

Living with a Foreign Tongue: An Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry into Identity in a Foreign Language

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Learning a second language involves the development of an identity in the target language. This study is an autobiographical narrative inquiry into the issue of identity in a foreign language. Autobiographical accounts of my relationship with, and my feelings about, English at different stages in my learning journey are developed to show how my identity with English has formed, shifted, and reconstructed. A critical perspective on identity formation is used to shed light on the identities I have lived with at different stages of my learning journey. The high status of English in China turned into my inner motive to acquire an identity as someone who speaks English well. However, at a more advanced competency level, I experienced a crisis of identity split between my English identity and my native Chinese identity, especially after becoming aware of an unequivocal postcolonial linguistic discourse that positions the two languages differently.

L'apprentissage d'une langue seconde implique le développement d'une identité dans la langue cible. Cette étude est une enquête narrative autobiographique portant sur la question de l'identité dans une langue étrangère. Je développe des récits autobiographiques sur mon rapport avec la langue anglaise, et mes sentiments au sujet de celle-ci, à différentes étapes de mon parcours d'apprentissage de sorte à démontrer la formation et l'évolution de mon identité linguistique en anglais. Une perspective critique de la formation de l'identité vient éclairer les identités que j'ai développées à différentes étapes de mon parcours d'apprentissage. Le statut élevé de l'anglais en Chine est devenu ma motivation interne d'acquérir une identité comme quelqu'un qui parlait bien l'anglais. Par contre, arrivée à un niveau de compétence plus élevé, j'ai traversé une crise de fragmentation de mon identité où j'étais déchirée entre mon identité en anglais et ma propre identité chinoise, notamment après m'être rendu compte du discours linguistique postcolonial explicite qui accorde des places différentes aux deux langues.

Language is not only a semiotic system for human communication but it is also an integral part of an individual's identity. Learning a second language inevitably involves the development of some kind of identity in the target language and culture (Dörnyei, 1998). In the earlier, more cognitive approach to language learning in which language learning is seen more as an abstract, internalized process, attention has been most often drawn to the relationship between learner identity and language attainment. On the one hand, Harder (1980) explained, foreign language learners who are short of a native-like proficiency will suffer from a "reduced personality" (p. 262) and "being a half-wit" (p. 269) in communications in the language. On the other hand,

being able to identify with or having a positive attitude to the target language and culture is seen as the internal motivation for learners in learning the language (see Dörnyei, 1998; Williams & Burden, 1997).

However, in the recent *social turn* in second language research (Block, 2003) in which language learning is taken to be a social practice and a socialization process, more complexity has been cast on the notion of learner identity. Identity has been seen more in the light of “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2000, p. 5). A more post-structural perspective has been introduced to view language learning identity as a site of struggle influenced by unequal power relations (Norton, 2000). Different from the structuralists who see linguistic signs as having idealized meanings and linguistic communities as being homogeneous and consensual, the post-structuralists see the signifying practices of linguistic signs as sites of struggles and linguistic communities as heterogeneous arenas with conflicting claims to truth and power.

But at the same time, individual learners are seen as being able to exert agency to transform their identity by investing in an ideal self in imagined communities (see Firth & Wagner, 1997; Morgan, 2007; Norton & Toohey, 2001). According to Weedon's (1997) notion of subjectivity, an individual is subject to relations of power, but at the same time, the individual can also exert human agency and negotiate a counter-discourse which positions him or her in a powerful rather marginalized subject position. The process of language learning can thus be seen as a process of learners making investment in a desirable identity (Norton, 2000).

This paper aims to enrich the current literature with further evidence on the process of language learners' identity formation and transformation during their learning journey. What is the learner's initial impression of the target language at the beginning of the learning journey? Where is that impression from? Why does she want to learn the language? Is it a voluntary decision or is it decided for her? Does this impression change? If so, how does it change? What factors are at work to effect the change? How does the foreign language identity relate to the mother tongue identity? The current study is an effort to answer these questions.

