

Chinese Students' Person Identity and English Learning: A Qualitative Study of Chinese Postgraduates

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between Chinese students' person identity and their English learning in the mainland of China. In-depth interviews were conducted, with five Chinese postgraduates being the participants. It was revealed that the students' person identity expression was restricted by their unsatisfactory English proficiency, which indicates that it is difficult for them to keep an authentic self-concept while using English. Also, the students' investment of time and energy into English learning after class was found to be rather limited, which is an important reason for their unsatisfactory English proficiency. Based on this study, it is suggested that Chinese students and teachers of English should be aware of the sociocultural context and the status of English as a foreign language in the mainland of China and increase the investment of time and energy voluntarily after class to improve the students' English proficiency and sense of authenticity in using English.

Keywords: person identity; authenticity; English proficiency; investment; Chinese postgraduates

1. Introduction

The relationship between social identity and second language learning has been a research focus in the field of second language acquisition for several decades. A breakthrough in the area of sociocultural study of second language learning was made with Peirce's (1995) social identity theory of second language learning. Peirce's theory was widely recognized and many studies were carried out, borrowing academic wisdom from it and at the same time, critically examining its fundamental concepts, for example: McKay and Wong (1996), Morgan (1997) and Pittaway (2004), in which important theoretical reflections on 'investment' which is an important component of Peirce's social identity theory, were made and new understandings were presented. Out of the academic wealth of all the studies came into being the research approach- the sociocultural theory of second language learning, and themes of research emerged. Norton (2006a, 2006b) identified four major research themes: 'identity and investment', 'identity and imagined communities', 'identity categories and educational change', and 'identity and literacy'.

A fundamental belief in the sociocultural identity theory of second language learning is that social context has influence on the interaction between social identity and second language learning (Norton, 2006a, 2006b). Many previous studies were focused on second language learning in an immigrant context while some were targeted on context in the 'outer circle' countries as they are classified in Kachru's (1992) theory. That is, English is learned as a foreign language in those countries. Several of these studies were carried out in the mainland of China. For example, Gao (2008), Gao and Liu (2009), Gao, Zhao, Cheng and Zhou (2007), and Gu (2008). Close examination of these studies revealed that they shared a common theme on identity change and English learning. This study is expected to join these studies in the discussion of identity and learning English in the mainland of China but from a different perspective. It is focused on the relationship between person identity and learning English as a foreign language in the mainland of China. Its target population is postgraduate students of the English department in universities. Generally speaking, those students are expected to be a group of people who have access to the best resources for learning English. This study is expected to contribute to the understanding of the interaction between learning English as a foreign language and the learners' person identity in the mainland of China and contribute to the theoretical speculation on the expression of authentic self and second language learning which was brought to light by the wisdom of scholars such as Horwitz (2009) who offered the perspective of 'authentic self-presentation via the L2' on the evaluation of learners' second language competence.

2. Literature Review

There is rich research literature of Chinese students' learning English as a second language in the field of sociocultural identity theory of second language learning. Among the previous studies, studies carried out in immigrant contexts, such as Arkoudis and Love (2008), Gao (2010), McKay and Wong (1996), do offer profound insights into the issue of identity and second language learning. So do studies of identity, investment and learning English as a second language in Hong Kong which is a special administrative region of China and was a former British colony, for example Gao, Cheng and Kelly (2008), and Trent (2008). However, the scope of this study and detailed review of previous research literature are limited to the learning of English in the mainland of China. A primary reason for this decision is the concern that the sociocultural context of English learning in the mainland of China is different from that of the immigrant context in the above-mentioned countries or regions. In these countries and regions, English is or once was an official language while in the mainland of China, English is never an official language. It is a foreign language. And, as reviewed systematically in Niu (2008), policies on foreign language education have undergone shifts and reforms during the 20th century. There are many more factors contributing to the differences in sociocultural context, which deserves systematic research with deep exploration and is certainly beyond the scope of the current study.

Close reading of research literature of Chinese students' English learning and identity in the mainland of China revealed that the relationship between identity change and the students' English learning emerged as a theme of research.

English learning was found to have influence on the change in identity of Chinese students. In Gao, Cheng, Zhao and Zhou's (2005) study of the association between self-identity change and English learning of mainland Chinese undergraduates, the influence of English learning on the six categories of self-identity change was investigated: "...self-confidence, subtractive bilingualism, additive bilingualism, productive bilingualism, identity split, and zero change" (Gao et al., 2005, p 39). It was found that 'self-confidence' was strongly influenced by English learning and factors such as sex, starting age of learning, college major and English proficiency had significant association with various categories of self-identity change (Gao et al., 2005).

