

First-Year English Majors' Identity Transformations and English Learning

Qiuming Lin

Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China
Email: linqiuming@gmail.com

Received 15 April 2014; revised 17 May 2014; accepted 26 May 2014

Copyright © 2014 by author and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Learner identity has been recognized as significant for second or foreign language learning in the recent decades. By employing Bamberg et al.'s (2011) framework of three identity dilemmas and Norton's identity theory of SLA (Norton, 2000, 2010) as the theoretical foundation, this study investigates how learners' identities transformed, and how they were related to learners' English learning trajectories by tracing a group of first-year English majors in a key university in China for one year. With the data elicited from one of the participants' diary and in-depth researcher-participants meetings, this paper suggests that English learning is not just a process of acquiring a set of language skills and knowledge, but a complicated social practice, in which learners' identities are constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. This finding has important implications for English teaching and learning in China.

Keywords

Learner Identity, English Learning, Identity Dilemma, Investment, Imagined Community, Diary Study

1. Introduction

Most English majors have to go through dramatic transitions in their life upon their first arrival in the university. There is a transition from their hometown, which is usually a small city or a town or even a village, to a metropolis, a place full of novelties but remote from their families, former classmates and teachers. There is a transition from comprehensive study on subjects of both arts and science to specialized study in English language and culture. There is a transition from a pressured life revolving exercises and exams to a bustling life full of social

activities. For the first-year English majors, the university is a new community of practice¹, in which they take all kinds of language courses, enhancing English skills and deepening their understanding of the cultures of English-speaking countries. At the same time, they make friends and participate in all sorts of social activities, such as joining students' union or taking part-time jobs. Being engaged with the ever-going English learning process and various social activities, the English majors may identify themselves with different roles and keep having new self-understandings.

By tracing a group of first-year English majors for almost one year in GW, a key university in Guangzhou, China, the current study investigates how the transformations of learners' identities are related to their English learning trajectories. Specifically, this longitudinal study aims to address two research questions:

- 1) How are the English majors' identities constructed and transformed in the first year in the university?
- 2) How do learners' identities affect and simultaneously are affected by English learning?

2. Literature Review

The issue of identity has recently been recognized as central to Second Language Acquisition (SLA), as there is much research in the relationship between identity and L2 learning. Different researchers, drawing on different sources and using a variety of methodologies, have brought diverse perspectives to this relationship. A wealth of research explores the multiple and intersecting dimensions of language learners' identities (for example, Block, 2007; Day, 2002; Miller, 2003), while a growing body of research seeks to investigate the ways in which particular relations of race, gender, class and sexual orientation may impact the process of SLA (for example, Kanno, 2008; Nelson, 2009; Norton, 2000).

However, most of the research is targeted at ESL learners in English speaking countries. There has been little focus on the identity of the EFL learners. Being the largest population of EFL learners in the world, the Chinese English learners remain largely understudied in identity and SLA research. Only a small group of Chinese scholars have explored the relationship between EFL learning and self-identity of Chinese college students (Gao, 2004; Gao et al., 2004), but none of this research is longitudinal, thus failing to reveal a more dynamic picture of how the learners' identities transform and relate to their English learning trajectories over a period of time in college. My research will then be a new and significant contribution to this area.

3. Theoretical Foundation

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The construction of identity is integral to the current study. Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin's (2011) explication of three identity dilemmas will be drawn on as the theoretical framework. According to Bamberg et al., the process of identity construction is best conceptualized as the navigation or management of a space between different dilemmatic positions.

3.1.1. Dilemma (i) Agency and Control

Agency refers to the capability to act. One will lean toward a world-to-person direction of fit or a person-to-world direction of fit. On one end of this continuum, the person will view himself/herself as a recipient or an undergoer who is constructed by the world. On the other end, the person will view himself/herself as a creator or a controller who constructs the way the world is.

3.1.2. Dilemma (ii) Sameness vs Difference between Me and Others

The space between self-differentiation and self-integration constitutes another continuum. One will define a sense of self as different from others, or one will integrate a sense of self into communities with others. This requires the navigation of how and to what degree one views and presents oneself as the same or different from others.

¹A community of practice (CoP) is, according to cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), a group of people who share a craft and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally.