Methodology

The current study is an autobiographical narrative inquiry into my experience learning and teaching English in the People's Republic of China and my experience using English as a second language in Canada to demonstrate the process of my language learner identity construction and transformation. Narrative inquiry is one of the five approaches in qualitative research (i.e., narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study) (Creswell, 2006) that studies people's lived experience in life, with stories taken as both the phenomena and the methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The methodology is based on Dewey's (1938) view of life experience as the foundation for learning and Johnson's (1987) experiential philosophy that points to the importance of embodied experience as a way of knowing. The goal is to arrive at the meaning of the human lived experience by investigating people's personal narratives, lived, told, and relived (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry works with three dimensional narrative spaces that look at life experience backward and forward (temporality), inward and outward (sociality), and within and across situations (space) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Autobiographical accounts of my relationship with and my feelings about English at

different stages in my learning journey are developed to show how my identity with English has formed, shifted, and reconstructed. Narrative inquiry is used as the methodology as it is able to capture people's lived experience in a holistic and non-reductionistic manner. Narrative inquiry is particularly conducive to researching people's identity issue, as stories are taken as life experience itself; it is through stories that people create coherence of meaning in life, identity is thus people's stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In line with the tradition of narrative inquiry, previous literature in foreign language identity will be woven into my own narratives so as to ensure the seamless connection between theory and practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

My Childhood Admiration for Interpreters

I was born in 1975 in a small mountainous village in the Northeast of China. It was one year before Chairman Mao died, which brought an end to the Cultural Revolution; but the effect of the Cultural Revolution was still visible in my earliest memories. I can still remember my mom going to work in the Communist Commune, called the Production Team, when I first went to elementary school. I remember that my family of five members only received two wagon loads of corn-on-the-cob at the end of the year. It was not until 1983 when the agricultural reform, as part of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Open-up policy, was carried out in my village and the previously collectively owned land in the village was divided up and leased to each household to farm.

My dad, as he later on explained to me, chose to leave the Production Team before 1983. He did not see hope in the Production Team, so he went to work as an independently contracted builder on construction sites in the nearby town. He would have to pay some money to the village to compensate for his absence, but he could still make more money than working on the Production Team. It was in 1984, when I was in Grade three in elementary school that my father bought our first 17-inch black-and-white TV set. It was one of the first few TV sets in my village, maybe the fourth one. There was only one channel on TV and it lasted every night from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. As we did not have any other choice, I would watch everything on the same channel including the news I did not understand. The national news, which started at 7:00 p.m. and lasted half an hour, always started with diplomatic news about national leaders visiting other countries or receiving visits from leaders of other countries. At their meetings, I noticed that the leaders were not able to talk to each other directly. My family explained to me that the leaders had to talk through interpreters who were sitting between the two leaders behind the tea table. I was deeply impressed with the work of the interpreters, believing that their job was very important and admirable. I must have thought for a moment that it would be cool if I could speak a foreign language and interpret for leaders of the country. But as a farm boy, I never really thought I would have anything to do with that.

This experience occurred right after China's 30 years of isolation from the rest of the world (from 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, to 1979, when the Cultural Revolution was over). As I reflect upon it, for me as a boy on a remote farm in China in the early 1980s, the only person I knew of that could speak a foreign language was the interpreter sitting between the two national leaders from two countries on TV, and the only job for a person who spoke a foreign language was to work as an interpreter for leaders at diplomatic meetings. It was an admirable and honorable job with high prestige and high expertise. For many other villagers today who have not traveled far away from home, they still have the same impression. Once I

traveled home during the summer holidays when I was studying as an English Education major at university in the late 1990s, and one of my neighbors asked, “When will you be able to translate for Jiang Ze Min [the Chinese president at that time] on TV?”

Learning English in Secondary Schools in China

English was not officially introduced in elementary school curriculum in China until 2003 (Wang, 2007), though many more developed areas in China had already voluntarily introduced English in elementary schools long before that. In the part of the country I grew up in, English was only offered from junior middle school onwards. I have a sister and a brother who were six and three years older than me, respectively, and they went to junior middle school before me. I saw their English textbooks and they told me how to say a few words in English, “good morning, good bye, dog, cat, rose”, etc. I also learned the English alphabet song from them. I remember eagerly anticipating going to junior middle school and learning English myself.

In 1988, I went to junior middle school and started learning English. The Chinese Nine-Year Compulsory Education Law was officially passed in 1986, but it was not yet implemented where I was from in 1988. As a result, we had to take an entrance exam which selected top students to enter the junior middle school. I remember feeling very stressed before the exam as both my sister and my brother had made it before me. On the exam day, I was taken to the junior middle school where the test was administered on the back seat of my sister’s bicycle. It was more than a half hour’s ride. There were 18 students from my village primary school who took the exam, and only seven passed and were admitted to the only junior middle school in the township. I was one of the seven lucky ones.

