

***Mainland Chinese Students' Perceptions of
Language, Learning, and Identity in an English
Language Teacher Education Program
in Hong Kong***

John Trent

Department of English, Institute of Education, Hong Kong

This paper reports on a qualitative study that examined the perceptions of eight preservice English language teachers from mainland China about their English language learning experiences within an undergraduate teacher education program in Hong Kong. Based upon a framework of identity construction, and using in-depth interviews conducted at regular intervals during their freshman year, the study explored how the participants' constructed identities as English language learners as they crossed geographical and educational boundaries to pursue higher education in Hong Kong. The study illustrates that the participants' experienced challenges in realizing the multiple language learner identities they sought to attain and that this may have resulted in conflicts and antagonism between different identities positions. Implications for providing language learning opportunities to mainland Chinese learners enrolled in higher education institutions in English speaking environments are discussed and suggestions for future research considered.

Key words: teacher education, teacher identity, Chinese learners of English

INTRODUCTION

The recent rapid growth in the number of mainland Chinese students studying at higher education institutions abroad, including Hong Kong and Macau, has been well documented (Li, 2007). Li and Bray (2007) point out that much of the research into the cross-border mobility of mainland Chinese learners has addressed issues concerned with the macro and meso levels of systems and institutions. Recent work, however, has begun to also explore the micro level, seeking to understand the experiences of individual internationally mobile mainland Chinese learners. This research highlights the complex relationships and attitudes of some mainland Chinese students studying overseas towards learning and using the English language, as well as to learning content subjects through English. For instance, opportunities for English language enhancement and use are reported to be a significant factor in explaining the decision of mainland Chinese learners to study abroad. Li and Bray (2007) report that mainland Chinese learners reasons for studying in Hong Kong and Macau include the lack of internationalization of higher education institutions in mainland China and the difficulties they perceive in improving their foreign language skills at these institutions.

Gao and Trent (2009) examined the motivations of 10 mainland Chinese undergraduate learners for coming to Hong Kong for the purpose of teacher education. The student teachers suggested that the attractions of studying in Hong Kong include opportunities for enhancement of their English language proficiency. Bodycott (2009) found that mainland students nominate an English speaking environment as one of the most important factors when considering studying abroad. At the same time, English language proficiency amongst Chinese learners studying in English-speaking countries has been identified as a concern of some university teachers, as well as a source of anxiety amongst the learners themselves (Edwards, Ran, & Li, 2007; Xie, 2009). Xie (2009), for example, suggests that although the opportunity to improve English language skills represents one of the primary educational reasons underlying the decision of mainland Chinese students to study in

Hong Kong, English remains “the most difficult barrier to conquer, both for living and studying” (p. 111).

The current study contributes to the growing body of work which has drawn attention to the experiences of English language learning and use amongst mainland Chinese students studying abroad. It takes up the call by Li (2006) for research aimed at understanding this particular international student population, “their needs and expectations, and their adaption to the academic and cultural conventions of the host society” (p. 38), by examining the experiences of eight mainland Chinese learners who came to Hong Kong to take up full time undergraduate degree places in a teacher education institution in Hong Kong. A contribution of this study is to understand the participants’ experiences of learning and using the English language abroad through the theoretical lens of identity construction, recognized as crucial to understanding language learning and learners (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2002; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). The paper begins by outlining a theoretical model of identity construction in practice and in discourse. Next, the participants’ experiences of studying and using the English language throughout their initial year of teacher education in Hong Kong are described. These experiences are then examined in terms of this theoretical framework and implications for supporting and enhancing the English language learning experiences of the participants, as well as other mainland Chinese learners studying abroad in analogous educational settings, are discussed. Implications for future research are also considered.

Identity-in-Practice

Identity refers to “our understanding of who we are and who we think other people are” (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 10). Varghese et. al. (2005) maintain that a comprehensive exploration of identity requires attention to both “identity-in-discourse” and “identity-in-practice” (p. 39). Identity-in-practice describes an action-orientated approach to understanding identity, underlining the need to investigate identity formation as a social matter,

which is operationalized through concrete practices and tasks. Wenger (1998) explores identity construction as an experience in terms of three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Through engagement, individuals establish and maintain joint enterprises and negotiate meanings. Engagement allows us to invest in what we do and in our relations with other people, gaining “a lived sense of who we are” (Wenger, 1998, p. 192). Imagination refers to creating images of the world and our place within it across time and space by extrapolating beyond our own experience. Alignment coordinates an individual's activities within broader structures and enterprises, allowing the identity of a larger group to become part of the identity of the individual participants (Wenger 1998).

Wenger (1998) also investigates identity formation in terms of the negotiation of meanings that matter within a social configuration. For Wenger (1998), meanings exist within a broader structure termed the “economy of meanings”, in which a range of meanings are produced, each of which competes “for the definition of certain events, actions, or artifacts” (p. 199). Within an economy of meanings, different individuals have varying degrees of control over the meanings that are produced, a situation Wenger (1998) describes as the “ownership of meanings” (p. 200). The diverse degrees of control different individuals have over meanings – the relations of ownership of meaning - shape the negotiability of meanings and result in some meanings having more currency than others. Negotiability then refers to the extent to which individuals can use, modify, and claim as their own the meanings that matter to them. If such negotiability is absent an identity of non-participation and marginality can result; the individuals experience “becomes irrelevant because it cannot be asserted and recognized as a form of competence” (Wenger, 1998, p. 203).