English learning motivation of Chinese students was noted as a research focus in relation to their identity change. Gao et al. (2007) investigated the relationship between English learning motivations and self-identity changes of Chinese students. With the quantitative study of big data, they found seven types of English learning motivations of Chinese students, for example, intrinsic interest, immediate achievement and so on. And, of particular interest to the current study are their findings of Chinese students' self-identity changes and their relationship with the motivations of English learning.

Gao et al. (2007) found the following:

..., the most prominent self-identity change for the Chinese participants occurred in self-confidence. The second highest score appeared under zero change, probably indicating the instrumental nature of learning in EFL contexts, and to a certain extent, the shortage of target culture exposure. Meanwhile, the cultural aspects of learner identity did undergo some change, especially the productive and additive type. It indicated that productive bilingualism was not limited to those designated as best language learners; it also existed among ordinary university undergraduates. (p. 172)

In terms of the relationship between English learning motivations and self-identity changes, the primary conclusion of the study is that "...there was a strong relationship between intrinsic interest on the one hand, and productive and additive changes on the other." (Gao et al, 2007, p 148)

And, the factor of time was highlighted in the influence on the relationship between Chinese students' identity change and motivations of English learning. In Xu and Gao's (2014) longitudinal study of mainland Chinese university students' motivation types and identity change, association between these two factors was found and the interaction changed with time. According to their findings, initially the motivation type had a stronger influence on the identity changes but with time going on, from the 2nd year of the students' study, the former's influence started to decrease while the latter's began to increase. Specifically, "[s]ignificant correlations existed between individual development motivation and positive self-confidence identity change, between going-abroad motivation and subtractive identity change." (Xu & Gao, 2014, p 111).

As the identity change was confirmed to occur in relation to English learning, it is natural to wonder whether English learning would be a threat to Chinese students' ethnic identity. The possibility was denied by the study of Liu and Zhao (2011) of mainland Chinese university students' language attitudes towards English learning. It was revealed in that study that the students were proud of their Chinese ethnic identity and thought that their mother tongue, Chinese, was more important than English. Based on this finding, Liu and Zhao (2011) concluded that learning English was not a threat to the students' ethnic identity.

Besides the identity change, there are several other research focuses concerning Chinese students' English learning and identity. The relationship between strategies of learning English and identity construction was focused on in Gao's (2008) study. In the interpretive inquiry study of the influence of sociocultural context on mainland Chinese students' learning strategy, Gao (2008) found that the students adopted an exam-oriented strategy and one reason for it was that good grades achieved in exams would be helpful with the students' construction of favorable social identities in the educational setting, such as a 'hero', before peers.

Similarly, Gu (2008) studied identity construction, participation in two communities (a Chinese educated urban community and an English speaking Christian community) and the motivation to learn English of three female college students from non-urban areas in the mainland of China. The study presented the students' efforts to construct their desirable identities, which are related to the white middle-class women image to some extent, in an urban setting through communication with native English speakers of the Christian community. At the same time, the study revealed the students' confusion and struggle mainly due to the gap between their imagined identity and their reality in the immediate sociocultural context. This study is informative of the identity issues of Chinese female college students from non-urban areas and lends insights into reflections on the person identity and second language learning. But it is worth noting that the research findings of this study would be better understood in the light of sociologists' expertise on the situation of the target population. The restraints on the target population's access to, for example, economic and educational resources should be noted. And, in Gu's study the students' English language proficiency was not paid enough attention to, the information being restricted to the students' English major or science major (non-English major) categories.

Besides, the influence of social-class identity on Chinese students' English learning was attended to in recent years. Gao (2014) reviewed several empirical studies of the relationship between Chinese learners' English learning and their social-class identity and concluded that Chinese learners' social-class identity in the contemporary society of China was a contributing factor to their learning of English, however, the influence of it was not quite strong. In her own longitudinal study of six Chinese students who attended long-term programmes of language schools in UK, Gao (2010) also revealed that there was a possible association between Chinese learners' social-class and their English learning.

In summary, the relationship between English learning and identity change emerged as a theme of research on Chinese students' English learning and identity in the context of the mainland of China and factors, such as motivations, time, strategies for English learning and social class, have been addressed.

Based on the previous studies, this study aims at investigating Chinese students' person identity and their English learning and is expected to make some contribution to deepening the understanding of the relationship between Chinese students' identity and English learning in the context of the mainland of China.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The qualitative research method was adopted in this study. Research questions addressed in this study include:

1. How is the subjects' English proficiency?
2. What is the subjects' self-perception of the fundamental characteristics of their personality?
3. What are the subjects' opinions about the relationship between their English proficiency and the expression of their personality?

