The Role of Local Communities and the Shift of L2 Learners' Frame of Reference in Second Language Acquisition

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This article explores the role of local communities and the shift of L2 learners' "frame of reference" in students' language learning and identity construction, both of which rarely receive sufficient attention in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Using interview data from studies of two language learners and sociocultural theories, the authors argue that local communities both help L2 learners to access to and develop their English but also hinder learners in constructing their social identities that in return affects language learning. Moreover, the shift of L2 learners' frames of reference from native speakers to bilingual users influences students' learning strategies and their view of themselves as second language learners. Thus, while researchers and educators focus on classroom activities, they need to pay equal attention to help learners access social practices and recognize the importance of L2 learners' identity development.

Introduction

With global economic development and international cultural interaction, an increasing number of people in non-English speaking countries go to English speaking counties especially Great Britain, the United States and Canada to study, work, and live. Proficiency in English affects the life chances of ESL (English as Second Language) speakers in English speaking countries. A large number of researchers and practitioners in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have been striving towards efficiency in teaching and learning ESL. After the 1990s, researchers shifted their focus to the social context and the influence of interaction and social practice on the process of SLA. The classroom has become a key site for researchers to study how interaction between teachers and students or among students impacts on SLA. The recent research, however, seldom considers how the participation of outside-classroom activities and local communities such as work places, and peer networks affect students' progress in language learning and their social identity reconstruction.

L2 learners' social interaction may influence changes in self-identity that mainly reflects on how L2 learners compare themselves with native speakers or bilingual users. This kind of comparison in this paper is referred to as the *frame of reference* that is not a fixed and static notion but a changing and dynamic concept based on L2 learners' needs and concrete situations. The changing process of this frame of reference, however, has seldom been studied in SLA. Accordingly, we will first quickly review the development of sociocultural theories and critical sociolinguistics in SLA. By presenting the interviews we conducted, we will discuss the ways local communities and target language speakers

facilitate or constrain L2 learners' to access English. Furthermore, we will examine how L2 learners change their self-identity when they shift their frame of reference from native speakers to bilingual users in SLA. By focusing on two case studies, we claim that local communities not only facilitate L2 learners to access to English but also hinder them to (re)construct their social identities. We also argue that these learners develop their self identities after comparing themselves with native speakers and bilingual users.

Theoretical Framework

Since 1978, interest in sociological and anthropological aspects of SLA has been increasing, especially in terms of sociocultural, post-structural and critical theory. Recent literature has been concerned with how L2 learners are situated in specific social, historical and cultural contexts and how they resist or accept the positions those contexts offer them.

This focus on the social nature of learning is paralleled with Bakhtin's (1981) work on the social nature of language. Language socialization refers to both socialization through language and socialization to use language. Through participation in social interactions, L2 learners come to internalize and gain performance competence of L2 in these socio-culturally defined contexts. Learners' access to a variety of conversations in their communities has been of increasing interest in L2 educational research since the mid-1990s, aiming to "reflect the fundamentally social nature of learning and cognition" (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p.311). In this view, the focus on individuals and their functioning needs to shift to activities, settings, and learning that inevitably accompany social practice.

The idea of socially situated learning which is participation in the activities of one or more communities of practice has been used to study second language development. Social context of L2 learning, from Davis' (1995) view, is seen as at most a modifier of the internal activity that occurred in individual language learners. Rogoff (1994) states that learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community. From this perspective, learners of English participate in particular, local contexts in which specific practices create possibilities for them to learn English.

Lave and Wenger (1991) propose the notion of community of practice. Community of practice is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practices in which that membership engages. On the one hand, more participation in communities affects the extent to which L2 learners gain conversational and other language learning opportunities. On the other hand, though all individuals may be engaged to different degrees in the joint enterprise, they may have differential access to the "repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated by the community" (Wenger, 1998, p. 76). For Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is socially situated, and involves "increasing participation in communities of practice" (p.49), alongside experienced community members with necessary resources. The social structure of communities and the power relations obtaining within community members define the learning possibilities available to L2 learners. Thus, researchers need to pay close attention to local communities and their practices to examine how they facilitate or constrain learners' access to the linguistic resources of those communities.

At the same time, social interactions also affect L2 learners' self-esteem. As Rogoff (1994) theorizes, learning and self-development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their communities. The achievement of learning cannot be addressed without linking and being mediated by learners' self-definition and their changing frames of reference from native speakers to bilingual users which in turn influences the development of learners' self-identities.

