

Identity Construction and Investment Transformation - College Students with Countryside Origin in China

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Abstract: This paper reports on a qualitative study that investigated the identity negotiation and English learning investment transformation of English learners in a Chinese university. For better understanding L2 ‘motivation’, the notion of identity, investment (Norton, 2000) and “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998) are employed. The study examined how English L2 learners constructed multiple identities to reposition themselves in a Chinese educated urban community and an English speaking Christian community, how their participations and identities in the two communities were co-constructed, and how their English learning motivations transformed. The informants included four female undergraduate students from English and Bioscience majors respectively enrolled in a Chinese university. Recordings of conversation, students’ self-reports, and interviews were collected over one and a half years. The four students serve as case studies to illustrate different patterns of identity as well as participation construction and investment transformation.

Keywords: motivation, investment, identity, communities of practice, participation

Introduction

Given the growing population of English learners and more and more intercultural communications taking place in Mainland China, China has English speaking communities that are expanding whilst remaining at a distance from English learners, different from the typical second language learning environment where learners’ first and second language communities have relatively equal dominance in population and power. While interacting with English speaking communities becomes possible, university students are faced with the impacts from social and ideological aspects associated with the western cultures.

Motivation, as generally believed to be one of the most important determinants of L2 achievement, has undergone a substantial evolution since the seminal study by Gardner and Lambert in 1972. Its theoretical approaches have gone through the following stages: the socio-psychological approach to examine how individual’s attitudes towards the L2 and the L2 community influence one’s L2 learning behavior; the cognitive-situated approach to shift the focus from the motivational impacts of macro context to those of situated learning contexts; the process-oriented approach to catch dynamic and temporal character of L2 motivation; the poststructuralist approaches to address the relationship between individual and the social world, and to look at its impact on one’s investment in L2 learning.

Norton (2000), the practitioner of poststructuralism in motivation research, aimed to achieve a holistic picture of L2 learners by adopting a methodological framework which was influenced by researchers who seek to “investigate the complex relationship between social structure on one hand, and human agency on the other, without resorting to deterministic or reductionist analysis” (p. 21). She also reconceptualised motivation as investment, which “signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton, 2000, p. 10). If learners invested in a target language, they would expect a good return on the investment, an access to previously unattainable resources, and would hope to acquire a wide range of

material resources or symbolic resources (Bourdieu, 1991), which would “increase the value of their cultural capital” (Norton, 2000, p. 10). However, criticisms were raised, directed at the dichotomy between learner and context in Norton’s account and the lack of interpretation of discourse’ constructive role of identity. Price (1996, p. 333) argued that her argument “places discourse as a medium through which subject interests may be facilitated or impeded”, but her account doesn’t give an adequate account of “how those interests themselves, and the subject as such, is constructed by discourse”. Moreover, Price also pointed out that in Norton’s study, learners’ identity was presented to be more individually maintained than socially constructed. Similarly, Sealey and Carter (2004) indicated that Norton’s analysis did not give the same consideration to contextual resources as she did to situated activity and social settings, thus the role of ‘discourse’ in social relations was not fully developed. Further, Norton’s analysis didn’t illustrate the effect of learners’ material resources on their “choices, opportunities and ambitions” (p. 200).

Therefore, a balanced and holistic view that considers the social, contextual, situated, and individual factors that influence L2 motivation has not been successfully reached. Chinese learners from countryside faced with participating in Chinese urban and English speaking community are an interesting group to be investigated regarding motivation, identity, power and participation because of its special position resulting from their historical background and the PRC context where they are embedded in and which is experiencing sociocultural, economic and political changes. Motivation research, that investigates the impact of situated participation in evolving communities on learners’ motivations and imagined identities, and examines the facilitating or impeding effects of material resources on taking up different identities or developing different investments of English learners from countryside, would add something new to this field.

Grounded in the notions of identity, investment and communities of practice (COP), this paper reports on a study which closely investigated how English L2 learners constructed multiple identities to reposition themselves in a Chinese educated urban community and an English speaking Christian community, how their participation and identities in the two communities were co-constructed, and how their L2 motivations evolved. A longitudinal and in-depth investigation of their experiences reveals different negotiation patterns of identities and participation and different paths of motivation transformation which were individually, historically and socially mediated. In the following sections, the theoretical background is introduced and the findings are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results and the theoretical, methodological as well as pedagogical implications.

Theoretical Background

This study is one of a number of recent studies in applied linguistics that “views language learning as a fundamentally social, cultural, and temporal activity rather than just an individual, decontextualized, ahistorical, cognitive activity” (Morita, 2002, p. 14). I draw on ideas from neo-Vygotskian research (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978), poststructuralist theory and Gee’s (1999) model of discourse analysis. Though the approaches are located in different theoretical frameworks and emphasize distinct aspects of social practices related to language learning, they are complementary rather than exclusive.

Sociocultural theory, founded by Vygotsky (1978) and further developed by others (e.g., Wertsch, 1991) (Lantolf, 1994) regards the development of any high level cognitive functions as socially mediated. According to Vygotsky, cognitive developments result from the transition of knowledge from interpsychological level to intrapsychological level with the assistance from their more capable peers and mediating tools. Sociocultural theory

emphasizes that the internalization process is a dynamic transformation which is related to, but not simple replications of external functions. A person's cognition is shaped by his/her social relationships, cultural values and principles he/she is in contact with.