3.1.3. Dilemma (iii) Constancy and Change

Identity is also constructed through navigation between constancy and change. One will position oneself in terms of some form of continuity, facing the dilemma of claiming to be the same in the face of constant change or claiming to have changed in small ways.

The above-mentioned identity dilemmas are three continua, within which individuals construct a sense of self that balances in between two extreme endpoints. My analysis of learners' identity transformations in the current study will be carried out within this three-level positioning framework.

3.2. Theoretical Concepts

Norton's identity theory of SLA (Norton, 2000, 2010) also serves a part of the foundation of my current study. Norton argues that learners' identities are central to second language learning. They are socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual. In her theory, three important and interrelated concepts, namely identity, investment and imagined community, are very useful for my discussion of the relationship between learners' identity and language learning.

3.2.1. Identity

Norton (1995, 1997) used the term identity to refer to how a person understands his or her relationship to the social world, how that relationship is socially constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future. Norton argues that three characteristics of identity are particularly relevant to SLA: the multiple, non-unitary nature of identity; identity as a site of struggle; and identity as changing over time.

3.2.2. Investment

Norton (1995) introduced the economic term investment to signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. She argues that, if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their "cultural capital"². Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment, which will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources. Learners' investment will change over time, being influenced by various factors, such as learners' self-identity, power relations between the English language learners and native speakers, etc.

3.2.3. Imagined Community

The term "imagined communities" was first coined by Benedict Anderson (1991) and refers to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination. Norton (2010) points out that these imagined communities, however, are no less real than the ones in which learners have daily engagement, and might even have a stronger impact on their investment in the target language and their learning trajectories. A learner's imagined community invites an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context of future affiliations and identifications, rather than prevailing sets of relationships.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

Since learners' identities are seen as multiple and changing, methods that used in an identity approach to SLA tend to be qualitative rather than quantitative. For there has been a strong methodological focus on narratives (Norton, 2010), the methodology used for the current research is "Diary Study".

At the beginning of the academic year 2012-13, I invited the first-year students in my Communicative English class as participants. Five of them (4 female and 1 male) volunteered for my study. I asked them to keep a diary and regularly take down their experiences in learning English. We gathered together on a group once a month

²Cultural capital is a sociological concept that has gained widespread popularity since it was first articulated by Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, cultural capital acts within a system of exchange as a social relation that includes forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a person has that confers power and status in society.

and they were encouraged to read some extracts from their diary entries to the group, sharing their desires, fears, joys and frustrations in English learning. In order to guarantee a supportive and intimate environment for the discussion, all the meetings were held at comfortable and relaxed settings, such as the café or canteens on campus. Following Pierce (1994), I didn't use any recorder, as it might make the participants feel uncomfortable when discussing personal issues, and might accentuate my role as researcher and distance our relationship. However, I did take notes at the meetings when I wanted to record words from the participants.

The project ran for almost one year till the end of the academic year.

4.2. Data Collection

At the end of the project, the diaries of the participants were collected as the major source of data. The researcher-participants meetings mentioned above are another important source for data collection. The discussions that arose from the diary extracts were a rich complement to the written diary entries. The data for my diary study then include two major sources: First, learners' diaries, in which the participants recorded their English learning experiences; Second, my notes taken during the researcher-participants meetings.

5. Case Analysis

In this paper, one of the five participants is selected for a more detailed case analysis and discussion. Harper (pseudonym) was a 19-year-old girl when she came into GW from a small county near Guangzhou. Before that she studied in the best middle school in the county, and did well in all subjects. Her scores on the subject of English were always among the top three in her grade, and because of this, as she said, she had a sense of achievement. With her dream to become a middle school teacher of English in the future, she was very excited to be enrolled by GW and became an English major.

5.1. Agency and Control

Before entering the university, Harper presented herself as highly agentive in her studies. She was among the top students in the grade, and had self-confidence. After achieving a good result in the College Entrance Examination, she was even more self-recognized. People around her also thought highly of her and her parents gave her the right to act on her own, such as deciding which universities to apply for and what subject to major in. Finally, she chose GW and English upon the advice from her middle school teachers.

