Choice or No Choice: What Does Learning English in China Mean for a Girl of Chinese-Greek Mixed Ethnicity?

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Abstract
This study attempts to examine the position of English through the lens of a girl of mixed Chinese-Greek parentage and analyze how she takes up ways of being in the process of constructing her multilingual and multiethnic identities. Based on the interview data, our discussion is intended to bring out salient identity position in relation to internationalization and globalization. It is hoped that the current study can add to the body of literature by presenting the perspectives and beliefs of one unique voice in the discussion of English and open up new ways to understand the changing role of English in China and the world at large.

Key words: The position of English; Chinese-Greek mixed ethnicity; identity; motivation

INTRODUCTION
China presents a compelling case study for the examination of the actuality of English as an international language, since the imprint of English on Chinese society and culture is considerable. What are the functions English is put to? What are people’s attitudes toward it and expectations of it?

While the above issues have been conceptualized from the viewpoint of typical Chinese learners/users of English, some typical Chinese nationals who also lay claims to another ethnicity have not yet been well researched. This study attempts to examine the position of English in China through the lens of a girl of mixed Chinese-Greek parentage and analyze how she takes up ways of being in the process of constructing her multilingual and multiethnic identities.

We want to see from her narratives her anxieties, anticipations and aspirations for English study in China. Specifically, we will look into, but not be confined to, the following questions: a) Does she have any English learning experience before coming to China? b) What is the English learning environment like in Greece, compared with that in China? c) Does she view her singular profiles as benefiting or obstructing her English learning in China? d) Does she see globalization as opportunity or as threat? e) How does she understand the notion of English: as an academic subject, a means of communication, an introduced ideology, or a symbol of globalization? f) Does she believe in the position of English as a global linguistic and cultural capital? g) How does she negotiate her mixed linguistic and cultural identities in China in the age of globalization? h) How does she position herself strategically for a future career where English plays a crucial part?

It is hoped that the current study can add to the body of literature by presenting the perspectives and beliefs of one unique voice in the discussion of English and open up new ways to understand the changing role of English in China and the world at large.
world. In the context of accelerating globalization, the role of English as the most recognized international language is beyond dispute. As Crystal (2000:ix) rightly claims, “We have arrived at a critical point in human linguistic history” when English has become the lingua franca for communication in various domains. English can be seen as a globalizing medium in its own right, influencing language, communication and even culture around the world. This status quo has prompted a variety of responses among learners who see the importance of developing their multilingual identity and fully exploit the opportunities knowledge of English brings.

Learner’s evaluations of the relative power and significance of a language are a key aspect of language learning. For a large number of non-native speakers, English is not only a medium and subject, but also the gateway to future success. This overarching concept of the supremacy of English has underpinned the heavy bias towards and preferences for English in language learning at all levels. Growing English competence is viewed as an essential skill for participation in global affairs and is strongly associated with an international posture (Yashima, 2002).

2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK: A PERSON-IN-CONTEXT VIEW OF MOTIVATION

In a person-in-context relational view of motivation (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009), Ushioda calls for a more contextually embedded relational view of motivation and identity, with a focus on real persons, a focus on the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling human being, embedded in and responding to multiple micro and macro contexts (p.220).

Theorizing language learners as fully rounded persons with social identities situated in particular contexts, Ushioda maintains that learners are self-reflective agents who bring unique identities, personalities, histories, motives and intentions of the social learning environment (p.221). She argues that where L2 motivation is concerned we need to understand the second language learners as real people who are necessarily located in particular cultural and historical contexts and whose motivation and identities shape and are shaped by these contexts. We need to take a relative (rather than linear) view of these multiple elements, and see motivation as an organic process that emerges through the complex system of interrelations.

Instead of adopting a generalized perspective on language learning and language learners, a person-in-context relational view of motivation provides the theoretical foundation for our discussion as it offers a particularized, contextually-grounded angle of inquiry concerned with individual learners.

3. RESEARCH DATA: PURSUING ENGLISH STUDY IN CHINA

I met Elli when I taught her English writing in the second year. Her unique appearance and outstanding language proficiency impressed me. I decided to have a chat with her about her experiences and expectations, with special regard to her multilingual and multicultural identities. The following is the written account of the semi-structured interview.

a) Your family language: Greek, Chinese, English or …?

My family language is Greek I suppose, because I have lived there all my life, but I’m used to speaking Chinese with my mother and siblings (except when I speak to my father), though most of the time we just tend to mix the two languages because it’s more convenient.

b) Your (English) learning experience before coming to China

In Greece kids start learning English when they are still in elementary school (4th grade if I remember correctly). However, the schools (especially public ones) are very lax in this matter, so most kids are sent to take extra classes in the afternoon, or take private lessons. This actually happens in a lot of subjects.