The concept of mediation plays a critical role in the organization of activity and the generation of higher mental processes (Donato & McCormick, 1994). The mediating tools that are available and the ways these mediating tools are used in the internalization process define what gets learned and the process of learning (Hall, 1997). The mediating (semiotic) tools include algebraic symbols, mnemonic devices, diagrams, gestures, and, most important of all, language. Vygotsky (1978: 28) concluded the functions of language in the development of higher psychological functions as "enabling children to provide for auxiliary tools in the solution of difficult tasks, to overcome impulsive action, to plan a solution to a problem prior to its execution, and to master their own behavior". Therefore humans use symbolic tools, most importantly language, to set up a relationship between them and the external world.

This theory is appropriate to reflexively examine learners and their social environment. Sociocultural theory, therefore, allows for investigating social milieu, institutional as well as departmental systems, L1 speaking communities and situated interactions in which L2 learners participate. It is helpful to better understand L2 motivation, which as Thorne (2005, p. 403) argues "is not an atomistic element possessed by a learner, rather it is built in relation to prior and ongoing activity and responds to changing social-material circumstances".

The challenges sociocultural theory is confronted with center on the assumption that all populations have equal opportunity in learning and the neglect of language (Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Thorne, 2005). The first issue could be addressed by incorporating agency, identity and power relations in analysis and recent research has made such efforts (e.g., Bazerman & Russell, 2003; Sawchuk, 2003). The second critique has been to a certain degree smoothed by researchers who directly applying sociocultural theory to language learning (e.g., Donato, 2004; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Thorne, 2004). Sociocultural theory is developing an increasingly critical perspective and it thus shares "aspirations for political engagement, while also offering distinctive contributions to the project of critical scholarship" with poststructuralist approaches (Thorne, 2005, p. 403).

The next component of the framework is the poststructuralist theory. A poststructuralist approach takes "a critical attitude to traditional ways of thinking and talking about reality, subjectivity (that is, the condition of being a person or 'subject') and knowledge" and proposes that "reality is constructed in and through discourse" (Cameron, 2001, p. 50-51). Specifically, poststructuralist inquiry involves the following characters:

First, poststructuralist inquiry emphasizes that the status of different languages, discourse or registers are unequal in the linguistic marketplace (Pavlenko, 2000). Language is viewed as a form of symbolic capital which can be later transferred into economic and social capital. Therefore, the view of language as a form of symbolic capital makes it possible to "link the individual and the social in the L2 learning process, tracing ways in which particular linguistic varieties and practices become legitimized and imbued with values or stigmatized and devalued in the linguistic marketplace" (Pavlenko, 2000, p. 88). In addition, identity in poststructuralist inquiry is multiple, dynamic and subject to change (Weedon, 1987). Language learners may experience the everlasting tension between what he chooses himself to be and what others position him to be (Pavlenko, 2000). Furthermore, in poststructuralist

theory, identity and language are mutually constitutive (Norton, 2000). As Weedon (1997, p. 21) points out, “Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed”. The poststructuralist perspective is drawn on in this study to capture the “dynamically performed” (Nguyen & Kellogg, 2005, p. 113) identity as well as motivations of English learners, and power relations between learners and L1 speakers in interactions over a prolonged period. It also allows for the exploration of the historical perspective of English learners as social beings.

Another component of the framework is the situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) view the process of learners socialization in a given community as ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (LPP). According to Wenger (1998), the newcomers need to gain peripherality and legitimacy to make actual participation possible. Peripherality means “an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 37). Legitimacy is a prerequisite for a new comer to “be treated as potential members” and “only with legitimacy can all their inevitable stumblings and violations become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect, or exclusion” (Wenger, 1998, p. 101). In the cases of periphery and marginality, both non-participation and participation are involved. In contrary to the periphery, where “the participation aspect dominates and defines non-participation as an enabling factor of participation”, marginality contains “a form of non-participation” that “prevents full participation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 165-166).

The notion of “imagined community” was coined by Anderson (1991), and further theorized by Wenger (1998). Anderson (1991, p. 6) states that the construct of a nation-state is imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in minds of each lives the image of their communion”. In this sense, imagination is a way to influence the citizens of a nation ideologically and to construct national identities. Wenger (1998) proposed three modes of community belonging: engagement, imagination and alignment. Engagement is “a source of identity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 174). Engagement has time and space limitations since one can only be in one place at a specific period of time. Imagination refers to “a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves” (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). So imagination is capable of extending our experiences beyond the boundary of mutual engagement. Alignment means “coordinating our energy and activities in order to fit within structures and contribute to broader enterprises” (Wenger, 1998, p. 174). Through alignment, people coordinate their action with a certain community and become part of it. Wenger (1998, p. 197) illustrates that what alignment conveys is not “inherent in engagement or in imagination” because people may engage in a community but not manage to align their action, and people may imagine to connect to others without knowing what to do about it.

In this study, the situated learning theory allows for the investigation of the multiple communities which the English learners form part, the positions learners have, as well as the interrelationship among community participations, motivations, identities and imaginations.