Identity-in-Discourse

The other aspect of a comprehensive understanding of identity construction, identity-in-discourse, acknowledges that identities are discursively constituted,

mainly through language. In poststructuralist theory, for example, identity construction occurs as individuals identify with particular subject positions within discourses (Weedon, 1997). In this view, language and identity are mutually constitutive; while language presents to the individual historically specific ways of giving meaning to social reality, “it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). From a poststructuralist perspective, such construction is a process of struggle because “the individual is always the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Although Wenger’s (1998) concept of the economy of meanings does allow for the possibility of conflict as different meanings compete to define actions and events, his framework has been criticized for offering a “benign model” (Barton & Tusting, 2005, p. 10) that fails to adequately theorize the role of conflict and contestation. One theory of discourse that does address the role of conflict and contestation is that of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), whose framework is described by Jorgensen and Philips (2002). For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), meanings are fluid and discourses contingent, that is, there is always scope for struggles over what discourses should prevail. Within this view of discourse, identity is discursively constituted through chains of equivalence which contain nodal points or master signifiers of identity, such as ‘man’, with which particular content comes to be equated: ‘strength’ and ‘reason’, for instance. Different signifiers or signs, including ‘passive’ and ‘passion’, contrast this nodal point with other master signifiers such as ‘woman’. It is the collision of conflicting discourses that can result in social antagonisms, which occur “when different identities mutually exclude each other” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 47). Social antagonisms can be dissolved through a hegemonic intervention in which one discourse comes to dominate and “by means of force reconstitutes ambiguity” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 48). However, as discourses are always contingent and the meaning of signs can never be ultimately fixed, such a hegemonic intervention can be undermined in an ongoing social struggle over the definition of society and identity.

While the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) provides insight into the role

of struggle and contestation in identity formation, their framework lacks specific tools for discourse analysis. Within this paper, this limitation is addressed through the use of Fairclough's (2003) model of identity formation, which argues that "what people commit themselves to in texts is an important part of how they identify themselves, the texturing of identity" (p. 164). Linguistically, Fairclough (2003) examines the commitments an author makes in terms of both modality and evaluation. Modality refers to what individuals commit themselves to in terms of truth, obligation and necessity, and is often displayed in the use of modal verbs, such as 'should' and 'must', and modal adverbs, including 'probably' and 'possibly'. Evaluation describes what is believed to be desirable or undesirable and can be expressed in terms of what is considered good or bad, as well as useful and important. While such evaluations can be expressed explicitly, through the use of terms such as 'wonderful' or 'dreadful', they can also be more deeply embedded in texts through, for example, invoking implicit value systems that are assumed to be shared between author and interpreter. Finally, the texturing of identity can be examined not only in terms of what individuals commit to, but also why they make such commitments, that is, the "reasons that either the whole of a social practice or some part of it must take place" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 20). This paper considers four strategies that individuals use to explain and legitimate the texturing of their identities as language learners: (i) authorization, which occurs when reference is made to tradition, laws, or institutional authority; (ii) rationalization, which relies upon references to the utility of a particular course of action; (iii) moral evaluation, which appeals to value systems; and (iv) mythopoesis, legitimation derived from narratives (Fairclough, 2003).

To summarize, the theoretical framework developed in this section, with an emphasis on both practice and discourse, reflects the need for 'multi-faceted' and 'multi-layered' analyses of identity construction (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002). Based on this theoretical framework, the collection and analysis of data was guided by the following research question:

How did one group of mainland Chinese preservice English language teachers construct their English language learner identities in practice and in discourse during their initial year of study in a higher education institution in Hong Kong?

THE STUDY

Context and Participants

Eight mainland Chinese undergraduate students, four female and four male, participated in this study. All participants were enrolled in an undergraduate degree program, in which English is the medium of instruction, at The Hong Kong Institute of Education (hereafter 'the institute'). The institute is a dedicated teacher education institution in Hong Kong, offering degree and postgraduate level programs. A key component of the institute's strategic development plan includes taking an active role in the expansion of education within mainland China, as well as in the wider Asia Pacific region. At the time of the study, the eight mainland Chinese participants were completing the first year of a four year Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) program, majoring in English language teaching, which prepares students to take up full time positions as English language teachers in local Hong Kong primary and secondary schools. Candidates for the B. Ed. study the English language system, including pronunciation and grammar, language use in society, the Hong Kong English language curriculum, and language teaching pedagogy.

The institute offers English language support and services to students using a variety of different modes through the Centre for Language in Education (CLE). For instance, the English Enhancement Program focuses on developing the academic speaking and writing skills of learners, with attention also given to listening and reading. In addition, a range of self-access facilities and on-line language services are available to support the learning of content subjects through the English medium. Assistance is also provided for student's preparing for international language examinations,

such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination. Finally, the CLE arranges opportunities for local Hong Kong and international students to gather and learn about language and culture through social interactions. This exchange takes place through a series of non-formal activities such as language clubs, cultural events, and the sharing of experiences of living and studying abroad.