Vivian Cook (1999) points out the status of native speakers in language teaching. He mentions in previous SLA research that researchers have often "fallen into the comparative fallacy" (p. 189). That is to say, either language teachers or SLA scholars are likely to compare second language learners with native speakers. Previous research in SLA such as grammaticality judgments, obligatory occurrences,

and error analysis involve comparison with native speakers. Fossilization in L2 users' speech, for example, is viewed as failure to achieve native-speaker competence since native speakers are those who know their language perfectly (Cook, 1999). Instead, Cook claims that the L2 learner should be treated as a multi-competent language user rather than a second language learner. Multi-competence implies that the sum of language knowledge in learners' mind is relevant, not just the portions dedicated to L1 or L2. In other words, language teachers and researchers should treat L2 learner as a multi-competence language user rather than a "failed native speaker" (p. 191). Hence, he suggests that teachers and researchers should not compare multi-competence language users with mono-language users. However, he does not account for the ways that learners view themselves and compare themselves with "mono-language" users.

Although Cook's (1999) research has been useful particularly in terms of emphasizing viewing L2 learners as a multi-competence user from SLA researchers' and ESL instructors' perspective, he fails to look into L2 learners' perspective and their identities. He also does not address the common practice of L2 learners usually comparing themselves to language users with different proficiency levels including native speakers, fluent bilingual users and other multi-competence users. Ellis (2001) acknowledges the fallacy in SLA research and raises the question on how L2 learners construct self-identities.

Ellis (2001) believes that L2 learners construct self-identities and they know they have to make it themselves. Further, he discovers the learners' awareness of "the two dimensions of learning - the affective and the cognitive - and of the relationship between the two." (p. 82). Similar to Ellis, we will explore how L2 learners change their self-identities from their own perspectives and their shifts in frame of reference.

To examine how target language speakers and local communities function as gatekeepers in SLA and how the frame of reference affects L2 learners' self identity alteration, we draw on sociocultural theories and critical sociolinguistics to approach three central questions: First, how do the local communities and target language speakers facilitate or constrain L2 learners' to access to English? Second, what affects L2 learners' to access to English in local communities? Finally, with who do L2 learners compare themselves in the process of SLA?

Vancouver: The Setting of the Story

Vancouver is a coastal metropolitan in British Columbia, Canada. Vancouver is ethnically diverse. For instance, 48 per cent of its residents speak a first language other than English and French (2006 Census). Numerous people from Asian countries especially from China come to Vancouver to learn English, receive further education, hunt for jobs and even immigrate. Although Vancouver enforces a multicultural policy, people with the same ethnic background tend to gather and live in certain regions. The most salient examples are Chinatown and Richmond where Chinese people (including Hongkongese and Taiwanese) assemble together and live their lives without any English proficiency.

Against this background, the present study examines the experiences of two L2 learners through audiotaped interviews. Both participants were Asian-Canadian. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. In this research, we are interested in the characteristics of our interviewees' social interactions as well as the practices in the local communities where they were learning English. We also aim to get a clear and deep understanding of L2 learners' inner identity in terms of their shifting frame of reference.

A Story of Two Asians in Vancouver

Although the two interviewees come from different backgrounds and experience their lives diversely in Vancouver, they may reveal a preoccupation with recurrent questions mentioned above.

Scenario A

The interviewee N (pseudonym) is a 21-year-old Chinese male. He arrived in Canada three years ago. Now he is studying in a public university as an undergraduate student in Vancouver. He also works as a part-time deliverer in a local menswear store. N has been learning English as an L2 since grade five in a primary school in China. When we asked him whether there was any turning point in his language learning in Canada, he gave me an answer below:

> (I=Interviewer N=interviewee)
> N: Oh, I say my turning point is the winter break that I started working as part-time. (In the past,) even though I am in school, even I am taking ESL classes; I still have problems on understanding like most of my classes. Like most of classes in social studies, I don't understand what the teacher is talking about. But after the break, after I finished my work there, I think I can understand most of my classes.
> I: Why?
> N: Because there, everybody needs to talk to you. I have to understand what they are saying. You have to force you to learn fast, otherwise, they give you 'shit' (a sort of dirty words).
> I: But I have a question. I know the social studies talk about the history or geography or any literature or facts about Canada, right?
> N: Yeah, social study.
> I: Then how can your working experience benefit…
> N: I don't know. It is not about vocabulary. It is just I am more used to the way Canadians think. So like in social studies, they, the words actually is not really hard, but… if you write them on the paper, it is easy to understand what they say, but you don't used to the way they talking. You can't understand even simple words.

Since N talked about how his part-time working experience in a local company benefits his SLA, we continued to ask him how he felt about engaging in a local community. He frankly said that:

> N: I don't think I am enough involving in the society as a social member.
> I: How do you think this will influence on your language learning?
> N: This will obviously slow down the pace. It is not a good thing, but I don't know.
> I: Do any Canadians or Caucasians help you in the process to engage in the society?
> N: Maybe in my work place, (In which) people… I speak English to more, like Caucasians. But even in school, even I am speaking English, my friends, most of my friends; their first languages are not English. They still have some accent. Even they have been here long time, they have accent, they can speak very fluently, but they are not first language speakers.
> I: Do you have many Caucasians friends except your co-workers?
> N: Not many. I feel it is easier for me to make friends who share similar culture background with me… such as Asians.