Gee’s (1990, 1999) model is adopted in this study to investigate how learners with a countryside origin participate in the multiple communities of practices after entering university. Gee’s model is based on the distinction between Discourse with a big D and discourse with a small d. Gee (1999) views language as a medium “simultaneously reflects

and constructs the situation or context in which it is used” (p. 82), and maintains that doing discourse analysis “involves asking questions about how language, at a given time and place, is used to construe the aspects of the situation network as realized at a time and place and how the aspects of the situation network simultaneously give meaning to that language” (p. 92). Such a stance requires to understand not only “language in use”, i.e., the discourse with a small d, but “non-language stuff to enact specific identities and activities”, and a small d or “language in use”, i.e., Discourse with a big D (p. 7). Furthermore, Gee (1996) distinguishes two sorts of Discourses in any society, primary and secondary Discourses, which allows for a better understanding of the historical and original imprints on a learner, and the socially constructed influences. Primary Discourses constitute one’s “first social identity” and a basis for the learners’ to “acquire or resist later Discourse”; while secondary Discourses are “those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socialization within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization” (Gee, 1996, p. 137). Therefore, for English learners from countryside, lack of mastery in discourse with a small d in both Chinese urban educated and English speaking community may influence their participation in the Discourses. A comprehensive and dynamic analysis of the interactions of individuals with other people, ideas, ideologies and institutions is thus needed.

The central purpose of this study was to better understand how and why motivation of L2 learners from countryside evolved over a span of one and a half years and how the shifts were interrelated with identity and participation. This study draws on the framework of community of practice (COP) to understand how students previously within countryside discourse communities participate marginally, peripherally or legitimately in a Chinese urban community in a department as well as an English speaking community and how identities constructed in the two communities are interrelated. The present study adopts a temporal and multiple view of L2 motivation. The data analysis and interpretation were guided by the following research question:

How do L2 students negotiate their identities and participations in mainstream discourse community and target language community? What are the interrelationships between L2 students’ identities, imagined communities and investments in English learning?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were four female Chinese university students learning English as an L2. The four female¹ Chinese informants all attended a comprehensive university in northern China. Two of them with higher-intermediate English proficiency were majoring in English, and another two with low-intermediate English proficiency were majoring in Bioscience but taking compulsory English courses. The two groups differed significantly in English level, career orientations, chances of mixing with English L1 speakers², and exposure to western cultures, due to the different curriculum for the different majors.

Therefore, the longitudinal study of such learners’ experiences was expected to reveal differences between the two groups of English L2 speakers in terms of their language, investment, identity and ideology.

¹ Previous studies on language and gender have found that gender influences how we use language and how others use language with us (e.g., (Holmes, 1995; Tannen, 1994). Gender also affects motivation to learn an L2 (MacIntyre, 2002).

² English major students usually have teachers from English speaking countries; while all teachers of non-English major students are Chinese.

The informants interacted for the duration of the study with six English L1 speakers. Since this paper is part of a larger discourse-based L2 motivation study, the discourse analysis of the interactions is not incorporated. The English L1 speakers, through whom, the informants have chance to contact an English speaking community, still play an important role in understanding the informants' learning experiences.

Table: *Participants Profiles*

	Age (when the project began)	Major	Hometown	English L1 Partner(s)
JANE	21	Bioscience	Countryside	Rachel
HELENA	21	Bioscience	Countryside	Megan
JO	21	English	Town	Ivette (1 st) Kathy (2 nd)
OLIVIA	20	English	Countryside	Jill (1 st) Joanna (2 nd)

Procedure

Shortly after the Chinese informants were selected, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each of them individually. In the pre-interviews, the objectives of the study were introduced, preliminary information about informants gathered, and an initial rapport established. It was made clear that the data collected would be used only for this research project and pseudonyms would be used. The informants also received a consent letter describing the objectives and the procedures of the study in detail, and a digital recorder.

The English L1 speaker of each dyad decided the time and place of their regular meetings. The Chinese informants recorded the conversation, later transcribed by the researcher. After each session, the informants made journal entries. They used diaries to critically examine their participations in mainstream urban-discourse community in department and in the English speaking community. These diaries were then used to help analyze the informants' changing investment in English and their shifting and multiple identities over the course of interactions.

During the project, individual interviews were conducted in Chinese every two months, seeking to elicit more information about the learners' experiences and to strengthen the rapport between the informants and the lead researcher, which helped ensure the quality of the diary study and stimulated enthusiasm in writing down their experiences and feelings.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was ongoing, recursive and iterative. The conceptual framework was a starting point for interpreting the data. However, a grounded approach was used, so as new themes and patterns emerged over the course of the study, they were incorporated into the framework for analysis. The categories generated from the continual examination of interview transcripts, journals and interaction transcripts included: marginality, legitimacy, periphery, identity, imagination, motivation, power and so on. Within-case analyses (Merriam, 1998) were conducted to trace the changing process of particular student's participation in communities, identity construction and investment

transformation, and cross-case analysis were conducted to identify the emerging common themes across individual students. Triangulation of multiple standpoints from the focal students, the researcher and of multiple data sources from interviews, diary studies and recorded interactions between students and their conversation partners was adopted in data interpretation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

Findings

To address the research question, the overall findings are summarized first and then four different patterns of identity construction and investment transformation from the case studies are presented.

Analysis suggested that learners co-constructed their identities and positions in different communities during the period of study, so that they could be recognized as legitimate members of a given community. As rooted in their personal histories, values and investments, learners' identities were shaped and transformed through their ongoing interactions with the external world. Such construction was often unsettling and full of struggle. The same learner's different participation pattern in different communities revealed the situated nature.