This high degree of agency continued into the beginning of her university life. She presented herself as active both in and after the class. She studied English industriously, made friends enthusiastically, and vigorously applied for various students' clubs and societies. To her disappointment, however, most of her applications were unsuccessful because she couldn't pass the interviews. She began to realize the fierce competition in the university, especially in a good university like GW. She wrote in her diary, "*There are too many excellent students. This has strong impacts on me. I wanted to participate in many activities, but finally I have to be an onlooker. My expectations turned out to be just colorful bubbles.*"

English learning was not as smooth as Harper expected, either. The teaching styles and methods were unfamiliar, the courses proceeded very fast, and teachers' requirements were more challenging compared with those in the middle school. She was not feeling good any more. She was most frustrated in the Pronunciation course and Listening course. She was shocked to learn that her pronunciation of almost each consonant and vowel was wrong, and she could hardly understand the news in the Listening course. The failures in the interviews for joining the clubs also made her lose self-confidence in the English class. She became timid and reluctant to express herself or answer questions. And she was very nervous and shy when making a class presentation. She gradually felt hard to follow the courses, and didn't know how to prepare for the exams and live up to teachers' expectations. "*I was hugely influenced by the environment and others. My conception of the university has changed, and many of my ideas and plans have changed too. I felt so passive.*"

Although Harper still felt lack of agency, things became slightly better in the second term. In the first term, it appeared that she aimed too high and expected too much, and thus she felt upset and lost. After three months' adaptation and adjustment, she had a better and clearer understanding of herself, and could set for herself much more practical goals that were in line with her capability.

Towards the end of the academic year, Harper gradually got things under control again. When the first year

ended and the summer vacation began, she felt herself like a fighter who had a chance to rest and retrospect. She began to construe new plans and goals for the vacation, such as learning driving and Spanish, reading English novels, and practice English pronunciation and intonation by following the lines in the American soap operas. *“The summer vacation gives me time to think what I have, what I need, what I lack, and how to make it up. I felt I was in charge of the vacation, and I could make the best use of it.”*

5.2. Sameness vs Difference between Me and Others

Harper did everything the same as all her classmates after the College Entrance Exam—waiting for the exam result, filling in the application form, waiting for the admittance letter, getting to know about the future university. At the same time, she took a part-time job and went travelling. She constructed herself as being a member of the vast army of college-students-to-be. However, she strongly identifies her future education as significantly different from many others because she was going to study a very different subject in a more prestigious university, while most of her classmates were going to major in subjects of science and engineering. She expressed pride with regard to the difference and confidence about her future.

After entering GW, with all the other freshmen, Harper experienced every novelty in university life, getting to know people, joining in students’ clubs and societies, feeling curious about the new courses, setting aims and making plans. As a local student who had lived near Guangzhou, Harper was easier to get accustomed to the daily life in university compared with the students who came from other provinces. But she quickly found that many of her classmates were marvelous, as they were very independent and competent. *“I feel pressured with them. But the pressure gives me motivation too. I am honored to spend my university life with them.”*

In the middle of the first year, Harper felt every freshman was already very different from others. Everyone was engaged in different activities according to their respective aims and interests, e.g. taking different courses, joining different organizations, taking different part-time jobs. Harper finally got herself in the Magicians’ club, Badminton club and Environmental Protection Association. *“The others all get into something. If I didn’t get into anything, I would feel empty,”* stated by her in a researcher-participants meeting. She also took a part-time job as a campus agent for a well-known English learning organization. She hoped to train her eloquence and communicative skills through the job. Sometime later she took another part-time job as an English tutor for a high school student.

In the winter vacation, Harper did one thing that made her even more differentiated from her peers. She wore a brace on her teeth. *“I have very irregular teeth. I am ashamed of them. I dare not show my teeth to others. I dare not even laugh loudly with my mouth open. So I decided to do it. I want to begin my future career with a better appearance,”* she stated in a meeting. In order to wear the brace, Harper had to get four teeth removed, which was a miserable experience for her. And then, the wire device inside her mouth made her extremely uncomfortable, and prevented her from eating and speaking normally. What’s more, she had to keep answering endless questions about the brace from her relatives, friends and classmates. With the brace, Harper constructed herself as a strange being. These sufferings lasted for almost one term.

When the summer vacation began, Harper felt she was not different from her peers again. They had just finished an exciting year in university, and now they were moving on into the second year. It was time to reflect, and to prospect too.