As for me (or my siblings), we didn’t go to such classes, because my father thought it was unnecessary and a waste of money. We learnt from self-learning computer software, with the help of our parents of course. I personally don’t think the results were very good. My English was really bad back then.

When it was time for me to go to middle-school, I took an entrance exam for a foreign language school, “Anatolia College”, which was established by American missionaries in the late 1800s. I had private lessons for essay writing, (though I had only about a month to prepare) and I passed.

In Anatolia we had English 4 times a week and our teachers were either American or British. I think our Art teacher was also British. Of course we still had regular classes like all the other schools, but there was a kind of an “English” environment. Many activities or extracurricular clubs were in English for example there was a MUN Conference, duet-acting in English, English school magazine where you could submit poems or stories etc.

That was in middle school, but when I reached high-school I transferred. However, I took an intensive course on English because I wanted to take the Michigan Proficiency Exam.

After that I didn’t really learn English systematically, even when I took the IELTS. I believe that I started getting better at it when I first got access to the Internet. I started watching Japanese anime online and learned a lot from the subtitles. I think I also forced myself to learn because I
just had to read all the English novels in Anatolia’s library. Afterwards, I realized that I didn’t have any problem with reading whole books in English (which are incidentally much cheaper than the translated versions and . . . easier to find online)

c) What is the English learning environment like in Greece, compared with that in China?

Like I just mentioned, kids learn English from a young age as they do in China. Some of it like it some of it don’t. However, I think most of us learned from ways that were beyond our textbooks, like video games, movies, blogs or chat rooms. Those things gave us more chances to improve our understanding of the flow of the language. Of course, I realized that even like that I was the best in my class, which means we were not all on the same level because a lot of my classmates consciously try to learn it anymore. They could understand a more serious article but they would easily get stuck when it came to writing.

d) Your reason (s) of pursuing English study in China

I think it’s quite obvious that I like English as a language, and England as a country. I wanted to study translation when I was in Greece too, but got accepted in German Literature instead. When I choose this major I was between Translation and German but I thought it was a good way to study what I liked (English) and Chinese simultaneously.

e) Do you view your multiethnic and multilingual background as benefiting or obstructing your English learning in China? How do you negotiate your mixed linguistic and cultural identities in China in the age of globalization?

I think that Greek definitely helped me learn English in the first place, because there are a lot of similarities between the two languages. This became more apparent after I came to China. For example, some words that my classmates sounded weird, or difficult (like “arithmetic” maybe), I could understand them without thinking because they had a Greek or Latin equivalent that sounded almost the same. There are also some cultural or historical differences that I don’t need to clarified.

As for the second scale of the question I’m not sure what to say. For example, when I worked as an English teacher for little children, the parents complained that I wasn’t teaching properly, because for the sake of the lesson I sometimes used Chinese to explain, thus not fulfilling my role of a foreign teacher. As a result I got fired. I believe it was also due to my appearance. Many Chinese people I have met, when they realize that I can speak Chinese fluently they immediately assume that I can’t speak English or Greek well anymore. All in all, I find it difficult to negotiating my two identities, as I have to face these kinds of preconceived notions about what a foreigner should act like.

f) How do you understand the notion of English: as an academic subject, a means of communication, an introduced ideology, or a symbol of globalization?

For me English is first of all symbol of globalization but also an ideology that affects the way we think. I’m not sure in what ways exactly but I think people tend to mimic the American/British way of living or thinking as a result. With the spread of the language, no matter which country we belong to, we can’t help but learn about the culture that comes with it. Most of the time, we combine it with elements of our own everyday life.

g) Do you believe in the position of English as a global linguistic and cultural capital?

I find that English is a language that is suited for this role. We definitely need a global language at the age of globalization. English is already established as one mainly because it is a simple language I think. Although there are languages that have the potential (like Spanish, French, German and of course the increasingly popular Chinese), English is much easier to learn. I believe there are also reasons that have to do with the position of the USA in the political world and global economy in general. There might also be cultural reasons. For example, most of the Europeans I know, find Chinese culture immensely fascinating, but there are many things they cannot seem to fully understand or accept, ranging from the family structure to the political system.

h) How do you position yourself strategically for a future career where English plays a crucial part?

As for the future, I hope that I can find a job as an English Chinese Interpreter. However, I am aware that increasingly more people can speak these two languages. Even though I would love to research Old English in Edinburgh for example, I’m afraid that’s not very likely to happen. I think that the chances are that my future job will have more to do with Greek or German and Chinese than English.

Discussion and implications: What we do and in what context inform who we want to become

Motivation, as Dornyei (2001:8) defines it, is “the choice of particular action, the persistence with it, and the effort expended on it”. As reflected in Ellis’ narratives, there is a strong correlation between L2 motivation and future-related learner identities.