Analysis also showed that individual, contextual and social factors all contribute to one's development of the imagined communities and investments. There was always a tension between self and the social discourses, or in other words, between agency and context. When the contextual and social influences won over a learner's initially held identity, she would appear a great extent of variability in imagined communities and identities. When a learner's values and ideologies were firmly grounded or one's identity was historically shaped in a strong sense, imagined identity would appear to be relatively stable and unitary. Investment evolution of learners whose imagined communities were multiple and changing followed a spiral process. It resonates with Lantolf and Genung's (2002, p. 191) argument that a learner's goals "are formed and reformed under specific historical material circumstances". As they invested in their imagined identity by participating in relevant English-related activities, their knowledge, experiences, and information were accumulated, and imagined community was renewed. Then the learners adjusted their participation to the new imagined identity. For the learners whose imagined identity was relatively unitary, their investment, though appeared to be steady in direction, was changing in extent under the influence of immediate contexts.

Jo's withdrawal and persistence

A major challenge Jo faced in her freshman year in university was being unable to gain legitimate membership in the mainstream urban discourse community. The identity as a high-achieving student she held throughout high school was no longer recognized. The mainstream discourse valued being versatile and independent, playing hard, and having a wide communication circle, which Jo lacked. For a long time, she was "lonely and unconfident, eager to find a true friend who can appreciate my thoughts" (Jo, Journal 18, Dec 22 2004). She tried hard to get close to her roommates by doing things which she had little interest in. Gradually Jo gain relatively peripheral status in the community but still could not achieve respect and understanding. Jo gave up trying after she realized the irreconcilable differences in values and pursuits:

More and more people are just dawdling everyday and their only objective in life is to earn more money. They have no sense of responsibility and no one claim she wants to do something for the country and the society. Many students are becoming more and more utilitarian. (Interview 4, Feb 22 2005)

The mainstream life style and values is self-centered and material-oriented. My voice is so weak that I couldn't receive respect from others in my first two years in university. (Jo, Journal 18, Dec 22 2004)

The ideologies the students belonging to the mainstream community held contradicted those of Jo's:

I dream to be successful but I hope my dream will benefit not only myself, but the others. Besides my own life, I wish to be able to make the society become better.” (Interview 5, June 29 2005)

In contrast to many of her classmates' focus on material goods and their own enjoyment, Jo valued spiritual fulfillment and collectivism.

Jo established her identity as a person with altruistic aspirations and this identity helped her stop trying to gain fully legitimate membership in a community whose values she didn't believe. Instead, Jo chose to withdraw from the mainstream community, as a form of resistance. However, through the study's interaction with L1 English speakers, Jo's oral English ability helped her gain access to an English speaking Christian community, where she found sympathy and understanding:

Amazingly, I found that I had a lot in common with the English speakers, and a lot of virtues neglected by my roommates were affirmed by them. In fact, at that time, I really respect Christians because I think they are full of love and virtues. (Jo, Journal 18, Dec 2 2004)

Within six months, Jo converted from an antitheist to a Christian. However, the diary entries make it clear this was a carefully considered decision, not aimed merely at seeking legitimate membership in the English speaking Christian community (Jo, Journal 18, Dec 2 2004).

Jo's identification as a Christian brought not only her friends, but a peripheral status in the new community, and a new identity as an open-minded, active and confident girl with a lot of English L1 speaking friends. She used this new identity to assert herself among the mother language community members, indicating her views when she felt uncomfortable with others' disrespect or neglect of her feelings.

Jo's full legitimacy in target language community was never realized due to the struggle between herself and the sociocultural and ideological beliefs of that community. Her strong sense of being a Chinese was sometimes in conflict with her Christian identity:

Before I dared not deny the Buddhism and other Chinese-culture-related things, because if I did so, I would have a feeling that I had betrayed China. (Interview 4, Feb 25 2005).

Jo felt uncertain about her beliefs in spite of her careful preparation for her conversion, as she pointed out in an interview when she had been a Christian for over one year:

I always feel very confused about many things about Christianity. I don't want such kind of things to restrict my own thoughts though I feel I respect religion very much in heart. But I still need to explore by myself. (Jo, Interview 4, Feb 25 2005)

At the same time when Jo enacted her Christian identity in the English speaking community, her national identity and the symbolic resources possessed by this identity seemed to prevent her overall assimilation into it. Jo was proud of Chinese traditional culture while appreciating many aspects of western culture. The fact that she could seldom have deep conversation with English L1 speakers about Chinese history and society because of their limited knowledge of China disappointed her. She sought her American friends' views on the divergence between China and western countries in relation to political problems, and their unthinking support to western ideologies made Jo uncomfortable:

The result disappoints me that behind friendly smile and seemingly open-minded gesture is American's unilateral, arrogant and stubborn interior national discrimination. (Journal 21 Nov 26 2005)

When Jo was interviewed by an American journalist in a cultural exchange activity, she tried to construct her identity as "a Chinese girl, learned, gentle and nice, polite, speaking English fluently, but also very proud of her own culture", hoping to "change many American's attitudes toward China and tell them China is not backward, poor, over populated but energetic, cultured and enthusiastic" (Jo, Journal 17).

Jo had to deliberately negotiate her identities in the English speaking community: on the one hand, she was a Christian who shared the same basic values and ideologies as its members, but on the other hand, she refused to be identified as one of them if it meant giving up her identity as an educated Chinese girl with a colorful and rich culture or if it meant opposing China, especially its political problems.

