

# Identity, investment, and Chinese learners of English

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## Introduction

In July 2007, an intriguing competition was broadcast on Beijing TV. The show, “I am the hero: Olympic English TV contest,” sought to encourage Beijing residents to become better English speakers in preparation for the 2008 Olympic games. (*China Daily* report, July 30, 2007). The competition provides a window on the drive to learn English, not only in Beijing, but in every region of China. Many Chinese citizens, in fact, are not content to remain in the country to learn English, but are traveling to Hong Kong or to English speaking countries further afield, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, to seek increased opportunities to practice speaking this language of power. This raises interesting questions about the nature of the identities and investments being negotiated as Chinese citizens learn this influential global language.

In this spirit, a lively debate has taken place among English educators in China. The relevance or legitimacy of ‘identity’, and particularly ‘cultural identity’ issues regarding Chinese learners of English (e.g., Gao, 2004) has been challenged (Qu, 2005). Central to the critique is the following argument: “When identity change involves a second language, it signifies confrontations between two cultures, or two sets of values derived from the two cultures.” (Qu, 2005, p.113). Until these two “sets of values”, and the notion of ‘identity’ itself, can be clearly defined, Qu argues that it can be difficult to investigate new identity construction. As an extension of this argument, Qu takes the position that new cultural identity construction presupposed a strictly defined “second language” environment, or “genuine cross-cultural communication situation,” which has been absent in China where English is considered a “foreign language.”

This special issue of *Asian Pacific Communication* has provided much insight into this debate, focusing as it does on the learning of English by Chinese students in mainland China and Hong Kong, but also in North America and Australia. It

draws, in particular, on the notions of ‘investment’ and ‘imagined communities’ that Bonny Norton has contributed to the field of language learning and teaching (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton, 2001; Kanno & Norton 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Furthermore, it connects in important ways with Gao’s (1995) notion of the “paradox of intercultural communication”, which has addressed classroom practices regarding cross-cultural differences. We have been invited to comment on the contributions of this special issue, given our mutual interest in the conditions under which language learners speak, and our desire to investigate enhanced approaches to the learning and teaching of English in China and other regions of the world.

### **Identity and investment**

In Norton’s research with language learners in Canada (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000), she observed that existing theories of motivation in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) were not consistent with the findings from her research. Most theories at the time assumed that motivation is a character trait of the individual language learner and that learners who fail to learn the target language are not sufficiently committed to the learning process. Such theories, which were framed in primarily psychological terms, did not do justice to the identities and experiences of the language learners in Norton’s research. For this reason, she made the case that the notion of “investment”, which can be understood as a primarily sociological construct, might help to extend notions of motivation in the field of SLA. The notion of investment, inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1977), signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. If learners “invest” in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Unlike notions of instrumental motivation, which conceive of the language learner as having a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical “personality,” the notion of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex identity, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction. An investment in the target language is in fact an investment in the learner’s own identity.

Distinctions between motivation and investment necessitate different kinds of research questions. While scholars of motivation might ask, for example, “What is the learner’s motivation to learn English?” scholars of investment would ask, “What is the learner’s investment in the language practices of the classroom or community?” It is this latter question that is investigated in the diverse articles in this special issue.

In their research with mainland Chinese research students in a Hong Kong university, Xuesong Gao, Huiman Cheng, and Peter Kelly examined the extent to which a weekly English discussion group, the “English Club”, could best be understood with reference to Norton’s conception of investment. The students in this study were drawn to the English Club because they were frustrated by the lack of opportunities to speak English in Hong Kong, and their unsatisfactory attempts to interact with English speakers. Further, they did not share the same interests as local students, and the English Club served as a source of mutual support, “an unusual social community where they could socialize as well as learn English”. The use of the English language also provided opportunities for the students to discuss topics, such as “sex workers in China”, which they would be unlikely to discuss in the Chinese language. Interestingly, the English Club had much in common with the “English corner” in Mainland China, studied by Li (2004), who was part of Yihong Gao’s research team at Peking University.