The eight participants were all born in the People's Republic of China (PRC), reported fluency in spoken Putonghua as well as a variety of different regional dialects, and had completed their primary and secondary level education on the mainland before moving to Hong Kong to pursue full time higher education. None of the participants reported living or studying outside mainland China for any significant length of time prior to their arrival in Hong Kong. The student teachers were therefore invited to participate in the study because they could be regarded as cross-border students from Mainland China. Sampling decisions also reflected a desire to include participants from a variety of different geographical locations within mainland China, with a range of English language proficiencies, as well as to achieve a gender balance. Biographical information about each of the participant is summarized in Table One. In this paper the names of participants are pseudonyms.

TABLE 1
Summary of Participants' Biographical Information

Name	Age	Gender	Place of origin within the PRC	English Language proficiency (IELTS overall score)
Sophie	22	Female	Guangzhou	7
Richard	20	Male	Shanghai	7
Nancy	19	Female	Jiangsu Province	7.5
Jerry	21	Male	Shandong	6.5
Wendy	21	Female	Beijing	7
Glen	20	Male	Guangzhou	6
Margaret	21	Female	Sichuan Province	7.5
Brendon	20	Male	Shanghai	7

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews, which were audiotaped and transcribed, were conducted in three stages with each of the eight participants during the 2009-2010 academic year. The first set of interviews was conducted in September 2009, within one month of the participant's arrival at the institute. The interview questions sought information on the student teacher's biographical background and language learning experience, their beliefs about language learning, motivations for studying in Hong Kong, as well as their expectations for the development of their English language skills at the institute and within Hong Kong. Each participant took part in a second interview in January 2010, which sought information about their language learning experiences during their initial semester of study at the institute, the challenges they faced, and how, if at all, they were able to overcome these difficulties. A final interview with each participant was conducted in June 2010, at the conclusion to their freshmen year of study in Hong Kong. In this interview, participants reflected on the challenges and opportunities they had encountered in learning and using the English language within Hong Kong, whether their initial expectations about language learning and use had been met, what language learning strategies they deployed, as well as their aspirations for language learning throughout the remainder of their undergraduate degree program.

Analyses and interpretations of the data were attained in a recursive, iterative manner as interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times. As a first step, "codes" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56) were used to assign meaning and to organize the data as the contents of the interview transcripts were broken down into discrete parts. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), codes were assigned to different size "chunks" (p.56) of data; words, phrases, and sentences, for instance. These codes initially reflected the "indigenous language" (Patton, 2002) used by participants and were identified by searching for "topics that occur and reoccur" (Bogden & Taylor, 1975, p. 83). For example, several participants described the strategies they used to

understand the content-obligatory vocabulary they encountered in their B. Ed. program and the difficulties they encountered in writing academic essays. These comments were compared with other statements made by participants to see if there was a concept that united them. For Strauss and Corbin (1998), this step involves the classification of data “under more abstract explanatory terms, that is, categories” (p. 114). For instance, participants also described the importance of developing their spoken language proficiency, in particular, the skills they saw as necessary for taking part in discussions on topics relevant to their degree program. From this basis, the category ‘learning academic English’ was developed to refer to these beliefs and actions.

As Bogden and Biklen (2003) point out, particular theoretical approaches suggest particular coding schemes. Some of the categories that were developed therefore reflected the theoretical framework described above. For example, one participant, Jerry, offered the following comment:

I used to think a good language learner means that you have good exam results, so I attended a lot of exam oriented classes because my parents put pressure on me to go and said “if you don’t go you won’t keep up with others”.

In this excerpt, Jerry names the identity position “good language learner”, which he indexes as achieving good examination results. His commitment to truth of what constitutes a good language learner is underscored by the strength of the modality he deploys, such that Jerry’s statement comes to represent an adamant statement of what he believed in the past to be the essential marker of this identity position. The use of the term ‘so’ positions his description of the learning strategy he deployed - attending “exam orientated classes” - as a logical step in his attempt to take up this identity position. Legitimization of the use of this strategy occurs through authorization; in this case Jerry draws upon the authority vested in the role of parents (“my parents put pressure on me to go”). His final statement provides further legitimization for his strategy use, this time through mythopoesis, in which he recalls his parent’s cautionary tale of the negative consequences of

not attending such classes. As patterns and relations between such identity positions were considered, more theoretical or “analyst-constructed” (Patton, 2002) categories were developed in a form of cross-case analysis, in which the aim was to identify “processes and outcomes across many cases” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 172). Examples of these categories included “learning English in mainland China” and “continuity and discontinuity in identity formation”. Finally, participants were consulted for their interpretation of the findings and further refinements were made.