Jo's imagined communities and identities were multiple and shifting in the process of her participation in tangible communities. Her ideals in different life stages were: a scientist in junior high school, a capable politician like Madam Thatcher in senior high school, a successful businesswoman when she was a freshman and a sophomore, and a scholar in junior and senior years in university, a simultaneous interpreter in postgraduate period. As the knowledge was renewed, the experiences were enriched and the immediate and broad environments developed quickly, Jo's imaged communities changed. Simultaneously, imaginations influenced Jo's participations in different activities and helped her construct her identities which played a role in negotiating her positions in two communities. For example, when Jo wished to develop her career in business, she sat in the courses in the Financial Department. Through social activities, Jo learnt more information about the business world, which gave her a negative impression. She thus reimagined her future identity as a scholar doing research in the field related to English. Jo withdrew from the fiancé course and actively participated in a lot of activities which might be helpful to develop academic career. Since her junior year on, Jo led a research group studying the church schools in China before 1949, volunteered to be a social worker to help a group of students from the U.S.A., applied for the position of a part-time English teacher at a training school, worked as an interpreter in international conferences, kept trying to join in the English Speech Contest, and changed her research direction during postgraduate study. Her participation in my interaction project was another attempt to get closer to her ideal.

From the social-psychological perspective, Jo was a highly motivated English learner who had been working hard to improve it due to both instrumental and integrative reasons. However, the dichotomy could not picture her English learning motivation which was mediated with constructing identity, developing imagined identities, seeking recognition and more opportunities, and was reflected not only in ‘learning’, but in participating in all English-related activities.

In the process of realizing her ideals, Jo had various short-term goals. She enacted her imagined identities which empowered her to show persistence before failures. For instance, Jo invested in the annual English Speech Contest for four consecutive years and finally got returns:

This time, I didn’t disappoint my teachers. I got the first class prize. At that time, I really want to tell everybody there my dream come true. Never give up your dream. (Journal 30)

Jo’s not giving up before failure was to a large extent supported by her commitment to the imagined identity.

To summarize, Jo’s experiences in two communities suggest that her construction of identity and participation was both an individual and a social process, mediated through an interplay of factors including her own personal history and values, but also the values and culture of the new community. Jo exercised her identities to resist marginalization or to remain peripheral, and to shape positions that accord her values and fulfill her purposes. Identity negotiation bestowed Jo with both opportunities and challenges. Identity in one community influenced her activities in another community.

Jo’s experiences also indicate that her imagined communities, identities and investments in English learning were multiple and changing. Jo’s investments in the imagined identities pushed her to participate in relevant activities. Through participation, Jo accumulated knowledge and information of the outer world, which helped her renew imagined identity and reach a more and more specific one. When she started postgraduate study, she was relatively determined to be a good spontaneous interpreter in the future. Her behaviors were aligned to be more focused.

Olivia’s practicality and conflict

In contrast to Jo, Olivia used be on the edge of both communities described above. As a girl from the countryside, she needed to become involved in the urban discourse dominated community in her department, and her English ability provided her with the chance to get to know one English speaking Christian community. Olivia reconstructed her multiple identities to attempt to reposition herself from marginality, through periphery and to legitimate membership in the two communities.

Olivia thoroughly remoulded herself following the popular values in English Department, which is reflected in her moving to using ‘we’ rather than ‘they’ when she described that community:

We adored those with fashionable dressing, wide communication circle, as well as good sociable ability, and most people in our circle didn’t like bookworms” (Interview 2, Dec 23 2004).

Olivia successfully gained the membership of the university urban discourse community. Her values and ideologies were closer to that of the ‘mainstream’ culture in the English Department, compared with Jo, which might partly explain why she gained legitimacy while Jo didn’t. Olivia dreamed of becoming a person “who is wealthy and leads a better life than other ordinary people, having a decent job and dressing up gracefully” (Interview 3, Feb 22 2005). However, somewhat paradoxically, she was not really satisfied to be part of a community “who just enjoyed ordinary life without obvious goals, idling away most of the time”. Olivia’s solution was action, rather than withdrawal like Jo. However, as the top one student in the English Department and an active participant in the students’ union, Olivia still felt “empty in her heart from time to time”:

The more I gained, the more I wanted. I didn’t know how long the road would stretch on which I had struggled. I was tired sometimes and wondered what the point in my toil was. (Diary 3, May 2004)

The English speaking Christian community attracted Olivia’s interest. Owning the membership in one target language community would undoubtedly increase her symbolic resources in the Chinese language community. Olivia became a Christian shortly after she started meeting English L1 speakers. It seemed that her conversion happened very shortly:

This time I wanted to talk about something in common with Jill, so I chose this topic... Then she called her friend—a lady who was considered as an expert on the Bible... Then she asked me whether I knew how to become a Christian. I shook my head. They told me that I just needed a simple but pious prayer and welcome God into my heart. I thought maybe I should know more about God before I embraced him. But Jill said: “You knew more than me. With the direction of God, you will understand the Bible better.”... Thus I opened the door of my heart and became a Christian. (Olivia, Journal 4)