When we asked N how to learn the culture of the target language which is an important component of SLA, he answered that:

> N: I try to study some English culture, but most Canadians here like the kid around my age, what they are interested is not what I am interested.
> I: What you are interested?
> N: Like I am not interested in going out to party everyday. I want to like talking about some manga or music or… I learn culture, American culture form movies or TV shows. Most TV shows.

N's answers to our questions are not unique. Many interviews conducted by our colleagues exhibit the similar opinions (e.g., Bai, 2008; Han, 2008; Zhang, 2008).

Scenario B

The interviewee W is an adult immigrant who came to Canada from Taiwan. He has received an 8-year university education, including both undergraduate and graduate programs, in Taiwan. In 2006, he immigrated to North America. He first went to Los Angeles to study another Master's program, and he is currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Vancouver.

W has been in Vancouver for almost two years. When we asked about W's early experience of language learning in Vancouver, he said:

> (I=Interviewer W=interviewee)
> W: When I came here in the very beginning, I didn't dare to speak with the native speaker. That is really a problem with my language. So, I was very scared when I tried to speak out.

This conversation showed that W compared himself with native speakers in the beginning of his study in Vancouver. He said that he did not "dare to speak with native speakers." Perhaps it is because he sets up his frame of reference for his language learning as a native speaker. Even though he might not embrace the exact meaning of being a native speaker, he still created an image of a native speaker in his mind. On the other hand, we believe that when he did not dare to speak with native speakers, he may have found a huge gap between his L2 skills and the native speaker's L1 language skills.

During our interview, we found that W always compared himself with native speakers at the beginning of his study in Vancouver, despite the fact that he had completed a Master's degree in Los Angeles. Even in his new Ph.D. program in Vancouver two years later, he still sets the proficiency of a native speaker as his reference. Here is another conversation discussing native speakers.

> W: Sometimes even though right now we don't always rely on the translations, actually we are still using some translations. Sometimes you will find that native speaker never use this kind of thinking way, so sometimes I try to compare. I found it is not easy for me to switch my system from Mandarin to English. That means I cannot easily achieve my goal. My final goal is, of course, to become very close to native speaker, but it's very hard for me, and I don't think my goal will be achieved.
> I: When you find that your English is far from native speakers, like you have a very strong accent and different thinking ways, will you feel very sad or frustrated?
> W: Yes! Previously, I will feel very sad, and very uncomfortable. And I will feel like very shy.

Through this dialogue, we found that W had showed aspects of linguistic competence he wanted to compare with native speakers such as accent. Particularly, he mentioned the native's way of thinking. He believed that native speakers never rely on the translations. We think even though he may not quite understand the different thinking styles between monolingual users and bilingual users, he begins to be aware of the different linguistic systems.

Based on W's feelings of frustration, we asked whether he had found a solution.

> W: I tried to imitate native speakers' language to take as my language. That is, use the language they use, though it was not easy for me to do that.

According to W's words, we found that imitation is an important learning model from a L2 learner's perspective. As Lantolf and Yanez (2003) believe, "internalization occurs as the person attempts to imitate privately" (p. 99). However, whom they want to imitate is crucial. Since native speakers and fluent bilingual speakers have different language systems, we believed that during L2 learners' imitation, they will be aware of the linguistic difference between monolingual users and bilingual users. To illustrate our belief, we asked W:

I: Have you also imitated others' English?

W: Yeah. I compare my accents, word choice, and grammatical structure with bilingual users. By the way, I do not think I am a bilingual person because I am not using English as comfortable as them. I assume they are language users between native and those do not speak English so well, and I think it's possible for me to reach their level first and then become much closer to the real native speakers. Therefore, I compare with them and try my best to reach their level. I emulate how they speak, especially how they joke and speak with others pleasantly because having happy talks with others is a way to make friends and build up a networking in this abroad area. I also notice that sometimes their word choice and grammatical structure are quite different from the real native speakers, but I don't know to address this difference. I believe they undertake the influence of their mother tongue or parents' native language.

According to the definition of bilingual user from W, we found that he believed that a bilingual user is someone who uses two languages very comfortably. Since he did not consider himself having achieved the standard, he did not think of himself as a qualified bilingual user. In this regard, some L2 learners still define a bilingual user as someone who must be fluent in both languages. Those L2 learners do not see themselves as bilingual users and may try to compare themselves with fluent bilingual users in language learning and use. Further, these learners are most likely to believe that as L2 learners, they could reach the proficiency of a bilingual user much easier than the level of a native speaker. According to W's response, we assumed that those language learners such as W may have already noticed the difference between native speakers and bilingual users in terms of language acquisition.

