language and often indeed acts very differently as well” (Guiora & Acton 1979: 199). Among the researchers whose findings support Guiora's observations are Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001), in whose study learners reported the development of a second identity while learning a second language. Also Peirce (1995) supported this point of view by writing about multiple language identities an individual takes when confronted with members of a different culture group. A complementary view on language ego was presented by Brown (1991), who defined it as the measure of how closely self-concept and language are interlinked. Language ego is closely connected with the primal L1 identity and abilities, and the better they are developed, the higher the chance for a mature and strong second language ego. Since L2 learning is a stressful process, a well-developed language ego allows learners to overcome inhibition and anxiety, accept the necessity of being exposed to badinage or criticism, and also to get used to committing errors (Philips 1991). Weak language egos may bring failure in L2 learning (Guiora et al. 1972).

Guiora was predominantly interested in the relationship between language ego, its permeability and flexibility, and foreign language pronunciation. He observed that ego boundaries, at their early stages of development, are flexible enough to enable the learners to acquire almost native-like pronunciation. Since ego boundaries tend to lose their permeability with age (Guiora et al. 1972; Hartmann 1991; Guiora 1994), the ability to reach excellent pronunciation is possible only at a young age. The older learners grow, the less possible it becomes for them to dispose of the L1 language accent (Guiora et al. 1975). Guiora and his associates thus continue: “With pronunciation viewed as the core of language ego, and as the most critical contribution of language ego to self-representation, we see that the early flexibility

of ego boundaries is reflected in the ease of assimilating native-like pronunciation by young children; the later reduced flexibility is reflected in the reduction of this ability in adults” (1975: 46).

Even though Guiora and his associates concentrated their efforts on increasing language ego permeability to improve L2 pronunciation, their attempts resulted in only qualified success. Their major goal was to decrease inhibitions while speaking, thus the members of their research groups were given small amounts of alcohol or Valium. By so doing the researchers were able to prove that strong inhibitions (significantly correlating with ego boundaries) are responsible for the flaws in pronunciation and that it is possible, even though temporarily, to improve pronunciation through relaxing one’s language ego boundaries (Guiora et al. 1972; 1980). Comparable experiments with similar results, but this time with the use of hypnosis, were done by Schumann et al. (1978). These findings, however, allowed for no practical classroom implications. Hudson and Bruckman (2002), on the other hand, who investigated the influence of online environment on language learning with respect to the language ego model, found that students who had a chance to learn and practise a foreign language via Internet performed better than students in traditional classroom setting. The opportunity to give delayed responses proved a significant language ego boundaries relaxing factor.

5. Good and bad learners

Taking all the above into consideration, some general characteristics of thin- and thick-boundary learners can be introduced. Members of the first group prefer content-based curricula, as they find little discomfort while expressing thoughts and ideas, and tend to treat form and structure as of secondary importance. What is more, they prefer non-linear approaches to teaching and learning, with many elements presented at one time. This is because thin-boundary people handle spontaneous and unexpected situations very well and feel comfortable being presented with the “big picture,” rather than single pieces of information. Segmenting data poses a threat to their general mode of perception (Ehrman 1996).

Thick-boundary students usually occupy the opposite pole on the scale of educational preferences. They feel best in well-organized classrooms with a structured curriculum and as few unexpected events as possible. Furthermore, they avoid role-plays and scenarios requiring spontaneous reactions, especially when such scenarios assume modifications to identity (Ehrman 1996).

An extremely useful description of both types of learners was provided by Ehrman in her work on language learning difficulties (Ehrman 1996), where the researcher introduced the cases of two students: a male (representing thick ego boundaries) and a female (representing thin ego boundaries). The thick-boundary learner structured his learning by giving precedence to grammar and vocabulary

learning, which usually took the form of completing numbers of exercises, and only later participated in communicative tasks, such as role-plays or discussions, which required language mastery for which he was often not ready. He was nothing but a perfectionist, felt insecure when not rightly prepared for the lesson, and thereby spent a lot of time working. This attitude prevented him from having breaks and made him feel uncomfortable when he did. Another thing about this learner was that he preferred neatly organized tasks with clear rules and explicit goals.

