Social Identity in English Language Development: A Case Study with Two Interviewees

Zhang Juan[1*]

[1]*Beijing International Studies University, China.*

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Short Research Article

ABSTRACT

English language development has played an important role in constructing second language learners' social identities through language learning. Previous studies have demonstrated that learners' social identities are beneficial to learners' language development. This paper is a descriptive study using the method of interviewing, which investigates how the social identities are constructed in EFL learning. It shows that social identity is a dynamic concept and there exists a correlation between learners' social identity construction and their language learning development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social identity is the identity that EFL learners construct actively and it is associated with learners' desires and wishes in the future. Social identity, as a psychological term, has begun to attract the attention of researchers in the field of second language acquisition. Norton [1] explained the identities of EFL learners are multiple and subject to change and shift over time and space.

_____

Corresponding author: E-mail: fannymoonmilan@126.com;

Thus, "because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity" [2]. The notions of social identity and social position will be used to signify socially recognizable categories of membership that individuals occupy at different points in their lives [2]. In accordance with Wenger's [2] theory, social identities will be seen not simply as discursively constructed categories of self but as live experiences of participation in specific co-texts.

Given the fact that there exists largest amount of Chinese EFL learners in the world, this paper may contribute to the findings of mental construction of the social identity of the EFL learners. Though many studies have been done in the field, most of the studies are conducted with overseas students or immigrants as subjects and studies with Chinese English learners in Chinese learning background are not common. Based on that, in this study, interviews are conducted with two Chinese interviewees to obtain data, with 'Social Identity' as an analytic lens, and drawing upon data gathered from two interviewees with English learning background.

This is a case study in order to investigate how two interviewees' social identities affect their English language improvement. This study interpreted some processes to present interviewees' experiences, and to show how their social identities were socially constructed across time and place.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language and Social Identity in Theoretical Framework

Identity, whether it is an individual, social or institutional level, is something which we are constantly building and negotiating all our lives through our interaction with others. Everybody has many different identities all at the same time, and each of them does not exist in isolation from other identities. Kim has pointed out that some EFL (English Foreign Language) learners' struggle to learn English should also be understood in terms of the complex interactions between social meanings and social identities [3]. Also English confidence was beneficial for psychological adjustment and social identity (e.g., Cle´ment & Noels [4]). The research conducted by Cle´ment and his colleagues (e.g., Cle´ment

[4]) has shown that second language learning translates into the adoption of second language's social identity and an elevated sense of psychological adjustment [4]. As [5] argues, "Language and identity should be seen as a single entity" (p. 66), since language is the most important tool for both communication and social identity construction. Thus, Eva in [6] memoir has pointed out that 'This is a society in which you are who you think you are. Nobody gives you your identity here, you have to reinvent yourself every day' (p. 160). She then proceeds to ask that 'But how do I choose from identity options available all around me?' [6]. As is described in his findings shout social identity, Mediating/Moderating Roles of Communications theory [7], the social-identity approach is based on the argument that individuals seek to maintain a positive self-image given contextual and social determinants. Within that theoretical context, a first hypothesis examined by Cle´ment [4]. Suggests that the importance of social identification to different groups is related to relative status in society. Furthermore, even though language production is an individual phenomenon, it binds, through communication, those using it to attach certain social identity.

Language can be a powerful means of exercising social control. If you belong to a particular group, this means adopting the linguistic conventions of that group. Norton, B. Toohey [8] reminds us that identity is complex, contradictory, and multifaceted; it is constructed by language; and it has to be understood through both larger social processes and relations of power. Cle´ment [4] assumed that the relevance of social interactions with the in-group and out-group for the acculturative process should not, however, overshadow the role of language and linguistic confidence as these factors have an impact on identity. Cle´ment [4] that a model of language learning highlights how language contact and language acquisition impact social identity and social psychology adjustment.

The concepts of social identity have undergone a long progress of evolution. The relevant research that have done in the field of identity and language learning. Starting from sociology and psychology, the concept covers such aspects as identity, language learning, society and culture from the theoretical perspective and empirical perspective. The results of the present study also showed how social identity was sustained by communication and language learning development.

2.2 Language Learning and Social Identity Construction of Some Bilingual Writers

Norton has had theorizes that "To make a meaningful connection between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language and his changing social identity" [8]. We have rewriting of "assimilation" stories into all-American narratives which represents perhaps one of the most important achievements of bilingual writers —instead of writing themselves "into" America, as did the immigrants at the turn of the century, these EFL users rewrite America. And the examples are as following:

Anderson B [9] who came to the U.S.A. from Chile, said 'social and class identities are as inextricable from the issue of language ownership as race, ethnicity, culture, and gender.' And the class-linked notion that I transfer wholesale from Poland is that belonging to a "better" class of people is absolutely dependent on speaking a "better" language. And in my situation especially, I know that language will be a crucial instrument

I knew that having control of English was one of the few chances I had of not being swallowed up here, both as an immigrant and as a female [10]. Perhaps most poignantly class and language are interconnected in (Block, David [11]) memoir of a journey from a bilingual child of working-class Mexican immigrants to an American scholar and writer: Once upon a time, I was a "socially disadvantaged" child. Thirty years later I write this book as a middle-class American man. Assimilated.