Drawing on their data, Gao, Cheng, and Kelly argued that the weekly learning event extended beyond improving English speaking skills. The students developed “a sense of ownership of English” that enabled them to better negotiate their current circumstances and articulate a vision for the future. In this spirit, it is possible to argue that, for those students, English is not only associated with the target language culture, but an imagined community of “Chinese elites”. Consider, for example, the comment by Linda in extract 17, “a good command of English indicates that I am a Chinese of higher social class”. This raises the intriguing question of how the community of Chinese elites is “imagined”: is it different from target language English speakers, oppositional to them, or entirely independent of them? A second intriguing question concerns the discourse practices of the English Club. If the ongoing participation was related to the building of solidarity, to what extent did this group engage in code-switching between English and Putonghua? Further, how did their identities shift as they negotiated three languages in the primarily Cantonese-speaking context of Hong Kong?

While Gao, Cheng, and Kelly address the limited opportunities that mainland Chinese students have had to speak English in a Hong Kong university context, notwithstanding the fact that English is the medium of instruction, John Trent’s research highlights the challenges that *all* Chinese students have with respect to opportunities to speak English in this context. His paper uses a multidimensional investment framework to investigate the oral participation of one group of Cantonese speakers within their English for academic purposes classroom. Drawing on diverse sources of data, he argues that the successful integration of language and content teaching should include an appreciation of the institutional forces that constrained and enabled learners’ oral investment, how learners deployed a variety of knowledge, skills and understandings in support of this investment, and

the degree of freedom learners enjoyed in shaping the processes and products of their investments.

In making his case, Trent addresses an important pedagogical concern common to many English language teachers, whether in China or other regions of the world: how to promote greater oral participation through increased student investment in classroom and community practices. He identified two factors as influencing oral practices, “knowledge and expertise” in the subject matter, and “freedom and control” of the learning process. With respect to knowledge and expertise, he identified a very intriguing contrast between the oral participation of students in their regular Economics classrooms, which tended to be very limited, and their participation in their EAC (English for Academic Communication) classrooms, which was much more extensive. He argued that in the regular Economics classroom, there was an “asymmetry” in the power relationships between teachers and students, as these teachers had greater disciplinary knowledge than their students; in the EAC classroom, in contrast, teachers had limited disciplinary knowledge, and “learners had greater confidence in using and displaying this knowledge of Economics as a resource for investing in classroom discussion”. Thus, Trent argued, the use of disciplinary knowledge created spaces for students to position themselves as competent English speakers in their chosen field, and, like the students in Gao, Cheng, and Kelly’s study, establish “ownership” of their discipline. Further, with reference to Trent’s discussion of freedom and control, it is interesting to note that the small discussion groups in the EAC classroom are reminiscent of the English clubs in Gao, Cheng, and Kelly’s research. As Trent noted, “based on the presence of these social bonds and an associated positive emotional response, these students felt at ease participating in this discussion.”

Trent concluded that content teachers who were “frustrated and bewildered by the alleged reticence of Asian students” might have considered restructuring their classrooms in ways that establish asymmetries which can favoured students. While the EAC teachers, as language instructors, did enjoy a “knowledge asymmetry” over their students, in that they had greater expertise in the use of the English language, the teachers sought to minimize these unequal relations of power by focusing on fluency rather than accuracy. With reference to theory building, Trent drew on his research to argue that there is a need to investigate investment as a multiplex phenomenon in which the interaction between knowledge and expertise, freedom and control, and oral practices shape learners’ investment in classroom discourse.

Moving from Hong Kong to mainland China, Mingyue Gu’s research, like that of the Hong Kong research, is also centrally concerned with the unique position of the English language in Chinese society. As she argued, “English means more than a foreign language.... How will English learning influence learners, with respect to

not only linguistic improvement, but their identities, values and ideologies?" Gu, specifically, was interested in college students from non-urban areas, and investigated the ways in which rural English language learners in a Chinese university positioned themselves with respect to a Chinese educated urban community and an English-speaking Christian community. Her informants were three female students, one (Pauline) with an English major, and the other two (Helena and Jane) with Bioscience majors, taking compulsory English courses. Data were collected over a period of one-and-a-half years.