Olivia’s Christian identity won her more English speaking friends, but the values Christians advocated were contradictory with those she held. On one hand, Olivia appreciated the view of the English speaking Christian group that “real happiness lies in people’s heart and soul rather than how much wealth one owns” (Olivia, Interview 3, Feb 25 2005); on the other hand, she considered they were too satisfied with their lives without any challenges and aspirations, especially for material goods, and they were rather narrow and inward looking, not trying to gain more knowledge of Chinese society and culture. After one-year regular contact, Olivia commented:

They are just the ordinary people like us. They are very self-disciplined but kind of doctrinal. They use Bible to judge everybody and everything. (Interview 3, June 30 2005)

Therefore, it was not surprising that Olivia’s newly acquired Christian beliefs were shaky. Compared to the ‘real’ Christians, Olivia thought that she was too practical and goal-oriented. She even expressed doubts over her conversion:

Now I wonder whether the decision to believe in Christian is a little too hurried. Or I need to know more before I completely, really accept it. I think it has big conflict with my old living habits, and thoughts. (Olivia, Interview 2, Dec 23 2004)

In contrast to Jo's desire to be recognized by others and to benefit the society, Olivia's motive for learning English hard was to lead a "luxurious" life. Her imagined identity in her childhood was "a person who can live like the actresses in TV plays and movies, being dressed beautifully, and living romantically" (Interview3, Feb 24 2005). No communities up to her imagination were accessible to Olivia when she was young. So she kept that dream and worked hard:

R: you have been studying so hard, what's your motive?

Olivia: I don't know, maybe studying for me is like a key to the future, to the life I want

R: do you know clearly what kind of life you want?

Olivia: I don't know, I don't know what kind of life I want, but at least I will have a material basis and spiritual enjoyment. (Interview 2, Dec 23 2004)

After entering university, the contextual and social factors had great influences on Olivia, who continually constructed new imagined identities. Being quite alert to the social surrounding, opportunities and updated information, Olivia developed different imagined identities. Her motivation to learn English was always high, but the English-related activities she chose to participate in were varied as per her changing ideals. When Olivia imagined of becoming a successful business lady in the future, all the part-time jobs that could draw her interests were those in some joint ventures or western companies. When she wished to live a life like the Western middle-class women, she sought ways to get access to the Christian community and actively participated in Bible study, in spite of her little knowledge and interest in Bible at the beginning. When she dreamed of becoming a professor, she looked for part-time teaching jobs. When her ideal profession became a simultaneous interpreter working for government agencies, she sat in all the related courses and withdrew her participation from the classes of her own major of translation theory. However, Olivia's imagined identities coexisted rather than appeared one after another independently. When she shifted her investments quickly, she kept identifying who she was and whom she wanted to be.

In sum, Olivia pragmatically negotiated her identities through participating in activities of the two communities. However, Olivia was not willing to adopt the values of either community. She regarded most people in the mainstream mother language community as "too superficial", while those belonging to the English speaking group as "too banal". Olivia fluctuated over whether she should become a legitimate member of English speaking Christian community, mainly due to the large disparity in values and ideologies. Behind an apparently quick assimilation was a deep confusion and fierce inner struggle, and ultimately non-identification with either community.

Olivia's imagined identities were influenced by immediate setting and social discourses. Olivia's imagined identities increased her confidence, pushed her to be competitive and helped her construct identity as a competent and efficient learner and a sociable students' activities organizer. In the process of finding and realizing dreams, Olivia felt trapped between her real self and her imagined identities. On the one hand, she grasped kinds of opportunities and invested in her variable imagined identities; on the other hand, she experienced inner conflicts for holding multiple identities, in confusion with her present real life, she could hardly decide a clear direction.

Helena's compromise on reality

Helena studied in Bioscience Department, in which the mainstream community culture was different from that of English Department and seemed to be less materialist and more academic-oriented. Helena was faced with two main challenges: reconciling the values of her countryside discourse with the mainstream urban discourse and overcoming her financial hardship. Coming from a village where girls were discriminated against, Helena felt “lucky” to receive a university education, able to continue her study after finishing junior high school, unlike most of girls in her hometown. In her family, her mother had treated her differently from her brother because she was a girl, which had gradually moulded her into an introverted personality. Helena’s mother didn’t approve of her receiving higher education. In insisting on doing so, Helena was resisting the gender role imposed on her.

Compared with the English Department community, the Bioscience Department appeared to be an easier community for a country girl to attain a legitimate membership. In contrast to the English department, there was a harmonious atmosphere, and she got along with fellow students very well. However, Helena actually felt lonely even when it appeared she was fully integrated into the community. Unfamiliar with urban discourses, Helena had to imitate others’ ways, often contradicting her own identity, which upset her:

In order to participate in the activities, sometimes I felt I was not myself and what I was saying made me surprised. I could not believe I could say that way. Sometimes I feel tired to do so, but when I saw others all participate in a certain activity, I would feel uncomfortable to stay alone, so I pretend to be happy to do that. I don’t like that actually, but for the feeling of belonging to a community, I choose to do so. (Interview 2, Dec 24 2005)

Helena wanted legitimization, but at the same time, while she felt reluctant to be forced to become a different person and disliked the awkward manifestation of her identity:

The feeling of distance with my classmates cannot be removed in my heart. However I try, I cannot regard them as my good friends. I have been wishing to have a very close friend. Most of the things in university are fine and the most disappointing thing is that I have not found a good friend. (Interview 2, Dec 2 2004)

Helena had never communicated with English L1 speakers before this study of interaction. In terms of oral English ability, Helena was much weaker than Jo and Olivia. However, Helena established a very close relationship with her conversation partner Megan. The following conversation illustrates the degree of their friendship:

R: how would you describe the relationship between you and Megan?