The other, thin-boundary student adopted a completely different attitude. She enjoyed unstructured lessons, with diversity of materials and plenty of tasks requiring imagination or taking roles. Using the language abroad posed no threat to her self-esteem and, instead of doing exercises, she favoured learning through experience and exposure. What is more, she liked when all information was presented at once, so that she could try to build a whole picture out of it.

In their comprehensive study on the role of feelings and personality in language learning, Leaver, Ehrman and Shekhtman (2005) also provide the readers with a plethora of examples from classroom context in which thin-boundary learners typically feel comfortable. One of such is a lesson, especially at the elementary level, rich in new input (for instance a reading task or a film), with plenty of unstructured and unknown vocabulary and grammar, during which students with most permeable ego boundaries will guess, interpret, but hardly ever feel insecure. Nonetheless, high level of boundary permeability appears to be a double-edged sword as there are also instances when it makes students feel overwhelmed with the material, unable to separate useful knowledge from irrelevant data and too tolerant of ambiguities.

When it comes to thick-boundary language learners, Leaver, Ehrman and Shekhtman (2005) convince that this type of learning style requires lucid explanations of grammar and unambiguous word translations, preferably from a bilingual dictionary. At the same time, however, it may reduce one's empathy and hinder adaptation to new learning situations. Even though these two examples are extreme, they explain the general differences between learners, which are due to their boundary flexibility. At first glance, it may seem that both groups of students must experience severe difficulties in the language classroom, either because of insufficient organization or due to the surfeit of it. Nevertheless, a vast majority of language learners manages to overcome, at least temporarily, those difficulties with the use of different ego-related mechanisms such as *regression* (thick boundaries) or *accommodation* (thin boundaries) (Ehrman 1999).

Another important point in the comparison between thick- and thin-boundary students is their resistance to stress. It was found by Hartmann (1991) that good organizational skills, rigidity, reliability and perseverance are among the qualities which help thick-boundary people keep composure in the case of an unexpected stressful situation, but also cope with prolonged stress, for example before difficult examinations. Another thing observed by the same researcher (1991) is that in the

case of long-term stress, boundaries, irrespective of their original level of permeability, may thicken with time and become less flexible.

What is more, boundaries may thicken as a result of considerable short-term stress, for example, it is possible that someone facing strident criticism will employ various defensive mechanisms. A thick-boundary person is thus better equipped to deal with stress (Hartmann 1991).

6. Teaching implications and possibilities of further research

Taking all the theoretical tenets and the results of the research findings presented above into consideration, it becomes clear that the relationship between ego boundaries, understood as both a personality dimension and a cognitive style, language ego and foreign language learning requires further investigation. First of all, following the constructivist approach to the investigation of individual learner differences (Williams & Burden 1997), it is of paramount importance to search for teaching implications and draw up action plans which would enable learners to manage their own learning process with respect to their unique qualities. Since we lack statistical data on the influence of the above-mentioned variables on particular skills or language aspects, it appears necessary to consider those elements in further research. Taking into consideration the nature of the ego boundary construct, oral skills, albeit pronunciation has received a more in-depth analysis, deserve precedence over reading or writing. Secondly, ego boundaries may serve as a predictor of language learning difficulties, hence incorporating this concept into the individual learner differences framework may be of use not only for teachers, but also learners themselves in their struggle for more autonomous learning process. Moreover, students who are unable to cope with classroom procedures, for instance due to their disadvantageous ego boundary structure, may engage in only seemingly effective protective strategies (Berglas & Jones 1978; Ehrman & Dörnyei 1998). As it is the teachers' role to act in response to students needs, they should systematically monitor classroom behaviours in order to offer suitable remedies — not only on temporary, but also long-term basis — as well as reconsider their teaching plans to cater for their students' specific needs.

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