When I first started learning English, China was already ten years into its Reform and Open-up effort. As part of the Open-up initiative, China permitted foreign direct investment in several small *special economic zones* along the coast in 1978. In the 1980s, 14 coastal cities and three coastal regions became *open areas* for foreign investment. The open policy in China increased Chinese people’s dealings with foreigners in English. However, the quality of English education at that time was unsatisfactory. According to a national survey on English education in 1985, most secondary school graduates were unable to use even very simple language to express themselves after almost 900 hours of English instruction (Li, Zhang, & Liu, 1988 cited in Wang, 2007). The reasons were believed to be the grammar-based audio-lingual teaching method, rigid written examination requirements, a shortage of qualified teachers, and extremely limited resources (Wang, 2007).

I was not able to scrutinize the quality of English teaching at that time, but as I reflect on it, all of the above mentioned problems existed in the English classes in my junior middle school (1988-1991). I remember reading the vocabulary, the dialogues, and sentences after the teacher. The teacher was the only oral language input we had because we never listened to the recordings on the tape since there was no tape recorder available. In addition, we were supposed to recite all the dialogues and reading passages in the book. Reading and memorizing the textbooks seemed to be what we did most of the time. This practice continued when I went to senior middle school.

Today, when I read John Dewey (1938) I agree with him on the necessity and possibility of learning through learners’ personal experience, connecting life with education so that school education would be meaningful to learners. However, these ideas never occurred to me back then. I never really wondered why we needed to learn English. It was just a school subject we

had to take. Did I ever think that I would become an interpreter for national leaders, as I saw on TV as a young boy? No. I knew I had to learn it because I wanted to be a good student and because it would be tested on exams. Why did I want to be a good student? Why did I care about the tests? I never asked. Maybe I wanted to get out of the village, the town, the county, so I had to work hard at school. Since I wanted to be a good student, I worked hard on every subject, English included.

I remember it was difficult for me to memorize all 26 letters of the alphabet. Though I could sing the alphabet song and could read them from A to Z in order, it was difficult for me to memorize how to read each individual letter. It was also hard for me to memorize how to construct sentences using correct grammar (i.e., past perfect tense) and for me to memorize long passages in English. However, I managed to do all of those. Today, when I read about Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching, which recommends teachers to engage learners in meaningful communication in the target language so that learners can naturally and subconsciously acquire the language rules, I totally agree. However, these ideas would have been a luxury to us at that time. The teachers might have had very limited proficiency in English themselves so they might not have been able to conduct their classes communicatively. The best thing they could have done was prepared us well enough for the written exam, as listening and speaking were not required, so that we would not be at a total disadvantage compared with students from other regions.

When I was in senior high school from 1991 to 1995, the goal of English teaching was to ensure students passed the university exam. I took the university entrance exam twice in 1994 and 1995, due to my failure to enter into a desired university on the first attempt. During my senior middle school years, the national English syllabus was revised in 1993. In the 1993 syllabus, the word *communication* was used in the objectives of teaching for the first time (Wang, 2007). To achieve this end, the teachers were advised by the curriculum to use a variety of teaching strategies to create situations for promoting communicative competence:

Language form has to be combined with its meaning and with what the students think and want to say. Special attention should be paid to turning the language skills acquired through practice into the capacity of using the language for the purpose of communication..." (Adamson & Morris, 1997, p. 22)

However, the new curricular objectives did not seem to have much impact on our classroom. Teachers continued to explain the reading texts and grammar items in Chinese. We continued to recite the reading passages in the textbooks. There were no dialogues in the textbooks in senior high. Since the university entrance exam did not include listening and speaking components, listening and speaking were not practiced on a daily basis. Burnaby and Sun (1989) summarized the traditional methodologies used in China as a combination of Chinese traditions of learning, such as intensive study and recitation of texts, and Western influences, including grammar-translation, extensive and intensive reading, linguistic analysis, and the study of literacy texts. Their summary was a good description of the English pedagogies in our classes. Particularly, the Chinese tradition of text memorization was considered the best way to learn English in my high school experience. I remember very clearly that one of the students in my class was very good at memorizing English texts in the textbook. Once he was called upon to recite a long passage, and he recited it very fast and with ease; he was so fast that we could not catch what he was saying. However, the teacher praised him by saying he was the best English learner he knew.