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews. Five participants were invited. They were all postgraduate students of the school of English language and literature in a university in Beijing, China. They were majoring in linguistics, English literature and translation study. Three of them are male students. For the convenience of data analysis results presentation, the participants are given aliases: Sophie, Philip, Beth, John and

Ingrid, Sophie, Beth and Ingrid are female students majoring in Linguistics; Philip and John are male students majoring in Translation Studies.

All the interviews were conducted in mandarin Chinese which is the official language of China and is the first language of all the participants. Every interview lasted about 40 minutes. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded.

Coding was carried out to analyze the data. At the initial stage of data analysis, the recordings were transcribed. After that, close examination of the transcription was carried out. The transcriptions were analyzed line-by-line in constant comparison in order to summarize basic ideas that reveal the subjects' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences in common.

4. Findings

4.1 Proficiency in English

The participants reported their scores of standardized tests for English proficiency such as TEM (Test for English Majors) and CET (College English Test) in the mainland of China. Their scores range from 60 to 75 out of 100, which shows that their proficiency in English is average. None of the participants has taken internationally credited tests such as IELTS and TOFEL.

4.2 Personality Traits and the Expression in English

The participants were asked to describe their main personality traits and their self-expression in English. It is worth noting that regardless of their respective personality traits, all of them except Ingrid reported they had difficulties in expressing themselves in English. And, they attributed their difficulty in expressing themselves in English to their unsatisfactory English language proficiency.

Sophie: I'm a person of extreme sense of insecurity so sometimes I see 'retreating' as a distinctive characteristics of my personality. And, I always think of the worst situation when I should make a decision.

I'm more 'reserved' when speaking in English. I will avoid arguing with people because if I say I disagree with him/her, I need to say a lot more to support my stance. I think it's because my oral English is not good.

Philip: I consider myself a deep person. I have difficulty in expressing myself in English. When I communicate with a foreigner, I can understand him or her quickly. But, it's quite difficult for me to speak out what I want to say.

Beth: I'm good at learning, very careful and a little bit stern, especially before strangers but I am a kind person.

My personality is an obstacle to my learning of English. If I speak in English, I believe people can understand me but I just don't want to do so. And, I think because my English is not very good, I do not want to speak.

John: Firstly, I'm quite sociable. That is, I like to communicate with people of various types. Secondly, I'm very diligent with researching and acquiring knowledge about what I'm interested in.

My English proficiency is not sufficient for me to talk concisely and precisely. I can only say something in a general way and I have difficulty in providing details in English.

Ingrid: I'm very frank. I am very warm-hearted and I like helping people. I feel all right in expressing myself in English. English is quite direct. I feel it easier to learn English than to learn Chinese.

4.3 The Understanding of the Role of English in Their Life

The three women participants showed an 'instrumental' approach in their attitudes towards the role of English in their life, while the two men participants considered English as 'an art' or 'a way of thinking'. The women participants generally saw English as an instrument to facilitate their pursuits in making-a-living and career development. And, even though Philip would like to consider English as 'an art' and 'part of his life', he admitted that English was an instrument, at the same time.

Sophie: I think English is a 'platform' for me. 'Standing on this platform', I can apply for positions in foreign companies or organizations of foreign affairs. Jobs there require for good proficiency in English so people of poor English proficiency would be 'shut out of the door'.

Philip: I really don't want to say that English is an instrument but it is. It is a very powerful instrument. But I would like to see it as an art. It is part of my life.

Beth: I think I have to make a living with English. What's more, if I can be a teacher of English, I can have a sense of achievements from teaching kids.

John: I think it is problematic to see English as an instrument. To me, it is away of thinking of foreign culture. My mother tongue is the essence and foreign languages are 'modifiers' to it as fur is covering an animal's skin.

Ingrid: English is essential to my career development. Besides, it is helpful to my self-improvement. It can help me to broaden my vision.

4.4 The Influence of Learning English

All the participants confirmed that learning English had influence on them. Major influences include changes in the way of thinking, interests in culture and vision-broadening.

Sophie: There must be some changes. For example, we read in English and we can have some understanding of the British and American culture and customs through the reading. And, we are influenced unconsciously.

Philip: I think learning languages does have influence on me. Some thinking will be instilled in me and influence me unconsciously. I may look at issues from a new perspective which is different both from the westerners and the Chinese. It is like a mixture.