RESULTS

Learning English in Mainland China

Shortly after their arrival in Hong Kong, participants were asked to describe their beliefs about, and experiences of, English language learning in mainland China. The comments of Sophie, Jerry, and Brendon are representative of their views:

Extract one

In (mainland China) being an English language learner, to me, means studying to pass exam and getting good results, so you have to study textbooks about grammar and vocabulary for hours and hours to do well in exams. I believe those English lessons at school were helpful in terms of exam preparation but I always thought I had to work harder outside of school to find ways to learn more natural and authentic English, real English, to make myself better than people who only know exam English. So, I knew that what I learned at school was absolutely not sufficient, so I tried to find opportunities to actually use the language outside of studying for exams, and that was helpful to me, as a language learner. (Sophie)

Extract two

I used to think that a good language learner means that you have good exam results, so I attended a lot of exam oriented classes because my parents put pressure on me to go and said “if you don’t go you won’t keep

up with others". But these classes mainly focused on grammar and apart from examinations I thought they were not useful. Later I changed. I started to think about good language students as trying to be an independent language learner by finding situations to communicate and use language beyond textbooks so I didn't go so often to the exam classes and decided to do things myself, like read English newspapers, novels. (Jerry)

Extract three

I always did more than just study English for exams....I watched English films and found it really helpful for my language development. I turned on the English subtitles so I could be immersed in an English-speaking environment. As a result, I felt my English listening and speaking skills really improved, and also I got to learn about the cultures of English speaking countries. (Brendon)

One of the ways in which individuals can identify themselves is through naming identity categories. Sophie, for instance, names the identity "English language learner", which she partly indexes as "studying to pass exams". For Jerry, the identity category "good language learner" is similarly indexed partly in terms of examination success. Both Jerry and Sophie underscore their commitment to truth in their description of this identity position in terms of examination success through strongly modalized statements describing what "good language learners "have" and "get": "you have good exam results", "getting good results". The experiential nature of identity construction is revealed as Sophie and Jerry refer to the practices, activities, and strategies that represent the constituent elements of such identity categories, including participating in English lessons at school, attending exam orientated classes, and studying from textbooks. The use of such strategies as one part of being "an English language learner" is positively evaluated as "helpful in terms of exam preparation", where what is helpful is seen as desirable.

Sophie and Jerry go on to qualify their positive evaluations of this approach to language learning, and therefore their identification of the identity category English language learner solely with examination success: "apart from examinations I thought they were not useful" (Jerry). In this case,

what is described as “not useful” is taken to be undesirable. Sophie however provides a more adamant statement of belief to underline what she saw as the limitations of associating the identity language learner solely with attending language classes, the use of textbooks, and with examination success: “What I learned at school was *absolutely* not sufficient”. In qualifying their endorsement of this aspect of the language learners’ identity, the participants highlight the non-unitary nature of identity. For instance, a good language student, according to Jerry, is not indexed entirely in terms of examination results, but also requires that the individual is an “independent language learner”, which means finding situations in which to communicate and use language beyond textbooks. A similar approach is pursued by Sophie, for whom being an English language learner involves finding “opportunities to actually use the language outside of studying for exams”. This extension to the identity of language learner also suggests that identity is not a fixed entity. Thus, Jerry linguistically constructs the identity language learner in terms of a “then and now” divide that emphasizes the change these language learners have experienced: “I used to think ...later I changed”. For others, such as Brendon, this appears to represent a long established division: “I *always* did more than just study English for exams” (Brendon).

Associated with this expanded understanding of the identity “language learner” is a broad range of learning strategies, such as watching English films and reading English newspapers and novels. These strategies are positively evaluated, being positioned as “helpful” (Sophie), as improving listening and speaking skills, and in terms of providing understanding of “the cultures of English speaking countries” (Brendon), where it is assumed that such skills and cultural understandings are in fact desirable goals for language learners. Extracts one to three also represent personalized statements of belief that emphasize the role agency played in the participants shifting understandings of what it means to be a language learner. For example, prior to Jerry’s change in thinking about the meaning of what constitutes a ‘language learner’, his strategy of attending examination classes is reported as determined by his parents: “*my parents put pressure on*

me to go". Linguistically, Jerry's role in this aspect of his language learning and strategy selection is "passivated" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 33). Thus, Jerry assigns himself a passive role in the learning activity; he positions himself as undergoing the activity, his attendance at these classes being the result of pressure from others. His legitimization of this particular strategy use relies partly on authorization, drawing upon the authority vested in parents in relation to their children. In addition, legitimization occurs through mythopoesis, taking the form here of his parent's cautionary tale that warns of the negative consequences of not attending these classes, that is, a failure to "keep up with" his peers. In contrast to this passive role, the participants position themselves as empowered social actors when describing the ways in which they attempted to take on the identity of language learners who go beyond classrooms and exams: "*I decided to do things by myself*" (Jerry); "*I watched English films...I turned on the English subtitles*" (Brendon).