5.3. Constancy and Change

After receiving the admittance letter from GW, Harper positioned herself as a college student, separating from her past as a middle school student. She wanted to become more independent, and reduce her reliance on the family. That’s why she took a part-time job, and went travelling. Sometimes she travelled alone. *“I felt lonely and bored sometimes. But a strong person should be able to endure the loneliness.”* She was still the same as before, holding strong belief in herself, in her future.

As soon as she entered GW, Harper was overwhelmed by the drastic transition. She wrote in her diary: *“In the middle school, we were ‘forced’ to study, and strictly supervised by teachers and parents. But in university, no one restrains you anymore. You need to study autonomously and diligently. Otherwise you got nothing.”* Harper realized that tertiary education has looser control but higher demands for students. She also found that the once effective learning strategies she used in high school were no longer fit for her studies now.

At the same time, instead of spending the majority of the day sitting in the classrooms like what she did in the

middle school, Harper was busy with her club affairs and part-time jobs. She needed to spend a lot of time in preparing the lessons she gave to her “student” every week. Gradually she began to lose control of her time, lose balance between study and work, and could not complete her tasks in time. What’s worse, her efforts in English didn’t pay off. She was below the average in the class. She constructed herself as a poor learner, no longer the top student in the middle school.

After losing herself in disappointments and failures for a long time, Harper gradually found herself back. She decided to stand on solid ground, and make progress step by step. In the second term, she quit two clubs and the tutoring job. She had more time for English learning. In the final exam, her marks got better, and she regained faith in herself.

Harper admitted that English learning affects her enormously, sometimes inspiring, sometimes discouraging. No matter what impact it had, she would keep striving for improvement as she always had before. *“I would not crave something high and out of reach now. I can accept myself, the one who only makes tiny progress every day or even no progress at all. But I believe I will succeed in the future.”*

6. Case Discussion

Throughout her first year in the university, Harper was seeking every opportunity to improve herself, to arm herself, and to prepare herself for a bright future. From the previous identity dilemma analysis, we can see that she has multiple identities (including imagined ones):

- As a female, who will become pretty with regular teeth. Harper believes, with the brace on her teeth for one or two years, she will become a prettier woman with confidence in her appearance. It is this future self-portrait in her mind or imagined identity that pulls her through the sufferings—unpleasing looks, pains, discomfort, curious or antipathetic gaze from others, inability to chew food or to speak clearly, etc. At the initial stage, she was worried that she could not speak English well with the brace, so she purposefully reduced her investment on English speaking.
- As an adult, who should be able to endure loneliness, agony and adversity. It’s this identity that prompts Harper to go travelling alone, supports her to overcome the pains from wearing the brace as well as the setbacks in English studies and the club interviews. Her eventual overcoming the difficulties reinforces her self-identification as a grown-up.
- As a college student, who should be independent and have scholastic pursuit. This identity further distances Harper from her family psychologically, and affiliates her to the community at her university. As a new member of this community, she pays close attention to various campus events, and tries to get involved. She also tries to upgrade herself scholastically by following all kinds of English competitions, such as the Pronunciation Contest, the Speaking Contest, the Drama night, the Interpretation Contest, etc. This comprehensive involvement further constructs her identity as a college student.
- As an English major, who should be more skillful in English and more open to western culture. No doubt Harper’s heavy investment on English largely originates from this identity. She tries every possible way to make her English level higher than non-English majors. She recites English vocabulary, watches English movies, reads English books, listens to English news, speaks English in her dorm, and even studies English when taking non-English courses. Even though her efforts don’t yield a satisfactory return, she never gives up.
- As a potential middle school teacher of English, who should possess not only the English knowledge but also the quality of a good teacher. For a long time, Harper has interest and passion in the teaching profession. She identifies herself as a future member of the community of English teachers. This imagined identity further commits her to English learning and impels her to take the tutoring job so as to experience being a teacher.
- As a potential career woman, who is competent, eloquent, and good at communication, organization and management. When Harper is low in her English studies, she deconstructs her identity as a future English teacher as she cannot see much chance in it. But she never doubts that she will become successful in her future career. Reconstructing herself as a future member of the community of successful career women, Harper engages herself energetically in extracurricular activities in order to develop different skills and abilities. The investment of time and energy on other activities distracts Harper’s devotion to English learning.
- As a controller of life. There are moments when Harper views herself dominating: she can choose university, choose the specialty, choose the time, the place and the ways to study English, decide what activities to take,

and moves towards her goals step by step. In these moments, Harper studies English actively. Meanwhile, the improvement of her English level strengthens her identification as the controller of her life.