It is intriguing to learn how these rural learners negotiated their identities and investments in an urban space. Pauline, for example, who struggled for legitimacy within the English department, believed that becoming a Christian would increase her access to a target language community of English speakers, and, as Gu noted, "increase her symbolic resources in the Chinese language community". Like the mainland Chinese students in Gao, Cheng, and Kelly's study, Pauline sought to increase her symbolic and material resources in order to access more powerful Chinese networks. Her "imagined identity", drawn from her childhood, was "a person who can live like the actresses in movies, being dressed beautifully, and living romantically." Helena, although welcomed in the Bioscience Department, remained unfamiliar with urban discourses, and, in order to be accepted, adopted practices that made her feel uncomfortable. "In order to participate in the activities, sometimes I felt I was not myself and what I was saying made me surprised". As with students in Gao, Cheng, and Kelly's study, it was the need to belong to a community that structured her activities. Although Helena did not convert to Christianity, she found that her English speaking Christian friends provided support and friendship at a challenging time.

The study reveals how, in an era of globalization, and specifically in the rapidly changing economic, sociocultural and political context of the People's Republic of China (PRC), English language learning entailed complex and often contradictory relationships that challenged conventional practices and beliefs. The study also raises many intriguing questions: Are the "Chinese educated urban community" and the "English speaking Christian community" in fact imagined communities for the informants? What kinds of experiences did the informants have before entering college and how were their rural/urban identities shaped? How is language/dialect involved in the identity transition of rural to urban, regional to national? Further, how open is the university toward students participating in Christian activities? Did the informants have other identities that would potentially conflict with their Christian identities, e.g., that of a Communist Party member or Communist League member?

### Identity and imagined communities

An extension of interest in identity and investment concerns the imagined communities that language learners aspire to when they learn a new language. Norton (2001) drew on her research with two adult immigrant language learners to argue that while the learners were initially actively engaged in classroom practices, the realm of their desired community extended beyond the four walls of the classroom. This imagined community was not accessible to their respective teachers, who, unwittingly, alienated the two language learners, who then withdrew from the language classroom. The work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) helped Norton to make sense of this data. In many English language classrooms in China, all of the members of the classroom community, apart from the teacher, are newcomers to the English language. The question that arises then is what community practices do these learners seek to learn? What, indeed, constitutes “the community” for them?

Norton argues that for many language learners, the community is one of the imagination — a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future. The community may also be, to some extent, a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships. In essence, an imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner’s investment in the target language must be understood within this context. Further, learners have different investments in particular members of the target language community, and the people in whom learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who represent or provide access to the imagined community of a given learner. Of particular interest to the language educator is the extent to which such investments are productive for learner engagement in both the classroom and the wider target language community. Norton has elaborated on such theory in a special issue of the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, edited by Kanno and Norton (2003), as well as more recent work by Pavlenko and Norton (2007) (see also Pittaway, 2004).

In this special issue, Arkoudis and Love’s research with Chinese secondary school students in Australia drew on Kanno and Norton (2003) to make the case that the notion of imagined communities enhanced their understanding of learning on both temporal and spatial dimensions. On a temporal dimension, they explored Chinese international students’ investment in their Specialist Maths class, and how this was influenced by the students’ future imagined community. On a spatial dimension, they discussed the implications of expanding markets of Chinese international students in the school sector. Data included interviews with the Specialist Maths teacher, Diana, and a group of eight Chinese international students, one of whom (Shizhem) served as spokesperson for the group. Interviews

focused on a maths test that involved a series of questions about a model railway, which posed great problems for the Chinese students unfamiliar with this term. The intriguing student response to this challenge was expressed by Shizhem as follows: “Not sure what model train is, so I just read for Maths.” Like many of the Chinese students who were struggling with the language in which the problem was expressed, Shizhem sought to “extract the mathematical formula” and then attempt to solve it. His conception of mathematics, which was distinct from that of the teacher, was that mathematics is about numbers and equations. For the teacher, however, the conception of mathematics included “real world” knowledge as expressed through language.