H: close friend, and she is very warm-hearted, very helpful, very considerate and very nice

R: in what ways is she different from your Chinese friends?

H: I think she treats everyone very well and *will never look down upon others*.

(Interview 4, Jan 17 2006)

Megan introduced other English speaking friends to Helena and invited her to attend their parties. In spite of the fact that Helena was not a Christian, this didn’t affect their intimacy. Helena appreciated Megan’s life attitudes and values. Helena favored western culture. The life style of the English speaking Christian community presented an ideal picture for Helena, and it comforted her loneliness.

Helena's ultimate life goals were to bring her parents a better life and to have her own family. Maybe she had other dreams but inhibited them. For example, she could not share the goals of many of her fellow students due to financial problems, that is, to pursue a higher degree overseas and have a successful academic career. Being unable to afford the costs for the examinations and applications needed for overseas study, Helena felt she was different from others:

I think taking the postgraduate entrance exam is a have-no-other-way choice. You know, students in our major are hard to find ideal jobs. If we couldn't find ideal jobs, the only way out seems to be continuing PG study. I chose to do so is not because I like the major. Many students are in the similar situation. (Interview 3, Aug 10 2005)

In contrary to Jo and Olivia, Helena almost never mentioned what her dream was. She seemed to have compromised on life and could not help. Communicating with Megan and other English speaking friends brought Helena a more specific imagined identity, that is, one with an easy job, enough salary and a happy family.

Helena never stopped studying English during the four years in university. English had different meanings to her. English had pragmatic meanings because "English is extremely important when looking for jobs" (Interview 3, Aug 10 2005); English was a cultural conveyer when she watched English movies and appreciated the "touching" English expressions; English was the communication language between her and her best friend Megan and Megan's community.

In sum, Helena identified more strongly with Megan's community than with her mother tongue community. Her identity as a girl who knew little about city living and communication style seemed to have a strong influence on her participation in both communities. With her English speaking friends, Helena didn't highlight her Chinese identity. Therefore the distance between her and Megan was no larger than that between her and her urban classmates. Rather than imitating her classmates' ways and betraying her own identity while gaining membership in the department community, Helena presented her own views when communicating with Megan and Megan's other English speaking friends. The ideologies and values of the English speaking community had resonance with those of Helena's, which contributed to her sense of belonging to the English speaking community.

Helena's imagined identity appeared relatively stable and unitary and she was not influenced a lot by the immediate surrounding and social discourses. Her historically constructed identity as a girl who should not expect too much on life influenced her future goal and participation in communities. Both the internal and external elements limited her 'bravery' to picture a fancy future.

Jane's sense and sensibility

In contrast to the other three informants, faced with two new communities, Jane felt she gained the legitimate memberships of both with no obvious difficulties. Like Helena, Jane was majoring in Bioscience and originated from a small village. Jane's family was better-off than Helena's and never imposed biased gender roles on her. Jane became a Christian in junior high school under the influence of her mother. She gradually developed a relatively fixed set of values and ideologies. After entering university, the mainstream urban discourse community, though very different from the one she previously belonged to, did not put her

under much pressure. Jane admitted that she changed a lot, and had experienced personal transformation in university:

University life changed me a lot. My views have been broadened. Before I didn't know what the outer world was exactly like. I think it would be very regretful if I never knew the outer colorful world. (Interview 2, Dec 22 2004)

However, Jane didn't feel lonely in this new community. Instead, she established her identity as a person with an open mind and from a different but not inferior background, compared with urban classmates from more financially well-off families. Jane didn't try to imitate others but accepted things new to her.

Jane didn't have contact with English L1 speakers until she joined the study. Like Helena, Jane also identified more closely with the English speaking community introduced to her by conversation partner Rachel. Quickly Jane and Rachel became close friends:

At first I felt there was distance between us, but very quickly we became good friends and could talk about all kinds of things. We are both Christians and feel very close to each other because of the same belief. We follow the same principles. (Interview 2, Dec 22 2004)

The above excerpt shows that common ideology contributed to a spiritual connection between them. Jane indicated that Rachel was her best friend and even closer to her than other Chinese friends. In communication, Jane asserted her identity as a legitimate Chinese member of an English language community. The symbolic resources embedded in this identity helped her regulate the power relations with other English L1 speakers.

Jane's strong identification with her identity as a Christian helped her firmly stick to her own values and ideologies. Jane's two imagined identities are a social worker in an orphanage established by English speaking Christian group as one and a researcher working in an academy as the other. English ability was essential to realize either imagined identity. The dichotomy of Jane's imagined identities seemed fall into Dornyei's (2005) conceptualizations of ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self. The first imagined identity, working in a Christian orphanage, contained the life Jane really wanted to lead, and was related to Dornyei's ideal L2 self and Noel's integrative category. The second imagined identity, doing research in Bio-scientific field, belonged to her practical choice but not what she desired, and was related to Dornyei's ought-to L2 self as well as Noel's extrinsic category.

Compared with Jo and Olivia whose imagined communities were multiple and changing under the influences from personal experiences and social surrounding, Jane had only two imagined communities. The reasons for her fixed ideal self were explored in an interview:

R: why did you like to work in an orphanage?