I am not blaming my high school English teachers for doing a poor job. They did the best

they could to prepare us for the exam, the fate-determiner for all of us. The methodologies they used in class were certainly effective in equipping us with literacy skills in English required by the exam, but they were not conducive to the development of more communicative skills in English such as listening and speaking. I remember when I was in the third year of my senior high school that I met the very first foreigner of my life. He was an American man whose wife was a Chinese girl who had graduated from the same high school I was at. They were visiting the campus when another boy and I met them. The Chinese lady explained to us that she had gone to this school and then encouraged her husband talk to us. He said something to us but we had no clue what he had said. His wife then interpreted for us, and said her husband had seen mountains all around in the horizon and wondered if we had ever read on the mountain. After hearing her translation, I struggled to put together an answer, “No. We read in our classrooms.” My pronunciation must have been quite poor but the man somehow understood. After that, our conversation could not carry on. However, I somehow became very excited despite my inability to carry on with the conversation. After all, I had “talked” to a foreigner! I thought to myself it would be really awesome if I could speak more and really talk with him. Maybe I saw a glimpse of a big world outside the mountains.

As I holistically reflected upon my pre-university English learning experience, English was only a school subject that really had nothing to do with my life. I remember I was amused by the story in our junior middle school textbook about a clever monkey outsmarting a crocodile by throwing a rock into his mouth, and I was impressed by Karl Marx’s ability to learn multiple languages, as was introduced in our senior high textbook. Other than those memories, I failed to identify in any significant way with English in my life. However, my first encounter with a foreigner made me think of the possibilities otherwise.

Struggling for an English Identity at University

In the 1990s, after Deng Xiaoping gave his important speeches during his visit to Southern China in 1992, China entered a new stage of deepening Reform and Open-up. Establishing a market-oriented economic system in China became the agenda of economic reform. Overseas manufacturing businesses shifted to China at a fast pace, taking advantage of the Chinese preferable policy and cheap labor. It was very difficult for all of us to decide on a major to study when we applied for universities before the national university entrance exam. At a meeting to give us instructions for how to choose a major and a university in our university application, a teacher mentioned one thing that caught my attention, “Any major that has the words like ‘foreign’, ‘international’, such as ‘Foreign Trade’, ‘International Finance’ is a good major.”

Somehow I decided to study English at university. Maybe I considered it a popular major that could get me jobs, or maybe I thought I was a good English learner given the good scores I had earned on my English tests, or maybe I felt it was inherently fascinating to communicate with people from other countries and cultures. Whatever the reason, I did not think it through well enough because as soon as I entered university, I realized I had made a big mistake in choosing this major.

In 1995, I was admitted into a university renowned for foreign language education in Northeastern China. However, my excitement was soon replaced by a strong sense of shame and regret. I will never forget the first English class I had. The teacher hoped to evaluate how well we could understand English, so she gave us a small dictation test. She played a tape on the cassette player and asked us to write down any words we could understand. I guess it was a short story

read in a very slow pace, but I can only guess because I did not understand a thing. All I could hear and take down were the articles at the beginning of some sentences, “The”, “A”. There were 20 students in my class and I was the only boy. I looked around and saw that the girls around me, especially those from cities, were taking down complete sentences though occasionally missing a few words. The quality of English education must have been better in the cities. At that moment I felt totally ashamed and out of place. I felt it was the biggest mistake that I had ever made to study English as a major at university.

Because of the university’s reputation in foreign language education, there was an inherent expectation that everybody would speak beautiful English. Those who did so were admired and those who did not were laughed at. For this reason, a sense of shame and unworthiness was always with me. My poor English, coupled with my financial struggle (there was not much allowance from my family), made me wonder if I would ever get a date while in a university with the highest concentration of beautiful girls! My self-efficacy and self-esteem were given another huge blow at the end of the first semester. I was among the five students in the whole grade, which had about 120 in total, who flunked the speaking test for the first semester.