There are some interesting parallels between the Economics students in Trent’s Hong Kong research, and the Maths students in Arkoudis and Love’s Australian research. In both studies, the students did not participate in their discipline-specific classrooms. However, while in the Hong Kong study, it was the power imbalance between the teacher and students that constrained interaction, in the Australian study, it was a different conception of what constitutes “mathematics” that limited student engagement in the classroom. In the latter context, the Chinese students were confident about their mathematical abilities, and saw little need to interact with local students in the classroom. However, because the teacher assumed that knowledge of maths included knowledge of language, the teacher interpreted this non-participation as an indication of lack of motivation. “They are not motivated. So I just teach the class. I don’t talk to them much.” As Norton has argued, however, it is important not to confuse “motivation” with “investment”. While Shizhem and his fellow Chinese students were clearly highly motivated to learn English, they were not invested in the language practices of Diana’s classroom. As Arkoudis and Love discovered, the students’ investments lay in an imagined future community at university.

Arkoudis and Love’s research highlights the challenges that teachers face in seeking to understand students’ apparent lack of motivation to learn. The teacher’s expression, “I’m sort of caught in a bind” and “With this group I haven’t been able to build up any sort of rapport” was suggestive of a teacher identity that was a site of struggle. On the one hand, she was trying to relate to this group of international students and provide support to their learning, be it maths or language. She recognized their differences from the mainstream group and their learning difficulties. Yet on the other hand, her positioning of the students as being unable to make sense of mathematics in the real world exacerbated their exclusion from the classroom community.



### **Identities and the paradox of intercultural communication**

Similar conflicting identities or double-bind situations are often encountered by researchers as well as teachers when dealing with cross-cultural differences. We unconsciously build walls that segregate cultures, notwithstanding our intention of building bridges between them. Gao (1995)'s concept of the "paradox of intercultural communication" captures this tension. To enhance intercultural understanding, a characterization of cultural differences seems indispensable. The very categorization and characterization, however, may reify differences and perpetuated cultural stereotypes, which will paradoxically hinder intercultural understanding. Another manifestation of the paradox is that when interacting with a disadvantaged group, we often "respect" differences by distancing ourselves, so as to guard against the danger of a "deficit" view. Nevertheless, this seemingly safe act of cultural relativism may further "otherize" and hence disadvantage that group.

Thus we need to go beyond cultural relativism. Differences are to be worked upon in a dialogue, explored from multiple perspectives, and drawn upon as sources for change and growth. For example, if Shizhem and his fellow students' perception of maths knowledge and their resulting lack of investment in classroom communities were "to their own disadvantage," the teacher could have been encouraged to dialogue with them on equitable terms, and articulate their future communities as they respectively perceived them to be. It is possible that the imagined communities of these teenagers are incompatible with future reality, and may limit their power in social functioning. When students have access to alternative views, they will perhaps be able to make more informed decisions.

The paradox of intercultural communication is even more evident in the Canadian study by Ena Lee, particularly with regard to critical discourse education. The issue of power is of central concern here. Her one-year qualitative case study investigated a Canadian post-secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) program that analyzed the interconnections between language and culture through a critical dialogic approach. Classroom observations revealed that disjunctions existed between the pedagogy as it was conceptualized and the practices of the instructors teaching in the program. Thus while the teachers supported critical dialogic teaching, their practices essentialized cultures and, concomitantly, the identities of the students. For example, it was interesting to note that student resistance had appeared most evident when the Canadian teachers discussed issues about China. These students took the position that while instructors highlighted inadequacies in China's approach to AIDS, for example, they were not sufficiently critical about the West's struggle with AIDS. Lee insightfully suggested that the teachers in the program may not have been sufficiently self-reflective (cf. Hawkins and Norton, *in press*) about their classroom practices. As a result, the classroom discourses



recreated subordinate student identities, thereby limiting their access not only to language learning opportunities, but to other more powerful identities.

While a critical approach in language and culture education seeks to make visible inequities in relations of power, the discourse can, paradoxically, constrain the students' expression of ideas, and reproduce culturally hegemonic discourses. As Norton has pointed out, such classroom discourse "exoticizes multiculturalism, rather than critically engages it" (Norton, 2000, p. 144). As a manifestation of the paradox of intercultural communication, this phenomenon might be called a "paradox of critical discourse education."