- As an undergoer of fate. There are also moments when Harper feels helpless. She cannot choose the clubs she likes best. She cannot choose the courses she is more interested in. Instead, she is chosen by the clubs. She has to accept some boring courses that have been arranged for her, and she has to follow some English courses arduously. In these moments, Harper deconstructs herself as being a controller of life and reconstructs herself as being a passive recipient at the mercy of fate.

All these gender, age-group, academic and (imagined) professional identities and various self-identifications fade in and out through Harper's first-year life in the university. Some of them are harmonious, while some are contradictory. Some of them may be more foregrounded at a particular time or space, while others may be more highlighted at another time or space. All these identities are more or less impactful to Harper's investment on her English learning, while her English learning experience also partly constructs or deconstructs her identities. Along with her English learning, Harper is constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who she is and how she relates to the social world.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Summary of the Study

With the data elicited from participant's diary and in-depth researcher-participants meetings, this paper has revealed a dynamic picture of identity transformations of an English major throughout her first year in the university. During this period, the participant's identities are multiple and ever-changing, being constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. The transformations of her identities in university have influenced her commitment to English learning, while English learning itself constitutes a part of the ongoing process of her identity constructions.

We can see that the participant constructs and negotiates her identities by mediating herself between two extreme points in three identity dilemmas. Sometimes she claims agency and control over her life, while at other times she feels being constructed by the world. She views herself as similar to others in some ways, yet she also differentiates herself from her peers in other ways. She indicated severe personal changes, but emphasized at the same time that her faith in future success has never altered.

We can also see that the participant's identities are significantly related to her investment on English, and should be understood not only in terms of investment in the real world but also in terms of investment in imagined communities. In some cases, imagined communities provide her a strong impetus for English learning. In some other cases, they led her to withdraw her time and energy in English learning and engage her in alternative actions.

7.2. Implications and Future Research

The current study on English learners' identities has important implications for English teaching in China. Teachers and educators need to be highly aware of the fact that learners' investment on English cannot be fully understood without being associated with their identities, which are multiple, contradictory, and ever-changing. Each language learner is unique, and their existence and development need to be respected, attended and cared. A humanistic approach should be adopted in language education. A friendly and open space should be opened for the learners with different identities, and each learner should be given the equal right to speak or use English in and after class.

Future research can explore how teachers and educators can practice the humanistic approach in details, and give more concrete advices for pedagogy. Furthermore, the investigating time of the study can be extended to the whole period in university to demonstrate more comprehensively how the transformations of learners' identities are related to their four years' English learning trajectories.

References

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Rev. ed.). New York: Verso.

- Bamberg, M. (2011). Narrative Practice and Identity Navigation. In J. A. Holstein, & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Varieties of Narrative Analysis* (pp. 99-124). London: Sage Publications.
- Bamberg, M., De Fina, A., & Schiffrin, D. (2011). Discourse and Identity Construction. In S. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*. Berlin/New York: Springer Verlag.
- Block, D. (2007). *Second Language Identities*. London & New York: Continuum.
- Day, E. M. (2002). *Identity and the Young English Language Learner*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Gao, Y. (Ed.) (2004). *The Social Psychology of English Learning by Chinese College Students: Motivation and Learners' Self-Identities*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Gao, Y., Li, Y., & Li, W. (2004). EFL Learning and Self-Identity Constructions—Case Studies of English Majors. In Y. H. Gao (Ed.) *The Social Psychology of English Learning by Chinese College Students: Motivation and Learners' Self-Identities* (pp. 107-124). Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Kanno, Y. (2008). *Language and Education in Japan: Unequal Access to Bilingualism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, J. (2003). *Audible Difference: ESL and Social Identity in Schools*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Nelson, C. (2009). *Sexual Identities in English Language Education: Classroom Conversations*. New York: Routledge.
- Norton, B. (1995). Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 9-31.
- Norton, B. (1997). Language, Identity, and the Ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 409-429.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Norton, B. (2010) An Identity Approach to Second Language Acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative Approaches to SLA* (pp. 73-94). New York: Routledge.
- Pierce, B. N. (1994). Using Diaries in Second Language Research and Teaching. *English quarterly*, 26, 22-29.