I soon realized that I did not have the luxury to regret choosing the wrong major. I had no choice but to catch up since at that time, we could not change majors at the university. In retrospect, my first two years there were unhappy and even painful at times. For those two years, English study was a struggle to survive and I was making painstaking efforts to catch up. In the third and fourth years however, I finally began to feel a sense of achievement in my English study. I felt much more confident in speaking English in public and I began to have a better and clearer accent in English. A common practice among Chinese students of English was to pick either the American accent or the British accent; two accents that were considered the most authentic varieties of English, and stick to it in our listening and speaking practices. I picked the American accent because most of the other students had picked it. It was before the age of internet so the American accent students listened to the Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts, and the British accent students listened to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio programs. I remember getting up very early and staying up very late to listen to the radio, which is when the VOA signals were the strongest.

I was also able to express more complicated thoughts in English. In an advanced writing class, my essays were often chosen by the teacher to read in class. I also chose to be supervised by an American exchange professor in writing my graduation thesis (an undergraduate thesis was required for the program), as she was known to have higher standards than Chinese teachers. I earned an A on my thesis. As I became more comfortable communicating in English, English became a part of my life. I began to train myself to think in English as well. Later on, upon graduation, I became a university English instructor and English became my professional identity.

Wanting to Sound like a Native-Speaker in my Teaching

In 1999, upon my graduation, I was hired to teach English at a university. To me, it was a new beginning for my learning. I felt the ultimate goal in foreign language learning was native-like proficiency in all aspects, which included the accent and the expressiveness of meaning, and I was far from achieving that goal. I tried to find opportunities to talk to native speakers of English. We had some colleagues who were native-speakers of English and I spent a lot of time hanging out with them. When I was with them, I thought I was a different person in the sense

that I talked and thought differently. Some philosophers of language, for example Wilhelm von Humboldt, Franz Boas, and Edward Sapir, say that different languages carry different world views. As I traveled back and forth between the two languages, I became aware of how the two languages categorized the world differently.

In pursuit of the ultimate goal in foreign language learning, English became a very big part of my life. I chose to read only English books, to mostly watch the only English TV channel, to get the news in English either through a newspaper or the internet, and to watch only English movies, sometimes watching one movie many times so as to imitate the characters' enunciation of English. Once my English-speaking friend said that I sounded like Forrest Gump, from the movie *Forrest Gump*. I stopped watching that movie, as I believed Forrest Gump was not a very intelligent guy and he did not have the best grammar. Still to this day, I have not figured out exactly what he meant when he said, "Stupid is as stupid does."

People around me praised me for my English. They seemed to be jealous of the fact that I was able to hang out with the English ex-pats in town. My students also admired my English in class, as most of the other teachers were not as fluent as I was. For a long time, becoming close to a native English teacher was my self-imposed goal of professional development. Once I was reading a book in Second Language Acquisition which said that adult learners of a foreign language who had passed the critical age, which was about 13, for second language acquisition were unable to develop native-like proficiency in many aspects of the language, particularly a native-like accent. I remembered feeling very sad when I read that.

Then, as a prospective parent, I was wondering if I could raise my future child in English as if it were his or her first language in China, now that I knew I was not able to acquire native proficiency myself. This became another incentive for me to brush up my English, as I was going to be the model for my future child's English. I began to read literature trying to find theoretical basis and successful cases of bilingual parenting in a foreign language, non-native to either parent. I turned it into the topic of my Master's thesis. After completing my research, I was convinced that it was plausible to do so. When my wife was pregnant, I spent much time talking to her belly in English, convinced that this was helpful to the pre-natal development of the child's language. After my son was born in 2007, my wife and I began to speak English to him on a daily basis at home, while the other family members spoke Chinese to him.

I still remember when I proposed the idea of raising a child in English at my proposal hearing in my Master's program. Another student who was already a father asked me, "Will this child still be a Chinese child [if he is raised in English]?" I responded by saying that it was only a matter of language acquisition, and that it had nothing to do with national identity. While we were actually raising my child in English, there were neighbors, who were also university professors and staff members, who wondered whether that would interfere with my son's Chinese acquisition. I took those concerns as being a result of their lack of knowledge of bilingualism and bilingual acquisition.

I never asked why I needed to sound like a native speaker of English nor did I question the high status of English in China both in school curriculum and in society. I very much took it for granted. It was later on in my life that I began to understand the concept of *World Englishes* (see Crystal, 2007), which points to the legitimacy of all varieties of the English language. Upon reflection I realized that I was a victim of the Native-Speakerism (Holiday, 2005), but at that time, sounding like a native speaker was important to me. The American accent and the British accent were considered the only legitimate accents by students of English in China, as I mentioned above. The Eastern Indian accent and the Singaporean accent were laughed at. For

more than a year, I was working part-time in the International Office of my university, managing exchange programs, interpreting for university leaders, searching for foreign faculty members, and looking after their lives in China. The work increased the number of opportunities for interactions with foreigners in English. Very often, I was identified as someone who knew every foreigner in town and I took pride in that identity.