Perceptions of Language and Learning in Hong Kong

The participants' descriptions of their expectations of studying English in Hong Kong reflected both continuity with their learning experiences in mainland China, together with an anticipation that there would exist opportunities to further develop different aspects of their language learner identities. The comments made by Wendy reflect the sentiments of many participants:

Extract four

I think that being an English learner in Hong Kong will be the same and different for us from the mainland. At the university we still need to be strong in academic English, they stress exams and assignments and there is academic pressure put on us to master the English that we must have to do well in our course, it's very important. But, also, I hope there is more chances in Hong Kong to learn out of the classroom, so my wish is that I can grab all these opportunities around me, not only in books but in daily life, so that I can improve all the aspects of my English learning, academic English and social English. (Wendy)

The emphasis on similarity and difference between language learning and use in Hong Kong as opposed to mainland China, suggests that identity construction occurs as a trajectory, with “a coherence through time that connects the past, the present, and the future” (Wenger, 1998, p. 154). Thus, as she looks to her own learning experience in Mainland China, Wendy sees continuity with her imagined future identity as an “English learner in Hong Kong” in terms of an ongoing need for examination success and to master “academic English”. The strength of her commitment to this belief is seen in her use of strongly modality, reflected in the depiction of acquiring academic English not as an option but, rather, as a “need” and as a “must”. Legitimization for her belief in the ongoing importance of academic English draws upon the institutional authority of the university in general, as well as the specific academic programme in which Wendy is enrolled (“at the *university* we need...we have to do well in *our course*”). Her reference to “doing well” suggests that positioning herself as someone who has mastered academic English played a positive role in her identity construction, where it is taken for granted that “doing well” in her studies is a desirable outcome for Wendy. Her description of acquiring academic English as “important” further underscores the desirability of achieving this goal in terms of her language learner identity formation. Moreover, it is worth noting that while Wendy prefaces her remarks with a first-person mental process clause (“*I think that*”), providing a subjective marking to the modality, she quickly moves to use of the inclusive terms “we” and “us”, signaling her claim to the authority to speak on behalf of her peers. This has the effect of positioning “academic English” as crucial to the ongoing construction of not only her individual identity as “an English learner in Hong Kong”, but also for that of the broader community of learners “from the mainland”.

The dual structure of the identity language learner - including both language learning as studying for exams and as using the language “outside of studying for exams” - is also evident in the linguistic shift Wendy makes, signalled by her use of the term “but also”, as she moves from her descriptions of “academic English” to revisiting the now familiar theme of

learning “out of the classroom”. This shift coincides with a move away from her self-positioning as passive recipient of, for instance, pressure (“pressure *put on* us”), to a position of active participant, one who undertakes personalized, purposeful action in relation to language learning (“*I hope I can grab all these opportunities...*”), and whose actions have as their rationale the achievement of a definite outcome: “*so that I can improve all the aspects of my English learning*”. Wendy’s reference here to “*all the aspects*” of learning underscores the multiple nature of her English language learner identity, encompassing both “academic English” and the learning experiences she suggests occurs “outside the classroom”. Yet, in the case of these out of classroom experiences, Wendy deploys a series of statements that indicate a softening in the stance she takes towards the realization of this identity. Linguistically, she retreats from the “*need*” to acquire the academic English she believes she “*must have*”, to a weakened commitment to the realization of her goals for out of classroom learning as a “*hope*” and a “*wish*”. This tempered stance towards the potential for learning outside the classroom points to a possible tension between the different consistent parts of the participants English language learner identities, that is, between a learner of academic English and one who learns outside the classroom, an issue that is discussed further in the following section.

Continuity and Discontinuity in Identity Formation

Participants’ reflections on their initial semester of studying and living in Hong Kong in terms of their English language learning experiences suggested the emergence of different learner identities, as summarized by Richard:

Extract Five

I believe that in Hong Kong I am three types of language learner, learning three types of English. First, we need to learn the academic English for studying here. Second, we have to learn English for the English language exams and also we should try to learn English to use outside class, socially, around the campus, and in Hong Kong society. (Richard)

Richard presents these remarks as an adamant personalized statement of his beliefs about English language learning in Hong Kong (“*I believe that...*”). Although this personalization gives a subjective marking to the modality, his choice of terms such as “need to” and “have to” leave little doubt about which of these three different types of learners are crucial to the identification of a language learner in Hong Kong. For instance, the strength of his commitment to truth about being a learner of “academic English”, as well as learning English for language examinations, stands in contrast to a weakened commitment to learning English “socially, around the campus, and in Hong Kong society”. Linguistically, this weakened commitment is suggested by the description of what he and other students “should “ learn, as opposed to what needs and has to be acquired. The possible reasons for this softened stance can be explored in terms of Brendon’s and Glen’s reflection on their first six months of English language learning in Hong Kong:

Extract six

When I first came here (Hong Kong) I always try to be active, to find my own ways to communicate socially in English, like with native English speakers on campus. But now, I am forced to spend most of the time on improving my English just for studying, for assignments, and also the exams are coming, so the time to learn English outside study is very little. I hope it can change later. (Brendon)

Extract seven

Here in Hong Kong, I want to be the type of language student who is going beyond learning English only to do well in the course. There are definitely more opportunities here to see and use English and I do try to take them, like watching English TV and chatting to friends in English. But the more time I spend here the less time I have for this, time is now only for academic English so I can pass the course, so I feel a bit frustrated about this. (Glen)