As in Arkoudis and Love's study, the development of students' critical discourse competence in Lee's study calls for further attention. If practices are performed in which more equitable dialogue is facilitated, and cultures are not assumed to be simply the same as "nations," plural identities have comfortable room to develop. In this spirit, Norton (2001) has suggested that the notion of "communicative competence" could be expanded to include a critical component, where learners would acquire "the power to impose reception." Facilitating the development of such a competence goes beyond merely "respecting" differences, and may provide a possible way out of the paradox of intercultural communication.

## Conclusions

Much of the research discussed in this special issue serves to convincingly challenge critiques concerning the relevance and legitimacy of identity research in China (Qu, 2005), and provides empirical support for the theoretical arguments made by Gao (2007). The research presented in the special issue suggests that whether Chinese learners of English are located in Australia, or North America, Hong Kong or mainland China, issues of identity and investment are paramount considerations. Further, this issue raises a number of perennial problems in the field of English language learning and teaching.

First, how should the field define the "target language community"? Would the dichotomy of "two sets of cultures" — "the native culture" vs. "the target culture" — be adequate in categorizing the reference communities in actual learning? Conventionally, the target language community is associated with native speakers of a language; thus, in the field of English language teaching, the target language community would have often been associated with citizens of the USA, United Kingdom, Australia, or Canada. For learners discussed in this special issue, however, the target language community did not necessarily conform to this norm. Many learners wanted greater access to groups such as educated Chinese, Christian communities, people with high status, and those with substantial wealth. In

Norton's terms, the target language communities are in fact "imagined communities" that are highly diverse, and not at all confined to two given sets. Students "invested" in communities and situations that are to a great extent related to their desired identities in the future. The concepts of "investment" and "imagined communities" not only theoretically validate but also open up new possibilities for identity research on "EFL learners."

Second, the conditions under which learners speak the target language is an issue of great interest and concern to language educators. Without opportunities to practice the target language, progress in language learning is compromised. What is evident in the research presented in the special issue is that learners are more likely to speak when the community is safe and supportive. The English Club in Gao, Cheng and Kelly's study provided solidarity to its members; the EAC room in Trent's study was a non-threatening, supportive space; the Christian communities in Gu's study were friendly and welcoming. Lee's study, conversely, demonstrates convincingly that students struggled to speak under conditions of marginalization. As English language teachers seek to encourage their learners to speak, as Diana in Australia did, they might consider how they could restructure their classroom to provide safe spaces for oral and written interaction.

Third, the studies raise questions about how "language" and thus "language teaching" is conceptualized across different sites of practice. For many teachers discussed in the studies, "language" meant more than the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, it also referenced sociocultural practices and power relations in the wider society. For these teachers, then, the teaching of English included examination of the discourse practices of diverse communities, in which relations of power were constantly negotiated and contested. In contrast, for other teachers involved in the teaching of discipline-specific knowledge, language referenced the integration of language and content; knowledge of language, for example, was seen to be integral to knowledge of mathematics. Significantly, however, the studies suggested that if there are disjunctures between the teacher's conception of language, and that of the learners, conflict and resistance may arise.

Fourth, the studies highlight the complexity of attempts to integrate the teaching of language and culture. In Australia, China, North America and many other places around the world, teachers are seeking innovative ways to teach "communicative competence," "intercultural communicative competence," "critical thinking" and so forth. However, many well-intentioned efforts do not produce the expected results, and Gao's (1995) study on a paradox of intercultural communication helps to explain tensions between objectives and outcomes. Such tensions must also be understood with reference to power imbalances between teachers and students, and what this might mean for critical pedagogical practices (Norton & Toohey, 2004). At the same time, it is not enough to merely "respect" existing

“cultural differences” in the sense of maintaining or reproducing them. Educators are encouraged to go beyond “cultural relativism” of a conservative kind, and foster growth toward expanded yet integrated visions.

As Chinese learners of English continue to take greater ownership of the English language, redefine the target language community, and develop unique forms of intercultural competence, scholars interested in English language learning and teaching need to reframe their research questions and reconsider their assumptions. This insightful special issue on Chinese learners of English encourages further innovative research on identity, investment, and language learning in the international community.

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