Crisis with the Foreign Language Identity

With my linguistic training in my Master's program (2003-2006), I often attended to the linguistic phenomena most people take for granted. In 2007 one linguistic phenomenon caught my attention, the foreignization in the naming of many Chinese commodities. Traditionally, Chinese commodities were named with a whole Chinese phrase consisting of 2 or more characters, and with pleasant meanings like "Ji Xiang" (happiness). The foreignized names were composed of several independent Chinese characters whose combinations did not make any sense in Chinese, like "Su Bo Er" (a brand name for kitchen utensils). They sounded like commodity names directly translated from a foreign language based on the foreign sound and this led me to think about the reasons behind this. I felt it was a way for the businesses to cater to Chinese consumers' beliefs in the superiority of Western products and Western culture in general. Were we unthinkingly buying into a Westernized way of thinking and living?

An example of a business using this propaganda was in a window display. A T-shirt displayed at the most eye-catching spot in the window annoyed me. There was a big American flag on the front and under the flag were a few English lines. It seemed to me that the shop owner did not comprehend what was written there. The English lines were:

You eat our burgers,
You drink our Cola,
You wear our Levi jeans,
You wear our Nike shoes,
You watch our Hollywood movies,
You listen to our rap music...
Come and become our 51st state!

Also in 2007, I was teaching English to graduate students in my university. There was one article carried in a widely used graduate English textbook in China that annoyed me. The title of the article was *The Future of English* (Mencken, 1935). It annoyed me because it was filled with claims of linguistic discrimination and linguistic hegemony, praising the superiority of English in comparison with other languages. It said in the article that English became the world language by the middle of the 19th century. One important reason for the wide spread use of English was the inherent quality of the language itself. Mencken (1935) illustrated this in the following phrases: "English, brought to close quarters with formidable rivals, has won very often, not by force of numbers, but by the sheer weight of its merit" (para. 7). "In wealth, wisdom, and strict economy,' said the eminent Jakob Grimm a century ago, 'none of the other living languages can vie with it'" (para. 7). "English is simple, it has clear sounds, it packs its words closely together, it is logical in their arrangement, and it is free from all pedantic flub dub" (para. 8).

In another widely used series of books for undergraduate students was a text titled, *The*

Glorious Messiness of English (MacNeil, 1995). Very similar to the above mentioned article, this one also praised the superiority of English language, but a different reason was given for its dominance in the world. “The English language would not have been what it is if the English had not been for centuries great respecters of the liberties of each individual and if everybody had not been free to strike out new paths for himself” (Otto Jespersen, 1905, as cited in MacNeil, 1995, para. 51) “...the same cultural soil producing the English language also nourished the great principles of freedom and rights of man in the modern world” (MacNeil, 1995, para. 53). The reason for the superiority of English in the world was believed to be the superior ideology and political system behind the language. As a linguist who believes in the functional equality of all human languages, I was sickened by the above linguistic imperialistic arguments.

While I was studying in my PhD program, I came to read some literature about the ideological dimension of language teaching, such as Phillipson’s (1992) concern with Linguistic Imperialism in English teaching; Holliday’s (2005) observation of the phenomenon of Nativespeakerism, which affords unequivocal power to native-speaking teachers in language teaching; and Penneycook (1989), who argued any language is part of the wider semiotic system within which it was shaped and is infused with ideological, historical, and political symbols and relations. For example, we will find that English is not politically neutral if we associate the history of English with the spread of colonialism. From the critical perspective, English education can be seen as comprising a number of fundamentally asymmetrical, and thus inequitable, relations. I began to wonder whether I, with my eagerness to learn English and to acquire a native-like accent in the language, was a product of the post-colonialist discourse in English education in the world. Had I become a victim of the Nativespeakerist fallacy? Should I feel as proud to be a good English speaker as I did before or should I rather feel ashamed?