Both Brendon and Glen recite a series of now familiar themes that were shown above to underpin the participant’s English language learning experiences and learning strategy use in Hong Kong, including finding ways

to communicate in English on campus and going beyond learning only for academic success by, for example, communicating with native English speakers, watching English television, and chatting to friends in English. However, in describing the fulfillment application of these goals and strategies, both participants offer negative assessments. Brendon, for example, laments the fact that “most of the time” he is “forced” to allocate his available resources to improving his “English just for studying”. His use of the term “forced” suggests that Brendon views this development as undesirable, a view reinforced by his closing plea for this situation to change in the near future. Similar observations in terms of the allocation of time are made by Glen, whose explicit negative evaluation of this outcome is captured in his use of terms such as “frustrated”, where his prefacing of this conclusion by the term “a bit” does not appear to diminish the force of his commitment to this negative assessment. This possibility of friction between the participant’s realization of their identity as language learner who has mastered “academic English” and a learner who goes “beyond the classroom” was a theme that recurred as participants recounted their first 12 months of study in Hong Kong:

Extract eight

Don’t be like some (students) that only use the chance for improving academic English. Apart from that, join more social activities, find ways to use English but you also need to be realistic and know that most of your time is spent on studying. (Nancy)

Extract nine

Join a hall (student residence) with exchange students and chat with them in English. I’m lucky I was assigned to a hall with exchange students if not I think I would only have exposure to English in the classroom, lectures, group discussion and my own studying for the course. It’s a shame if you come here and only use English for study and passing exams. So, my advice is find time to use and learn more English outside the classroom, but it’s hard to find the time, most of the time you just have to let it go, to focus on your studies. (Margaret)

Nancy and Margaret underline the participants' rejection of a one-dimensional view of language learning that centers only on acquiring and developing what has been referred to as "academic English". Linguistically, their opposition to such learning is registered in their explicit negative evaluations of students who adopt this limited view. For instance, Nancy's adamant declaration urges other mainland Chinese students not to "*be like some (students) that only use the chance for improving academic English*". Margaret's negative assessment of this limited approach to learning as "a shame" suggests support for Nancy's views. Nancy and Margaret also offer advice for mainland Chinese students newly arrived in Hong Kong that, as seen above, reflect the participants' belief in the value of deploying strategies that promote English language learning beyond the classroom. Their determination to promote such strategies is underscored in their directives to other students: "join more social activities, find ways to use English"; "join a hall with exchange students and chat with them in English". However, in concluding, Nancy and Margaret both present a pessimistic picture of the potential for learning "outside the classroom" ("most of your time is spent on studying"; "most of the time you just have to... focus on your studies"), a view which is consistent with the assessments provided by Glen and Brendon in extracts seven and eight.

DISCUSSION

Identity and Modes of Belonging

Wenger's (1998) framework emphasizes the importance of participation in the practices and activities of a community as crucial to identity formation. This attention to the experiential nature of identity construction was reflected in the different strategies the participants reported pursuing in their efforts to realize their identities as English language learners. In mainland China, for example, participants claimed that these strategies included studying English

language vocabulary and grammar textbooks and attending examination-focused classes. Engagement in learning and identity formation in terms of these learning strategies reflected the importance the participants' appeared to place upon acquiring the specific competencies they associated with mastery of "academic English". However, identity is not unitary; rather, its construction reflects a "nexus of multimembership" (Wenger, 1998, p. 158), that is played out as participation in the practices of different communities. For these learners, it was in part the work of imagination which played a crucial role in expanding the scope of their identity formation by allowing them to transcend the here and now of their engagement in the practices they associated with "academic English". The suggestion that they established connections between their learning of the English language and what they described as "more natural and authentic English" that lay "outside the classroom" and "beyond textbooks" (extracts one to three), implied that learners conceived of the use of new competencies for learning. These competencies appeared to reflect their desire not only to learn a different type of English but also to include within the trajectory of their identity formation a different type of English language learner, one which Jerry termed an "independent" language learner (extract two). The formation of this identity was established in practice through the learners' adoption of learning strategies which included viewing English television programmes and reading English books.

Identity formation also appeared to be experienced as a nexus of multimembership as the participants crossed boundaries to pursue their undergraduate degrees within a community of language learners at a higher education institution in Hong Kong. This was a process that initially suggested a continuity of identity formation. Thus, the construction of the students' identities as language learners could be seen to represent a continued emphasis on the importance of both mastering academic English as well as learning beyond the classroom (extracts four and five). Initially, then, participants suggested that although challenging, crossing this boundary appeared to offer opportunities for identity formation in terms of both these

aspects of their learner identities (extract three). In terms of Wenger's (1998) third mode of belonging, alignment, the participants' appeared to anticipate that their allegiance to the institute's requirement for proficiency in "academic English" would be entirely compatible with their desire to further develop their identities as learners who engage in the practices they associate with learning beyond the classroom. Thus, the task of reconciling their engagement in different practices associated with the work of forming different language learner identities, which Rachel foreshadowed in extract five, did not appear to be seen as problematic by the students upon their arrival in Hong Kong.