Jane: maybe it is related to my belief. I love the orphanages established by churches. I think orphanage is a nice place, where no big conflicts exist and we just give all our love to the children. (Interview 3, June 28 2005)

The reason turned out to be closely related to her ideologies. The ideal self, though she understood it was not very possibly to be realized, still pushed her to study English well for better communication with westerners. Jane mentioned that she disliked the future job

connected to her major, but she decided to continue the postgraduate study in bioscience to get closer to the ought-to self.

To summarize, over the course of the study, Jane gained legitimate membership of both Chinese educated and English speaking Christian community. Jane practiced different identities when participating in respective community. In the mother language community, Jane perceived herself to be a girl who came from a different, but not inferior background. She was open to her surroundings and enjoyed gaining new knowledge. In the target language community, Jane identified as a Christian, but one whose mother tongue was hard to learn. The former lent her a favorable ideological status in the community, while the latter empowered her with more symbolic resources. She had a greater sense of recognition in the English speaking Christian community than in the mother tongue community, which once again indicated that sometimes the values and ideologies were more powerful in influencing one's community participation than language.

Jane had her ideal self and ought-to self co-existing, and she invested in different aspects of English learning when reducing the discrepancy between actual self and different imagined selves. Jane tried to improve her English speaking and communicative ability for her ideal self and to practice English reading and writing ability for her ought-to self. Though Jane knew the ideal self could not be realized practically, Jane still actively participated in the English speaking community. Though Jane disliked the job related to her ought-to self, she still chose to work on the road leading her to a researcher. She made a decision between 'sense' and 'sensitivity'.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, from a community of practice (COP) perspective, we have examined the participation and identity construction of English learners with countryside origination in a mother language urban-discourse community and in a target language community. We have provided an in-depth and longitudinal investigation of learners' investment transformation and its relationship with learners' participation in two tangible communities. The following part discusses the implications of these findings for studying L2 learners' intercultural participation and 'motivation' in the unique context of mainland China in the era of globalization.

The findings indicated that L2 learners responded to the same community in various ways. Their seeming homogeneity in gender, cultural and linguistic background doesn't guarantee the similar pattern and path in community participation. For instance, Jo and Olivia, majoring in English, both experienced mother language community marginality, but with different responses. Jo used non-participation as a form of resistance to the disrespect from classmates in the mother language mainstream urban discourse community and to the values advocated there. Olivia coped with the initial marginality by regulating her own values and styles to those of the mainstream discourse. Methodologically, this implies that a survey research that regards learners as monolithic group ignoring their personal history, values and interests would not reveal the variability among individuals.

The findings indicate that behind some students' participation are their inner struggle between identity, culture, ideology and power. Language learners may experience the everlasting tension between what they choose themselves to be and what others position them to be (Pavlenko, 2000). The values and ideologies held by individual learners and communities contribute to negotiation between self-identification and being positioned. For

example, though Helena seemed to smoothly merge into the mainstream department community, she regarded it as giving in herself before the majority. Olivia apparently gained legitimate membership in two communities, but holding a distinct imagined community, she didn't get identification with either community she was participating in. Jo constructed her identity as a hard-working and knowledgeable girl with aspirations, while the members in the mainstream discourse positioned her as an out-of-date bookworm. The great discrepancy made Jo withdraw from the department community. The methodological implication is that seeking the voices of the informants is important in understanding community participation and identity construction, which supports the view that learners' voices should be recognized in SLA research (Benson 2004; Block, 1997). Pedagogically, it implies, on the practical level, that it cannot be taken for granted that students' participations guarantee their positive attitudes towards learning and community. Rather, teachers can use employ different types of activities and provide students different opportunities for language learning to satisfy students with various needs and situations. More individual assistance is needed especially for students with countryside background.

The findings show that individual learner's identity and participation are dynamically constructed by a given context. For example, while Jo remained a marginal status of department community, she got a relatively legitimate position in one target language community partly due to the shared values and ideologies. This indicates that the individual's identity construction as well as community participation are inseparable from and social, cultural, interpersonal and ideological factors in the local context of the communities of practices, which supports Morita (2004)'s call for the importance of a contextual analysis of community practices. Theoretically, this points to the importance of integrating individual, contextual as well as social perspectives in understanding L2 learners' intercultural socialization.

The findings show a spiral process of learners' 'motivation' development. An imagined community invites an imagined identity, and the investment in the imagined identity results in participation in specific English-related activities. The practice in activities which might bring people closer to their initial imagined community provides opportunities of meeting more people, gaining more information, knowledge and experiences. The initial imagined community is reexamined and reframed. New imagined identity is thus formed, which results in motivated behaviors, likewise in magnitude, but different in direction. Therefore, the process is circularly evolving, following different tracks. The result confirms Thorne's (2005, p. 403) finding that "motivation is not an atomistic element possessed by a learner, rather it is built in relation to prior and ongoing activity and responds to changing social-material circumstances". This methodologically implies the more longitudinal investigations in SLA field should be conducted to capture the dynamic interaction between learners and contextual as well as social factors. Pedagogically, on the conceptual level, recognizing the historically and socially constructed nature of L2 motivation is important, and on the practical level, fostering and maintaining students' L2 motivation require activities in and out of classroom that can arouse students' new interests and provide them up-to-date information.

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