Learner identity construction in EFL context: Needs for research area expansion and examination of imagined identities in the imagined communities

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Introduction

Issues surrounding learner identities have been discussed and researched extensively in the field of second language acquisition. This paper attempts to illustrate a need for dimensional expansion of the research area of identity issues. Current studies primarily focus on the identity issues in the core circle of English speaking countries, and very few treat learner identities in the context where English is taught as a foreign language. By reviewing the existing research and pointing out the gap in the research context, I argue that more studies must be done in the context where English is taught as a foreign language in order to examine how imagined communities are created and how such imaginaries affect the learners' identities and their language learning.

Theoretical framework

Identities from theoretical perspective

For the last decade or so, poststructuralists in the field of SLA have been trying to understand what identity is, how it relates to a larger society, and most importantly how it affects one's language learning process. Studies so far have confirmed that language use is a form of self representation which is deeply connected to one's social identities and values (Miller, 2003). Poststructuralists claim that identity is a site of struggle in a way that subjectivity is produced in a variety of social sites, all of which are structured by relations of power in which the person takes up different subject positions which may be in conflict with each other (Norton, 1995; 2000). Identity is understood as diverse, contradictory and dynamic: multiple rather than unitary, decentered rather than centered. In addition, identities change over time: characteristics such as attitudes and motivation change over time and social space. Studies based

on poststructural theories (i.e. Duff, 2002; McKay and Wong, 1996; Miller, 2003; Norton, 1995: 2000; Simon-Maeda, 2004; Piller, 2001; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004; Pavlenko, 2001) emphasize that learners' subjectivities are witnessed to be sites of contestations as learners constantly conduct delicate social negotiations. In the current study, poststructuralism helps to understand how Japanese learners of English built their own subjectivities in various contexts such as of returnees, bilinguals, students of an English medium school, and elite international schools.

In order to understand one's identity, one's investment (Norton, 1995; 2000) must be recognized. Investment includes learner's instrumental motivation (which encourages a person to learn with a purpose for utilitarian purposes) and integrative motivation (which learners learn with a purpose to integrate with the target language community) while recognizing that they have complex social history and multiple desires that can affect each other. Poststructuralists take Bourdieu's (1991) sociological vision that language has a form of cultural and symbolic capital which offers profit in the marketplace of social interaction. Drawing on Bourdieu's ideas, de Mejia (2002) explains that "language may be seen as a symbolic resource which can receive different values depending on the market. The possession of symbolic resources, such as certain highly valued type of linguistic skills, cultural knowledge and specialized skills, help to gain access to valuable social, educational and material resources. These resources, which constitute symbolic capital, in turn acquire a value of their own and become sources of power and prestige in their own right" (p. 36). McKay and Wong (1996) emphasize that a learners' needs, desires, and negotiation must be understood as a constitution of learners' lives and their investment in learning the target language. The notion of identity presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but also organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. An investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, which is constantly changing across time and space.

Learner identity in ESL and EFL context

Learner identity is understood to be affected by sociocultural context. The study of learner-identity in Japan is quite different from the existing

research which focuses on the ESL context. Although empirical studies in investigation of learner identities have been conducted by numbers of scholars in different contexts, and with varieties of participants, the studies tend to focus on learners of English as a second language. The influential studies by scholars such as Norton (2000), MaKay and Wong (1996), Miller (2003) along with other prominent studies all focused on recent immigrants in English speaking counties (Norton in Canada, McKay and Wong in U.S. and Miller in Australia). Although there are other studies in the field of language acquisition which have investigated learner identities in different contexts, such studies are significantly fewer in number compared to the ones in the core circle of English speaking countries. Empirical studies in the peripheral countries where English is spoken as one of the official languages (i.e. Egbo, 2003; Cameron, 2000), or studies of bilingual speaker identities in the outer circle countries (i.e. Kanno, 2003) provide fascinating examples of how identities are constructed in relation to languages and the society. Still, current researchers have not yet paid balanced attention to the issues of identity and language learning in terms of context. Learner identities in the EFL context may be affected by unique social factors that are dramatically different from learning English as a second language in the English speaking counties. The EFL environment's distinctive geographic location, social values and ideologies behind the curriculum may be factors affecting learner identities. Investigation of learner identity in the expanding circle (such as Japan, Korea, China etc.) is a significant next step in the field as it may show us how pervasive or insidious the effect of English language is while it will inform how learner investment, imagined community, and imagined identities differ and affect one's language acquisition.

Imagined communities and language learning

From afar in the EFL country, learners of English may imagine a community, people, or a country that may be unrealistic. The theoretical concept of 'imagined communities' is useful in understanding how EFL learners in Japan identify with and invest in English. The "imagined community" is a phrase and a concept coined by Anderson (1991). He uses it to suggest that a nation is socially constructed and ultimately imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-

members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion… are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/ genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (p. 6). The nation is imagined as limited, as sovereign, and as a community. SL/FL researchers take Anderson's concept that communities may be imagined, and apply it to communities that language learners imagine during the process of learning.

Some researchers have looked at identity construction of English learners in non-western contexts using various methods. For example, Lin, et. al. (2002) in their autobiographical narratives using a collective story, the authors include their own experiences of learning English in EFL settings. Although their article is not focused on their identities, it includes stories of the authors' language learning process - that learning English was enjoyable, even liberating. One of the authors said that "this foreign language had opened up a new, personal space for me to more freely express all those difficult emotions and experiences of an adolescent growing up, without feeling the sanctions of the adult world". Also, "Chinese was the language to represent ourselves and English was the language we used to expand who we were and who we wanted to be. To this end, English became a language of dream and a language of freedom". In their narratives, authors relate appropriating English language to expansion of learner horizons and identities.