Also, the boy who first entered a classroom barely able to speak English, twenty years later concluded his studies in the stately quiet of the reading room in the British Museum (Block, David [11]).

These examples were then coded and analyzed for information about particular types of social identity and the links between language and social identity. Similarly, all the writers continued to speak and practice their English and to enhance their confidence and self-esteem even under conditions of marginalization. To be sure, their powerful and dynamic language learning motivation influenced their English language development and social identity construction [8].

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Methodology

Social identity is seen as an ongoing process. [12] confirmed this stating that social identification is a life-long process, starting from infancy proceeding until one's death. With this confirmation in mind, it would be logical to expect that learners can be helped to come to a better understanding of their identity in different English Foreign Language learning stages.

This paper drawing on Norton's social identity theory as the framework and adopting the comparative method, aims to investigate the social identity construction of English Foreign Language learners. This section draws attention to the potential of language learning to facilitate social identity changes, by assessing studies of English Foreign Language learners' social identity construction.

This study focuses on the interviewees' inner voices and "introspective account of their experiences" (Gardner, R. C, W. E. Lambert [13]), how social identities affect their English language development and learning, and how English language development plays a role in constructing social identities.

3.2 Data Collection

As a data collection tool, the data were obtained through interview and observation and then were analyzed qualitatively. Even though this study's design emphasized regular face-to-face interviews, in general, the data were collected through multiple methods (by interviewing, talking, narrating and story-telling). Two planned interviewees majored in English.

The following research questions are: The aim of this study is to determine the effects of English learning development on EFL learners' social identities and how social identities affect their English language development and learning, and how English language development plays a role in constructing their social identities.

3.3 Data Analysis and Discussion

The relationship between language and identity were main discussion topics: How foreign language learners recognize their social identity? How their social class identity influence their

foreign language learning experiences? How their social class identity is constructed in their foreign language learning processes?

Gee JP [14] had given two points: Firstly, foreign language learners' social identities mediate their access to language learning resources and opportunities that are available in the foreign language learning. Secondly, their motivations and strategies in language learning are shaped by the range of social identities that are available for them in the foreign language learning.

The data of this study were analyzed in accordance with each research question.

3.3.1 Interview with Subject A (Fang Xiangyang): (a teacher works in the International exchange and cooperation office in a university now)

The researcher analyzed regular face-to-face interviews with the interviewee who was conducted over his learning career, but also considered about how the interviewee, his teachers, his parents, and his friends evaluated his oral English, his major, his language learning experiences and his language development as a career. He mentioned that: *I knew that my parents had encouraged me to learn English. I knew that I had turned to English only with angry reluctance. But once I spoke English with ease, I came to feel proud.*

Fortunately, the habit of reading aloud enlarged his (Subject A) English vocabulary and improved his knowledge of common English speech rhythms, which allowed him to interact more capably and confidently with his friends, colleagues, and professors in social activities. He said that '*Learning English, provided him with authority, confidence, and public social identity that he may never have had.*' Likewise, he actively sought out opportunities to talk and communicate with his foreign friends. These activities, along with his grown-up environment, gave him more chances for speech output. Such social interactions developed his communication skills and attitudes, and these social interactions in turn helped him to improve his English. Such positive motivation allowed him to generate opportunities to practice his English in the workplace and to change his social identity, boosting his right to speak for himself and to strengthen his self-confidence.

Kanno Y, Norton B [15] argue that the key difference between good learners and poor learners is that good learners "exercise the social networks so they can practice and improve their competence in the target language" (p.420). Take Subject A as an example. Some English foreign language learners who have strong motivation and desires to learn the target language become competent language learners and successful participants in their respective target language. Norton stated that a kind of foreign language is formulated "not only as a linguistic system, but also as a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated" [15]. For this reason, more research on good language learning is necessary to evaluate "learners' internal characteristics, learning strategies, or linguistic outputs," and "the reception of their actions in particular social identities" [15].

3.3.2 Interview with Subject B (Li Jianhua): (an English journalist works in the Central Radio International in China)

In the second interview, the study investigated how a CRI journalist's English language development affected his social identity and his society role affected his language development and his international communication. Social identity cannot be regarded as a quality gained with Subject B's actively observing the world around, but it can be gained with the active participation of interaction with the outer world, or encouraging him to participate in interaction with others. Similar to how social identity can influence his linguistic confidence, the opportunity to engage in communication with other group members of a similar linguistic background with the use of language technology can influence social interaction.