Beth: The most prominent influence of learning English on me is that I expect to visit those English-speaking countries. I expect very much to go there and experience the culture.

John: Certainly, learning English has influence on me. Through learning English, I learnt to focus on the main aspect of an issue, ignoring the minor ones. English is a rigorous language and it influences me in this way.

Ingrid: Learning English has broadened my vision.

4.5 The Use of English in Daily Life

Speaking English is the least applied skill in the participants' daily life. It is even less for them to communicate verbally with foreigners in English. In stark contrast, listening is the skill applied the most in their daily life. All the participants mentioned that they would see American films and TV series and generally enjoyed what they saw. Between writing and reading, the former was reported to be applied more than the latter in the participants' daily life. They would write posts in short form online and might keep diaries in English; however, none of them read extensively or constantly in English in daily life, even though they would have to read in English for school work.

Sophie: I kept diaries in English for some time because my father liked it. I 'twitter' on Wechat and Weibo in Chinese. I have little feeling about the American (Hollywood) movies. I like seeing films made in Chinese. When I read for leisure, I usually read in Chinese, for I think I already have to read in English a lot for study as I'm majoring in English and if I also read for leisure in English, my life and work are confused. As for speaking, I seldom talk to foreigners, only having talked with the foreign teachers. But before the teaching qualification test, my roommates and I decided to practice speaking English. We talked in English, for we wanted to rehearse for the test.

Philip: In daily life, I don't speak English or even code-mixing between Chinese and English. I only speak English when I have to. As for writing, I usually 'twitter' on QQ space in English. I think to 'twitter' in English is more implicit than in Chinese, as English is not my mother tongue. I keep diaries occasionally. Before, I kept diaries in English but now I keep diaries sometimes in English and sometimes in Chinese. When I surf the Internet, searching some materials, I will search in Chinese. Ever since I started my university study, I have been seeing British and American films and TV series. I don't see Chinese films because I think they are not interesting. Occasionally, I watch Japanese TV series.

Beth: I almost do not speak English in daily life since it is not fit for my personality. I may need a person to ask me to speak English and then the emotional obstacle is removed so I can feel free to speak English. I don't have much contact with foreigners, except my foreign teacher and his friends. Occasionally, I will 'twitter' on Wechat and Weibo in English. Expressing in English feels casual but at the same time it feels deep.

John: I practice English in daily life and Japanese as well, for Japanese is my second foreign language. The atmosphere of practicing English in my dorm is very good. My roommates and I often talk in English. I don't keep diaries but I have the habit of writing an annual summary. I do it mainly in Chinese. When I 'twitter' or write online, I may use all the three languages I have some knowledge of, namely, Chinese, English, and

Japanese. I read extensively. Usually I read in Chinese. I read books on technology and professions in English, while I read books on humanities in Chinese. I usually watch American and Japanese TV series, since I'm studying these two languages. I also watch TV series made in China but only few are well-made. I choose what TV series to watch according to my personal interests.

Ingrid: Occasionally, when I feel like doing it, I will talk with people in English. I rarely write in English in daily life. I keep diaries in Chinese because I think Chinese is exquisite so I can express myself better in it. In daily life, I usually read in Chinese as I can read more extensively in Chinese. My reading ability in English is not sufficient for me to read extensively in English. I can't understand some English literature. I can't understand those exquisite expressions in it. As for watching TV series, I watch American TV series, such as Friends, and I also watch Chinese TV series.

4.6 The Ideal Self and the Influence of Learning English

Four of the five participants thought that learning English had some influence on their pursuit of the 'ideal' self mainly through having impact on their thinking patterns and manners. The other one participant thought learning English had nothing to do with her 'ideal' self.

Sophie: I wish that I could be more 'ambitious'. That is, I could be courageous to speak out what I mean. I feel that foreigners are better at expressing themselves. But we Chinese students seem to be reserved and we are not good at expressing ourselves.

Philip: I hope that I could be good at 'independent thinking'. Also, I wish to be more capable and sharper. People from the English-speaking countries seem to be more independent. This has some influence on me, I think.

Beth: My ideal self is a person who persists on life-long learning and living a balanced life between working and relaxing. I don't think that learning English has anything to do with my idea of the ideal self. I admire those people who are very active in communication but I do know I am not one of them.

John: I hope that I could be engaged in what I truly like and have a harmonious relationship with colleagues. I wish to be a wise, warm-hearted and eloquent person. I think learning English has some influence on my idea of the ideal self but it is just one factor. Another influential factor is personal experience.