A bilingual by birth (of Greek and Chinese dual ancestry), Elli has been exposed to a different kind of learning environment (taught in a long-established college by American missionaries) back in Greece than her counterparts in China (instructed by local teachers). Recounting this experience in her learning history, she concluded that her better command of English is largely attributed to the immersion in a richer English-speaking environment from an early age.

However, the decision to pursue an English study in a key Chinese language university is made in
response to emerging social and national conditions. While Greece is trapped in financial turmoils, China’s breathtaking development has caught the world by storm. As indicated in the data, Elli was ready to embrace possible career opportunities arising from her learning experiences in China, for she considered participation in China’s tertiary education as a stepping stone to future success.

Elli clearly states that her vision of an international person was inspired by a passion for English as a language and England as a country. To prepare for her future career as a translator/interpreter working with English and Chinese, she took up language activities according to her own needs and interests. Imagine her future self as a globalized English-language competent specialist, she managed to maximize her potentials and actively incorporated American/British culture into daily life. At the same time, she also recognized the need to extend her future self beyond images of English interpreter, because of the sheer competitiveness arising from the large population of English (and Chinese) speakers/users.

In the analysis Elli was found to have exhibited high levels of motivation and construct and negotiate her identities through language learning practices. Her account illuminates the intrinsic link in motivation, identity and language learning. Apart from personal factors like language aptitude and talent, her choice of pursuing English study in China is heavily influenced by the immediate national context of Greece and China as well as the current world scenario.

By linking motivation with identity development, we can infer that learners’ engagement in language learning activities and practices and their choices and decisions are clearly affected by and in turn influence who they think they are, who they think they want to be and who they actually become.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS: IDENTITY AS STRATEGIC SELF-POSITIONING THROUGH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Based on the interview data with Elli, our discussion is intended to bring out salient identity position in relation to internationalization and globalization. We shall summarize some of our major findings under the heading: identity as strategic self-positioning through language learning.

Identity, as Norton (2000, p.5) points out, is how people understand their relation to the world, how that relation is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future. As such, identity should not be viewed as fixed. Linguistic behavior is a series of acts of identity. Self identification must necessarily express the diverse experiences drawn from the multiple contexts within which we live.

Recent research on language and identity suggests we need to reexamine language users’ own relation to multiple languages or language varieties. Sociocultural perspectives on language learning spearheaded by Dornyei & Ushioda (2005, 2009) have endorsed the view that context or real world situations are fundamental to learning. In the language of education field, we have to retheorise motivation in relation to concepts of self and identity, particularly in terms of one’s aspirations for certain kinds of linguistic and cultural identity, or towards valued personal or professional identities that are defined, in part, by proficiency in particular languages (Dornyei &Ushioda, 2009).

Second language learners need to be understood as people who are necessarily located in particular and historical context. How context affects motivation is conceptualized as emergent from relations between human intentionality and social structure. This theoretical perspective well explains the motivation of this bicultural trilingual girl.

Increasingly language is playing a less symbolic and more pragmatic role in the life of its speakers. Learners position themselves strategically through their actions to advance along a career path that they can only imagine at this stage (future self-guides, see Dormeyei, 2009). But a degree in English can certainly enhance the likelihood of success in later life. English is a crucial skill they will need as lingua franca in their future. Globalization comes to entail proficiency in other languages while knowledge of English is taken for granted.

English can be the catalyst that helps the learner to realize his/her future role as competent user and global player. By choosing to study a key language university in China, one of the booming economies and a promising land of opportunities, Elli has the potential to develop the ability and confidence to position herself strategically in a changing world.

Given the critical relationships between the social variables, self-positioning is fluid rather than fixed, learners choose to position themselves in their own best interest or at least as they perceive to be their own best interest at the time in question.

With the help of the descriptive analysis, we have come to see the increasing interaction between individuals and societies in the complexity of the contemporary world. The peculiarities of Elli’s case suggest that the process of identity construction is affected by and affects language learning. Language is better understood as a non-linear dynamic system, made up of interrelated biocognitive, socio-cultural, historical and political elements, which enable us to think and act in society (Dornyei &Ushioda, 2009).
CONCLUSION

For everyone living in circumstances of late modernity, a focal question that has to be answered is “What to do? How to act? Who to be?” (Giddens, 1991, p.70). Indeed, motivation and identity are twin subjects of intensive study in recent years. How we theorize the motivation to learn global English as a target language for people aspiring to acquire global identity is reconceptualized in the context of contemporary notions of self and identity.

This study has sought to provide insight into learners’ experiences of globalization at a Chinese university. We have done so by presenting a qualitative analysis of a unique language learner’s profiles. We have discussed and interpreted the data using a person-in-context view of motivation that places the individual within the immediate settings and broader sociocultural contexts.

REFERENCES