Discussion

In regard to the role of local communities, N from scenario *A* thought working part-time was his turning point in SLA. Practices in workplaces, linguistic and otherwise, are different from practices in schools. Workplaces are real contexts that enable to improve learners' L2 proficiency. Coworkers in workplaces help language learners to improve their language skills, especially their oral communication. On the other hand, learners' social network have blocked them access to practice with more experienced participants (Norton & Toohey, 2001). In other words, these L2 learners could not completely reconstruct their social identity that is the sense of belonging to a particular social group.

These phenomena correspond to Norton and Toohey's (2001) study that language learners are not only bound up in what they do individually but also in the possibilities their communities offer them. Moreover, they explain that learners in both cases are successfully accepted as legitimate participants to their local communities and reform their identities in those contexts. Wenger (1998) argues that language learning is a social practice that engages identity (re)construction. Furthermore, Norton (2001) illustrates that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Wenger's mode of belonging is a creative process of producing new images of possibility and new ways of understanding learners' relationships to local communities. Holland et al. (1998) also emphasize this point in relation to becoming a member of a social practice. However, interviewee N felt that he was hardly accepted by or included in local communities. More importantly, he failed to access peer networks that are important not only for language learning but also for social affiliation.

According to the interview, one reason seems to be the difficulties with reforming learners' social identities. Unlike in Norton and Toohey's (2001) study in which Eva and Julie exercise human agency to gain access to the social networks of their communities, culture difference (a kind of human agency in our interviews) *prohibits* the L2 learners from developing their identities. Wardekker (2008) argues that identity is predominantly based on language and cultural discourse. As N in scenario *A* mentioned,

TV shows were the only means for him to become familiar with the culture of the target language. The lack of counter-discourses definitely eliminated the possibility for shared conversation (though most of these L2 learners master some linguistic skills of the target language through TV shows).

From scenario *B*, W describes the process of changing his frame of reference from native speaker to fluent bilingual user in language learning. Many researchers have been critical of SLA research, arguing that it has fallen into the comparative fallacy (e.g. Bley-Vroman, 1983; Cook, 1999). They claim the language teaching would benefit by paying attention to the L2 user rather than concentrating primarily on native speaker and the L2 learner should be treated as a multi-competence user (Cook, 1999). These SLA researchers believe it is necessary to avoid comparing L2 learners to native speakers because there is a difference between monolingual systems and bilingual systems. Where all monolingual speakers arguably have similar competences, bilingual users notoriously end up with widely differing knowledge. According to W, however, he always compared himself to native speakers because of language learning. These comparative actions are very natural for language learners, and it is unnecessary and impossible for us to stop them. Furthermore, we found from our interviewee W that sometimes L2 learners change their comparative standards from native speakers to fluent bilingual users. The reason for L2 learners to shift their frame of reference is because they set several different steps to reach. In W's case, his first attempt to become a native speaker shifted to imitation of fluent bilingual speakers. The final goal of this kind of shift is to get a closer step to develop his L2 skills rather than to be treated as a deficient native speaker.

Even though comparisons with native speakers seem beneficial to L2 learners, we suggest that these learners should be aware of their multi-competence. If L2 learners have some awareness of multi-competence, it will raise their confidence in learning a second language.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the role of local communities in SLA. Local communities, like a double-edged sword, facilitate L2 learners' access to English while hindering learners to claim their social identities and to place themselves in more powerful positions. Recent theoretical discussions have convinced us that good language learning requires attention to the role of social practices in contexts where individuals learn L2. However, a deficiency of human agency such as cultural agency exerts negative impact on L2 learners' social identity transformation. In this regard, while researchers and educators focus on classroom activities, they also need to pay equal attention to helping learners access social practices at the same time. For example, teachers could help students become volunteers in local communities in their spare time or recommend pop comics to them so that students could grasp a better understanding of L2 culture. Moreover, they need to involve culture learning in SLA so that learners can gain sufficient human agency to reconstruct their social identities in local communities.

We believe that many SLA researchers failed to consider how the shift of L2 learners' frame of reference affects their learning strategies and their view on their own in SLA. If L2 learners need a frame of reference and believe that they are different from native speakers and bilingual users, this dual focus is necessary for learners to establish their frame of reference. This perspective would be an important complement to earlier studies. We hope that future research may lend important insight into L2 learners' thinking and self-identity development from L2 learners' perspective in order to find appropriate teaching methods for L2 learners' language learning.

Acknowledgments

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