As Wenger (1998) points out, "the work of identity is always going on" (p. 154). The fluid nature of identity construction was revealed as the participants' reflected on their experiences of language learning during their first six months, and later their first year, of study and living in Hong Kong (extracts five to nine). By tracing over time the trajectory of the students' identity construction in practice, this study suggests that the simultaneous attainment of the different learner identities described above became contentious. Some learners, for example, reported the need to be "realistic" (extract eight) and to "let go" (extract nine) of their aspirations for developing their social English language competencies, that is their identities as language learners "beyond the classroom". The potential for some aspects of their language learner identities to remain unrealized could have led to the frustration (extract seven) that some learners seemed to experience during their initial year of study in Hong Kong, as well as in their desire to effect a future change to this feature of their identity formation (extract six). The potential for conflict between the fulfillment of different language learner identities might also reflect the operation of relations of power within the institute which position learners as relatively powerless, unable to negotiate the meanings of language learning and language learner identity that mattered to them. One possible outcome of these relations of power is the possible marginalization of the identity "out of classroom language learner", with the competencies though which this identity is acknowledged and displayed such

as the ability to interact with native speakers in settings beyond the classroom, rendered less relevant than those associated with the identity of learner of “academic English”. Together with this potential marginalization, participants suggested a lack of negotiability, experienced as a perceived erosion of learner agency, as they were “forced” (extract six) to invest time and resources in acquiring the competencies that defined “academic English”. Although Wenger (1998) acknowledges marginalization and a lack of negotiability as natural parts of a community, his framework has been criticized for not adequately theorizing the role of power, conflict and contestation (Barton & Tusting, 2005). Therefore, the following section draws upon a theory of discourse proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, and described above, to consider how the potential for such identity conflict may have shaped the participants’ processes of identity construction.

Hegemonic Interventions and Identity Construction

Central to the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) is the concept of social antagonisms, which arise when “different identities mutually exclude each other” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 47). In terms of Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) framework, the specific language learner identity that participants associated with learning “academic English” and the identity they equated to an “independent learner”, as one who is active in seeking opportunities to learn “outside the classroom”, came to be positioned in an antagonistic relationship. Faced with the pressures of their study program, the participants found it increasingly difficult to simultaneously further the construction of this latter identity. It did not, for instance, appear possible for learners to simultaneously attain the three language learner identities described by Richard as learner of “academic English”, learner of English for “English language exams”, as well as learner of English for “use outside the classroom” (extract five). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue that such antagonisms can be dissolved through a hegemonic intervention which suppresses particular identities, and therefore “by means of force

reconstitutes ambiguity” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 48). In the case of the participants in this study, such an intervention was made in favour of their identities as learners of “academic English”. However, in light of the negative assessment learners offered of this apparent suppression of some aspects of their language learner identities, the sustained success of this intervention is open to question. The following section therefore explores how this potential for ongoing conflict might be addressed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING, LEARNING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

It could be argued that the premium these learners placed on mastering the competencies associated with “academic English” within the context of the trajectories of their language learner identities represented a rational response to their immediate academic needs, and is a reflection of the additional time required to attain competency in cognitive- academic language proficiency (CALP), as opposed to the language associated with basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) (Cummins, 2000). Nevertheless, the potential for ongoing identity conflict that can arise when a lack of agency implies that learners conceptualize their present and future language learning trajectories in terms of a choice between the realization of competing language learner identities is unlikely to be beneficial for the participants in this study. For instance, Warin, Maddock, Pell, and Hargraves (2006) argue for the need to resolve the emotional and cognitive disjuncture that accompanies identity dissonance, which refers to the psychological discomfort that can occur when an individual experiences a disruption or inconsistency in identity (p. 237). Addressing the antagonisms described in the previous section should therefore be of concern to stakeholders such as university administrators, language instructors, and faculty teaching staff. In particular, the results of this study imply that the provision of language learning services that offer students opportunities to study and use the English language in a variety of

different contexts is a necessary but not sufficient condition for moving beyond such antagonisms. There is also a need to understand how different discourses of education and relations of power can position learners in relation to different learner identities, placing a premium on learners taking up particular identities, while suppressing others, and therefore potentially shaping the willingness and ability of learners to access different language learning opportunities.

For language teachers, understanding mainland Chinese English language learners' identity construction could begin by exploring the language learner identities this student population brings to higher education, as well as their aspirations for ongoing identity construction throughout their degree program. This might be achieved in part by teachers conducting interviews with students at the commencement of their studies that explore their prior language learning experiences and their goals for future development of their language competencies. These interviews, which would allow university staff to view language learning "from the perspective of the other" (Spivak, 1991, p. 121) could then be analyzed using the type of discourse-theoretic approach taken in this paper to reveal how and why learners place a premium on particular language learner identities. A longitudinal perspective should be adopted, in which similar interviews are conducted at regular intervals to trace the trajectory of language learners' identity construction during their experiences of higher education. These emerging understandings of learner identity could then be used as one input to the design of academic programs, language enhancement services, and extra-curricular activities, both on and off-campus, which are responsive to the ongoing and changing identity development needs and wants of learners.