Ingrid: I wish I could be more reserved. And, I think learning English may be of some help with my achieving this goal, for I notice characters in Downtown Abbey do speak in an implicit and elegant way. They appear reserved to me.

In summary, it was revealed in this study that the participants had an average level of English proficiency, mostly held an 'instrumental' view of the role of English in their life with making-a-living and career development as their primary concern, thought their self-expression was restricted by their unsatisfactory English proficiency, and did not often use English in daily life except when they watched American films and TV series. Also, they generally acknowledge the influence of learning English on their pursuit of 'ideal' self mainly through affecting their thinking patterns.

5. Discussion

Findings of this study show that the participants' self-expression was restricted by their unsatisfactory English proficiency, especially the speaking proficiency. That is, they usually fail to present their essential characteristics as individual persons in English. With Horwitz's (2009) insight of the authentic self in second language taken into consideration, the participants of this study cannot be seen as authentic in English, since they cannot present themselves as they do in their mother tongue. In this study, the participants showed positive attitudes towards going abroad to English-speaking countries and regions to have experience of the culture. This indicates that they had the wish to communicate in English. And, it is reasonable to consider their unsatisfactory English proficiency as an important reason for their restriction in the expression of person identity. As mentioned-above, the subjects of this study have been majoring in the English Language and they are supposed to receive abundant exposure to the English language and culture. And, they must have been invested a lot of time and energy in schoolwork most of which is associated with the English language ever since their undergraduate study. However, currently they still have difficulties in demonstrating their essential characteristics as individual persons due to unsatisfactory English proficiency. Under these circumstances, it is significant to explore the possible reasons for their unsatisfactory English proficiency.

The participants' narrative of their use of English in daily life can help to explain the situation of their English proficiency. First of all, according to the participants, they had little voluntary investment of time and energy into learning and using English after class. Watching foreign-made, particularly American-made, films and TV series, was reported to be the most popular and the most often adopted way of getting access to the English language, which involved and contributed to their listening proficiency. The participants' limited voluntary investment of time and energy into practicing using English in daily life is possible to reduce chances of the participants' developing their English proficiency. In terms of common sense, time and energy invested in learning a foreign language in school work is anyway limited. The students were not active in investing time and energy into learning and using English after class and consequently, they deprived themselves of chances to further develop their English proficiency.

The finding of the students' lack of voluntary investment in learning English after class indicates that the exam-oriented learning strategy, as focused on in Gao's (2008) study, is influential on Chinese students' learning of English. At the same time, better understanding of this finding would be obtained if the imbalance between investment in learning English and the limited actual chances to use English in daily life in the mainland of China, which was addressed by scholars, for example, Bolton and Botha (2015), is taken into consideration. As English is a foreign language in the mainland of China, learners of English do not have much chance to use the language out of the classes in their daily life. This issue was addressed in previous studies such as Gao, et al. (2007) which pointed out that in a foreign language learning context, learners quite possibly lack target language and culture exposure. In addition, it is worth noting that the view of English being 'instrumental' for them to pursue career development was dominant among the participants. It is reasonable only to conclude from this finding that English is important to the students for their future career but far from being essential to their life just as individual persons. This can also contribute to understanding their limited voluntary investment of time and energy into learning and using English in daily life.

6. Conclusions

Findings of this study suggest that on the practical level, it is worth more efforts to improve the English proficiency of Chinese learners and it is still a significant issue that Chinese learners of English may come across the problem of lacking in opportunities to use English actually outside of classroom. This problem is tolerable with the simple and exact fact that English is a foreign language in China taken into consideration. A realistic suggestion in this situation is that learners of English should be aware of their will to make investment in learning English through using it. That is, the learners should be helped to understand the importance of voluntary investment of time and energy in making opportunities for themselves to use English out of class. For example, in this study, two participants mentioned that they had the experience of speaking English with their roommates in order to prepare for examinations. It is believed that this type of voluntary action to use English will be helpful with improving their English proficiency.

On the theoretical level, findings of this study contribute to research on the relationship between language and identity through providing empirical evidences for the support of the association between foreign/second language proficiency and person identity. It is worth research attention that foreign/second language proficiency is associated not only with social identity which is based on the notion of group but also with person identity which is the essential characteristics that a person takes to define himself or herself. The learners' sense of authenticity will be affected by their proficiency in a foreign/second language.

This study had a very small number of participants. With the very large number of English learners in China considered, it is expected that future studies would be carried out targeting at a much larger number of subjects with quantitative research methods. What's more, it is suggested based on this study that philosophical reflections on authenticity in association with foreign/second language learning should be carried out in future with the Existentialism perspective on authenticity and the will of individuals.

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