As I wrote earlier, I began to live an English life in China since university, reading only in English, watching English TV and movies, as well as thinking to myself in English. After many years, I realized to my embarrassment that I was losing my Chinese. It was not that I could not speak it anymore, but rather I forgot how to write some Chinese characters. While I was studying my PhD, I was involved as one member of a team that conducted a workshop for teachers at a national meeting. My job was to talk about data collection and analysis in action research. While I was talking, I found myself code-switching to English in my speech all the time. I came to realize that English had become my academic working language. I felt more comfortable speaking it in such academic settings and as a result, I felt bad about not being able to express some notions in Chinese when facing a large group of Chinese teachers. I was thinking to myself: Was I losing my Chinese identity on my way to acquiring my English identity? Should I be alarmed? Was it an issue for me? Would people around me think of me as a traitor of my own native linguistic and cultural identity?

Coming to Canada

I obtained all three of my degrees from very good universities in China. However, when I was studying my PhD program in Beijing, the best PhD program in foreign language teacher education, I was in constant doubt about the quality of my degree compared with the degrees obtained from overseas universities. I worked hard and reviewed as much literature as I could, both in Chinese and in English. I wanted my degree to be as good as any degree obtained elsewhere.

Once I was talking to a British professor who asked me why there were so many Chinese

students working on their Master's and PhD's overseas, enduring a huge number of difficulties. I was surprised by the question. I previously had taken for granted that any overseas degree was better than the domestically obtained one. But where did that thought come from? Were overseas degrees always better than local degrees in quality?

In the winter before my graduation, I saw a postdoctoral position in Canada in teacher education, supervised by a worldly renowned professor. I jumped at it as I thought it was a wonderful opportunity for me. I talked with my family about this, and they were all very supportive. They promised to help me financially if there was not enough funding. I was luckily granted the position. Before I left, one of my friends I went to university with wrote the following poem for me, which I have translated into English:

To my friend
Go to Canada you will,
Bringing wife and son with you,
When will I see you again?
I do not know.
Alas!
So transient is life?
Like the stars in the sky.
Looking up,
I fail to see the old moon,
However, my hair is turning frosty and thin.
Going overseas to work or to live
Glorious as it has always been.
Long as one lives away,
An alien place becomes home.
Only in dreams can one travel at ease
Across mountains far between.

It has always been a glorious thing for Chinese people to travel overseas to work or to study. My friend's poem shows the Chinese attitude toward studying and working overseas. On the national level, since the second half of the 20th century, China began to look to the West for ideas to revitalize China. The Chinese government started to sponsor students to study overseas from 1872, sending 120 selected Chinese children to study in the U.S. (Huang, 2002). In the new century, China has increased the number of students they sponsor to study overseas from less than 2000 in 1996 to over 21,300 in 2014 (China Scholarship Council, 2014). Given this big sociocultural narrative, I thought of my coming to work in Canada as partly a patriotic act.

However, since I arrived in Canada, I have thought differently for a few reasons. I have listened to one radio program on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) since coming to Canada. One of the shows in particular talked about the Chinese one-child policy which had resulted in people's preference to boys rather than girls. The radio hosts also talked about one author's book, which introduced one village in China in which families had killed newly born baby girls. I was aware of the Chinese parents' preference to male children, however, I had never heard about Chinese parents killing their newborn baby girls. Another reason is due to a visit I had with a Chinese family here in Canada. The couple was second-generation Chinese immigrants, with three children. I talked to one of the children about whether he wanted to go visit China. He said, "Yes", but he was concerned with the air pollution in China. It was sad to

me that the most prevalent impression the child had about China was not the long history and rich culture, but the bad hazardous pollution. I am aware of the dire state of pollution in China; however, it is definitely not as dangerous as it is depicted in the Western media. Before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, to me it seemed that the only thing the Western media talked about was how dangerous the air might be for the athletes! One lady I talked to in Canada asked me whether China was covered by electronic wastes and whether the farming land in China was contaminated by them. She had obtained this impression from watching a TV program, which had shown a big mountain of electrical waste in China.

In my opinion, the Western media are often malicious about China. I began to wonder if the Western governments genuinely cared about the Chinese people when they tried to pressure the Chinese government to become more democratic and provide the Chinese people with more human rights or if they had done it for their own benefit. While I was working on my doctorate in Beijing, I realized that all of the Chinese scholars were eagerly learning research methodologies developed in the West. Since arriving, I have learned about the Western aboriginal scholars who have developed their own indigenous research practices based on their own ways of knowing, such as Linda Smith's (1999) *decolonizing methodologies*. I wonder then, given China's long philosophical tradition, how come Chinese scholars have not developed a set of Chinese research methodologies for social science and educational research? What would the Chinese methodology look like on the basis of Chinese philosophical traditions? Are the Western methodologies congruent with the Chinese ways of knowing, learning, and living?