Burbules and Berk (1999) argue that "one important aspect of criticality is an ability to reflect on one's own views and assumptions" (p. 61). Mainland Chinese language learners studying and living in English speaking environments might be encouraged to undertake such reflection by maintaining a journal in which they record observations and reflections on their language learning experiences, both inside and outside the classroom,

including the strategies they deploy, the difficulties they encountered, and how, if at all, they managed to overcome them. In conversations with university teachers, these texts can then be critically studied to reveal the different ways in which they are positioned as specific types of learners within different discourses. This might, for example, reveal the type of language learning experiences and opportunities that their positioning as, say, learners of “academic English” permits as well as excludes. Such awareness of their positioning by particular discourses of teaching and learning could assist learners to position themselves differently in relation to these discourses because, from a poststructuralist perspective, this understanding is an important part of the individual’s ability to move within and between discourses, to “use the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, refuse, or go beyond the other” (Davies, 2000, p. 60), and to determine when resistance is possible and when there is little choice but to comply.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study imply that English medium of instruction higher education institutions in Hong Kong and other analogous educational contexts could benefit from a detailed appreciation of how mainland Chinese learners construct their language learner identities. For instance, this insight would allow for the provision of opportunities for language enhancement that are sensitive to the full range and scope of the varied language learner identities that students bring to higher education, and which they form and reform throughout their study programs. Providing such opportunities will require not only an understanding of the identity construction process of different learners, but also awareness of how their positioning within different discourses of education and learning might shape their capacity to take up, resist, and refuse certain learner identities and, therefore, their ability and willingness to access opportunities for different types of language enhancement. In addition, there is a need for further contextualized,

longitudinal research that explores mainland Chinese learners' identity construction within educational settings around the world. The current exploratory study, while a step in this direction, is limited by the small number of participants and the collection of data within a single institute of higher education. Future research could therefore triangulate the viewpoints of different stakeholders – university administrators, university language teachers, and faculty staff – using multiple methods of data collection within a range of different academic disciplines across multiple higher education settings.

THE AUTHOR

John Trent is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong. His research interests include teacher identity, discourse analysis, and teacher education.

Email: jtrent@ied.edu.hk

REFERENCES

- Barton, D., & Tusting, K. (2005). Introduction. In D. Barton & K. Tusting (Eds.), *Beyond communities of practice: Language, power, and social context* (pp. 55-76). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bodycott, P. (2009). Choosing a higher education study abroad destination. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 8(3), 349-373.
- Bogden, R., & Biklen, S. (2003). *Qualitative research for education* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn Bacon.
- Bogden, R., & Taylor, S. (1975). *Introduction to qualitative research methods*. New York: John Wiley.
- Burbules, N., & Berk, R. (1999). Critical thinking and critical pedagogy: Relations, differences, and limits. In T. Popkewitz & L. Fendler (Eds.), *Critical theories in education* (pp. 45-65). New York: Routledge.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the*

- crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Danielewicz, J. (2001). *Teaching selves: Identity, pedagogy, and teacher education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Davies, B. (2000). *A body of writing 1990-1999*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltraMira Press.
- Edwards, V., Ran, A., & Li, D. (2007). Uneven playing field or falling standards?: Chinese students' competence in English. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 10(4), 387-400.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analyzing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge.
- Gao, X., & Trent, J. (2009). Understanding mainland Chinese students' motivations for choosing teacher education programs in Hong Kong. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 35(2), 145-159.
- Jorgensen, M., & Phillips, L. (2002). *Discourse analysis as theory and method*. London: SAGE.
- Li, D. (2006). Motivation in second language acquisition in Chinese research students in the UK. *Evaluation and Research in Education*, 19(1), 38-58.
- Li, M. (2007). Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong and Macau. *International Higher Education*, 46, 15-17.
- Li, M., & Bray, M. (2007). Cross-border flows of students for higher education: Push-pull factors and motivations of mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong and Macau. *Higher Education*, 53, 791-818.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London: Verso.
- Mendoza, S., Halualani, R., & Drzewiecka, J. (2002). Moving the discourse on identities in intercultural communication: Structure, culture, and resignifications. *Communication Quarterly*, 50, 312-327.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2002). Identity and language learning. In R. Kaplan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics* (pp. 115-123). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pavlenko, A., & Lantolf, J. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re) construction of selves. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 155-177). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- Spivak, G. (1990). *The post-colonial critic*. New York: Routledge.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., & Johnson, K. (2005). Theorizing language teacher identity: Three perspectives and beyond. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 4, 21-44.
- Warin, J., Maddock, M., Pell, A., & Hargraves, L. (2006). Resolving identity dissonance through reflective and reflexive practice in teaching. *Reflective Practice* 7(2), 233-245.
- Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Xie, C. (2009). Mainland Chinese students' adjustment to studying and living abroad in Hong Kong. Unpublished Doctor of Education Thesis, University of Leicester.