Norton and Kamal (2003) report a case study of Afghan refugee children in Pakistan whose investment in learning English was due to the imagined literal community and image of English as a language of possibility. Their participants' attitudes toward language learning and target society are quite different from the identities examined in ESL contexts. There is definitely a positive dimension of identities that is influenced by their positive image of the target language community which they hope to belong to someday, by speaking the language of the community.

Kanno and Norton (2003) explain that language learners also create imagined communities, which are groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom learners connect through the power of imagination. Norton (2001) argues that second language learners have images of the communities in which they want to participate in the future. These imagined communities have a large impact on their current learning although the learners are not yet members of such communities. Therefore,

the learner investment is closely connected to their imagined communities and future affiliation with the community that they hope to gain access to. Imagination can involve "some degree of fantasy, idealization, stereotyping, and reification" (Dagenais, 2003), and the imagined communities can extend to the institutional, linguistic and national level.

In one of the few case studies that deal with foreign language and learner identity, Kinginger (2004) reports a detailed longitudinal study of her student, Alice, who studied French in an American university. Alice, a lower class, older-than-average student, earned her tuition by working several jobs, in desperate hope of studying French in her college's study abroad program. Throughout Alice's foreign language study in college, she created a romantic image of France which was rather unrealistic. Her image of France resembled an image of Oz or Wonderland, similar to the images represented in travel brochures and television shows. She also expected the French people to be cultural, friendly and accepting as she dreamed to make friends with the natives and learn their cultures while she shared her own. The study deals with Alice's dispositions toward language learning, her imagined communities of French language users, her accounts of access to social networks at home and abroad, and her use of language learning as a source of coherence and of lessons in persistence (p. 223). In the study the author questions how her dispositions can be characterized in terms of claims to a renegotiated identity, where such dispositions come from and how they change over time. The questions extend to how Alice imagines the communities of French language speakers, her own role within them, and the symbolic capital she will gain through these endeavors. Also, the author is concerned with what kinds of communities of practice offer her membership to that community and how she gains access to them.

Imagined communities and societal power

As Alice did, foreign language learners uniquely invest in their language learning, create images of community, and construct identities. Not only do influential individuals, art and media play an important role in providing sources of information for the creation of imagined communities of the target language speakers, but also the larger society and its government immensely influence the imagined community of the target language speakers. In a

country like Japan where English is praised as an international language, English is thought to lead to "international/ intercultural understanding" (Kubota, 2004). Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) clearly indicates that international understanding and cooperation are essential in the perspective of living as a member of the international society (MEXT, 2003). MEXT claims that the importance of English language education in a school curriculum is because "globalization extends to various activities of individuals as well as to the business world. Each individual has increasing opportunities to come in contact with the global market and services, and participate in international activities. It has become possible for anyone to become active on a world level" (MEXT, 2003). Since 2002, MEXT has been on a mission to "cultivate" more "Japanese with English Ability", of which the action plan includes 1) improvement of the teaching methods, 2) the teaching ability of the teachers, 3) selection system for school and university applicants and 4) creation of better curricula for the children. According to the newsletter on MEXT's homepage (MEXT, 2003) this action plan was launched due to an increasing demand for the ability to adapt to "the transfers of information and capital across national borders as well as the movement of people and products", as "it is essential for them (the children) to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language". English abilities "are important in terms of linking our country with the rest of the world, obtaining the world's understanding and trust, enhancing our international presence and further developing our nation" (MEXT, 2003). The immense value awarded to the English language in Japan is perhaps due to the cultural, political, and economical imperialism and colonization by the U.S. whether or not this fact may be salient or important to the learners. The English language is a symbol of internationalization and the language and its proficiency are used as a commodity.

Imagined communities and institutions

In addition to the analysis of imagined community created by the government and its policies, it is important to investigate how imagined communities are created by institutions as well. In addition to the governmental power, both educational institutions and more informal language schools promise empowerment with their education, reflecting the

idea that empowerment thorough language learning is part of commodity. Kanno's (2003) analysis of policies and practices of four schools in Japan revealed that it is not only the individuals that imagine the communities that they hope to be part of, but also schools envision imagined communities for their students. Those institutional imagined communities are not created only for commercial purposes but also created for certain images of communities that the institution hopes their students to be a part of because such images carry social meaning and values. Institutional creation of imaginaries is indeed reflection and reproduction of ideologies of a larger society. Critical theories claim that "schools are political sites and they are not neutral" (Giroux, 2001). Educational institutions are in fact an inevitable part of society, and these schools tend to reflect and reproduce the societal power. Schools partly create the imagined structures and discourses that perpetuate ideology that are dominant in the society, such as "English is the international language", and "you have to speak English to be successful as a world citizen." In future studies, it is important to investigate how language learners in Japan construct their identity in reference to the institutions they are a part of, and what kind of imagined communities institutions create for their students.

Conclusion

Investigation of how learners of English as a foreign language in Japan create imagined communities of English language speakers, how they account for access to social networks, how dispositions can be characterized in terms of claims to a renegotiated identity and also where such dispositions come from, may provide clues for how learners learn the foreign language. Investigations on how English learners construct their identity as learners, create imagined identities, and also negotiate their identities between the cultures and languages they live with and imagine being part of would also reveal unique aspects of EFL acquisition in the outer circle. To better understand the identity construction of language learners and most importantly how language is acquired, more studies must be done in the context where English is taught as a foreign language and more questions should be addressed.

42

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