Discussion

The autobiographical narrative of my English learning experience provided evidence that foreign language identity is not a stable, unitary psychological state, demonstrated by either a constantly positive or negative attitude toward the target and home languages/cultures. Instead, it has been shown to change over the stages of language learning and the social contexts in which the learner is learning. In this sense, the English as a foreign language context (e.g., China) and the English as a second language context (e.g., Canada) are not only different in the amount of natural language input and natural interactive opportunities they provide, but they also differ in linguistic discourses and power relations as the sociocultural contexts of learning.

The study also provided evidence to show that foreign language identity is a social cognitive notion. The social structure translates into language learners' inner cognitive states. The positive societal attitude toward the target language can result in the language learners' strong motivation to learn the language despite the absence of immediate pragmatic use. The inequitable social structure that positions the target language and the native language differently can create doubts in the learners about their investments in their learning efforts and turn the foreign language identity into a site of psychological struggle. Seeing English as a venue of the post-colonial discourse in the world created a tension for me where there was a split between my identity as an English speaker and my identity as a native Chinese speaker.

However, foreign language learners can exert agency in the learning process. As Pavlenko (2003) pointed out, foreign-language learners may choose to construct oppositional identities. Some may reject the languages imposed on them for patriotic reasons, while others may instead reject the dominant national identity and create an alternative one through the means of a foreign language. For me, a desired identity I have long invested in was that of a better English speaker. At a more advanced level, I struggled between two dissociative identities (Pallas, 2001)

associated with two languages. Right now, the desired identity I am working towards is a dual self that brings together my English identity and my Chinese identity, and that works best in both worlds and between them. What drives the identity change is ultimately the distance between the current self and the desirable *possible self* (Dörnyei, 2005) perceived in a given place.

This study also showed that foreign language identity as a site of struggle for the learner can be a domain entirely outside the scope of language teachers' attention. In a way, the emotive upheavals experienced by the language learners over their identity construction challenges is beyond the capabilities of the teachers to help, as the identity crisis originates from uneven power distribution in the larger social discourse. This being said, being aware of such experience of the learners creates opportunities for empathy and opportunities for critical pedagogical intervention.

One possible way of critical pedagogical intervention by teachers is to engage learners in their autobiographical narrative inquiries, as demonstrated in this paper. Giving learners opportunities to reflect on the process of foreign language identity construction can increase their awareness of this issue and contribute to their identity construction in ways they desire. Teachers can also play a role in sharing results of social psychological research on a balanced identity in which a person embraces both the target culture and the home culture in a cross-cultural setting, which is the most desirable mode of cross-cultural being (see Berry, 1997). John Berry's work in multiculturalism has been helpful in my effort to build a cross-cultural identity.

Conclusion

The identity construction in a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural context should be a central aspect of the foreign language education enterprise. The ability to successfully manage one's identity re-construction in the process of foreign language learning, particularly in the global education context, is a necessary cross-cultural competence for international students and scholars. Identity construction should be an essential part of a language learner's communicative competence and thus an important part of the foreign language education curriculum. Language learners should not only be shown the linguistic and pragmatic rules of the target language, but also how such rules reflect the larger social discourse and structure that distribute the social power and resources unequally among different groups. The critical approach to teaching with its attention to the learner's identity as a site of struggle should be the center stage of foreign language education, following the linguistic approach, the cognitive approach, and the sociocultural approach.

This study has shown the value of narrative studies in foreign language education research. Though most second language teachers have been second language learners themselves, we tend to forget what it was truly like to learn a second language as we went through trainings in second language acquisition and second language teaching methodologies that essentially focused on the most effective ways to teach a foreign language. The technical view of language teaching with the focused goal of reaching desirable outcomes in the most efficient manner may result in educators' inability to understand and resonate with students' bumpy feelings and experiences over identity crisis in the process of learning a foreign language. Autobiographical narratives of experience, in which researchers look back on their own first-hand, pre-reflective language learning experience as stories, can help revisit, reveal, and remind second language teachers and researchers to listen to students' voices, attend to their feelings, and empathize with their

experiences.

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