This study focuses on Subject B's inner voice and his experience to answer the research topic that how social identities affect his English language learning development and his English language learning strategy, and how English language learning processing plays a role in constructing his social identities. He said that '*I started to choose English as my career because my English language learning has improved my social class. It heighted my social identity, and also because working in CRI gives me a higher sense of social class identity, I continue to improve my English language development.*'

His interview responses were coded and categorized, and common themes emerged: the participant's previous English learning education and his language learning background affect his

social identity, which in turn play roles in his English language development and his academic achievements. The recurring themes and topics were coded and classified by research questions. In addition, ongoing observation notes and interview data analysis were helpful to evaluate the participant's English language development, as well as to analyze his English learning development and social identity changes over time and place.

As shown here, this social context has important implications for influencing the development of future social interactions. Many EFL scholars regard EFL classrooms as sites of struggle, where the social, cultural, and political pressures of learning a second language influence learners' identities [16,17,18].

4. DISCUSSION

All in all, social identities that are available to them may provide them with unique means of self-representation and will prompt them to cross boundaries and assimilate them to the new contexts or become members of multiple communities.

5. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This section focuses on the findings of the two research foci: How their social identities influenced their English language learning, and how their English studying and learning experiences affected their processing of establishing their social identities. Establishing these descriptive and detailed explanations of interviewees' background in learning English and their English proficiency will be helpful to understand how their social identities have impacts on their English learning development. This paper provides a new direction for future research and facilitates our understanding of how English language learners go about constructing a positive social identity so as to improve their English language learning.

Most importantly, collecting information from all these sources enabled the interviewer to use data resources to investigate interviewees' motivation to learn English and their strategies to master English, as well as how their English learning experiences developed their social identity and perspectives on language development activities.

Given that social identity is a dynamic and constantly changing social construct across time and place (Norton, 2000, 2006), I believe that future research needs to include more detailed and long-term analysis.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Social identity, characterized by feelings of belonging to a group, is generally considered to be self-defined and to develop and change through time following social interactions. In this paper, I draw on (Kinginger, C [19]; Gu, M. M [20]) definition of identity and emphasize how the interviewees' learning development changed their social identities in interesting ways and with Norton's theories to enrich the role of motivation in language development and social identity construction. This study focuses on the interviewees' inner voices and their experiences to address how social identities affected their English language learning development and their English language learning strategies, and how English language learning plays a role in constructing their social identities.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, interviewees' consent has been collected and preserved by the author.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

REFERENCES

1. Norton B. Non-participation, imagined communities, and the language classroom [A] M. Breen (ed), Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research [C]. London: Pearson Education Limited. 2001;159-171.
2. Wenger E, Lave J. Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Miller, J. Audible Difference: ESLand Social Inentity in Schools [M]. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters; 2003.
3. Kim LS. Multiple identities in a multicultural world: A Malaysian perspective. Journal of Language, Identity, and Education. 2003;2: 137–158.
4. Richard Clément. Interethnic contact, identity, and psychological adjustment: The mediating and moderating roles of communication; 2001.

5. Bialystok E, Hakuta K. In other words. The science and psychology of second-language acquisition. New York: Basic Books; 1994.

6. Hall S. Representation: Cultural represen-tations and signifying practices [M]. London: Sage; 1997.

7. Turner B. Language and identity. In N. Hornberger, & S. McKay (Eds.), Sociolinguistics and Language Education Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters. 1987; 349–369.

8. Norton B, Toohey K Identity, language learning, and social Change [J]. Language Teaching. 2011;44(4).

9. Anderson B. Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism (Revised Edn) [M]. New York: Verso; 1991.

10. Cervatiuc C. Identity, good language learning, and adult immigrants in Canada. Journal of Language, Identity, and Education. 2009;8:254–271.

11. Block, David. The rise of identity in SLA research [J]. The Modern Language Journal. 2007;91:863-876.

12. Firth A, Waggner J. On discourse, communication, and (some) fundamental concepts in SLA research [J]. The Modern Language Journal. 1997;81:286-300.

13. Gardner RC, Lambert WE. Attitudes and motivation in second language learning [M]. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House; 1972.

14. Gee JP. Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. Review of Research in Education. 2000;25(1):99–125.

15. Kanno Y, Norton B. Imagined communities and educational possibilities: Introduction. Journal of Language, Identity, and Education. 2003;2(4):241–249.

16. Haneda M. Investing in foreign-language writing: A study of two multicultural learners [J]. Journal of Language, Identity, and Education. 2005;4(4):269-290.

17. Hirst E. Identity construction in complex second language classrooms. International Journal of Education Research. 2007;46: 159–171.

18. Mckay S, Wong SL. Multiple discouse, multiple identities: Investment and agency in second-language learning among Chinese adolescent immigrant students [J]; 1996.

19. Kinginger C. Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning and identity construction [J]. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackedge (Eds). 2004;219-242.

20. Gu MM. Identities constructed in difference: English language learners in China. Journal of Pragmatics. 2010;42(1):139–152.

APPENDIX

Interview Script

Topic: The relationship between social identity and English learning.

Interviewer: Zhang Juan

Interviewee: Fang Xiangyang, Li Jianhua

Note:

1. Fang Xiangyang is a teacher who works in the office of International Exchange and Cooperation Office of BISU.
2. Li Jianhua is my alumni. He graduated from BISU and now he works in Beijing.