How a Non-Native Speaker Constructs Positive Identities in a Master's Teacher-Training Program in Canada
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Abstract

In this paper on how a non-native speaker (NNS) constructs positive identities, I argue that a Master's teacher-training program in Canada has offered me resources, support as well as space to develop my own complex identities (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Speaking from the perspectives of a NNS, I aim to encourage pre-service or in-service teachers to think positively of themselves with my personal anecdotes. I first discuss constructs of Norton & Gao's (2008) identity and investment, and how my identity has been (re)shaped in the particular sociocultural context in a Canadian university. My investment in the current program does not just help me improve the target language, but rather increases my cultural capital. Then, I analyze Bakhtin's dialogism (as cited in Johnson, 2014), and relate the concept to illustrate the significance of engaging myself in a dialogue with peers and professors, and how everything people say or do has a meaning in relation to others. Lastly, I address the notions of interactive others (Kettle, 2005) along with multicompetence (Cook, 1996, as cited in Block, 2003). Interactive others provide audible space for people to be heard, and how they have made a difference in my life. As a NNS, I am not a failed monolingual, but a multicompetent language user who has knowledge of not just one language in my own mind (Cook, 1996). I hope to bring positive influences on those who will enter the job market soon.

Introduction

One of the most debated issues related to Second Language Acquisiton (SLA) discussed in my M.Ed. program at Simon Fraser University is the binary between native and non-native speakers, which has been discussed or argued among several scholars (Canagarajah, 1999; Holliday and Aboshiha, 2009; Phan, 2008; Phillipson, 1992; and Sayer, 2014). Most of my classmates believe White people have certain privileges, particularly in finding teaching jobs in an English as a second language (ESL)/English as a foreign language (EFL) context. It is interesting to note that one of my classmates who is a native speaker did not realize she had such privileges until we started to argue about this issue. As I reflect on my unpleasant job-hunting experiences in Canada, I am aware that when non-native English speakers (NNSs) step into the English Language Teaching profession, it is natural for them to feel insecure or uncomfortable teaching English in front of a group of ESL/EFL students (Sayer, 2014). We may be judged by our accent, lexicon and grammar, race, and skin color along with some other factors due to the native versus non-native distinction.

In the paper, I will first explore the issue of the native/non-native dichotomy originating from my previous job-seeking experiences, leading from it to how a Master's teacher-training program in Canada can offer a space for NNSs to construct positive identities. I will then analyze my own case by putting lenses on a number of reflections and my personal SLA journey: how my former encounter with NSs at Brock University was undesirable compared to what I have experienced in the current program, and how my restaurant work experience afforded me the abilities to develop interpersonal relationships as well as build confidence. Next, I will consider Norton & Gao's (2008) identity and investment, and view how a learner invests in the target language in order to increase cultural capital. The notion of identity also demonstrates how I have multiple identities through social interactions in various contexts. Furthermore, I will delve into Bakhtin's (1981; 1994) dialogism, where Ilieva (2010) explores that identity processes are dialogical and are co-constructed in a given sociocultural and political environment. In other words, the dialogic perspective helps portray the aspects and nuances of my engagement with dialogue and mutual discussions in class, which actively forge my identities in the Master's program. I will conclude with Kettle's (2005) concept of interactive others, and Cook's (1996) notion of multicompetence and how they help explain my positive identity formation. Without my professors' assistance to provide a space for me to be heard, I could not have benefited much from the program at SFU. Without feeling a sense of multicompetence, I would have considered myself a failed monolingual speaker. Having said that, SLA literature helps me find connections to showcase my personal experiences as an inspiring example of how a NNS can access the successful training offered by the M.Ed. program and the findings of my own and others' research help answer how a NNS interacts with others in the sociocultural context to construct positive identities.

Snapshot #1

When I finished a TESOL certificate program in Ontario in 2008, I had trouble finding a teaching job. It had bothered me back then due to the feeling of inferiority as a NNS, and perhaps a lack of teaching experiences. I recall that the online job posts explicitly demanded native speakers (NSs) which quite frustrated me. Similarly, when I was searching for potential volunteer jobs in Vancouver this year, after briefly introducing my personal background and teaching experiences, the respondent from an unknown ESL institution only replied with this message, "Were you born here?" (E-mail correspondence on June 1, 2015).

In most hiring practices, employment recruiters prefer to hire NSs, as illustrated in my snapshot. The topic is then significant to me since I want to know how I can gradually build positive identities to fight for my own rights and encourage other NNSs to do so once we enter the real world. The topic carries importance in the second language acquisition (SLA) field for two reasons: first, it is important to understand how teacher-training programs like the Master's Program at SFU is able to offer successful training like some of its literature has suggested; for another, it helps answer how NNSs construct positive identities through the interaction with others in the sociocultural context.

Despite the negative associations with NNSs, I am interested in discovering how a NNS like me constructs positive identities in the current Master's teacher-training program at SFU in Canada. I want to delve into the question of how the program provides a space and opportunity in such training, and how it helps a NNS to build positive identities during the process.

Personal Reflection Snapshot#2 (Nov. 16, 2014 and Jan. 19, 2015)

Some of my classmates at Brock University saw me as someone who was accented, a less proficient English speaker; they rejected and failed to legitimize my positioning in the group. I would not forget some of their facial expressions when I was standing in front of them. They gave me the look and the feeling of not being interested in anything I said. The label of international students are often perceived as deficient, othered, or marginalized. I am resistant to this label or categorization of international students.

Fieldwork Journal Snapshot #3 (Mar. 10, 2015 and Mar. 17, 2015)

My partner and I did a mini lesson today, and it was more enjoyable than our first one. Today's lesson was to show students how to access the online website about community events in the gym. During our last fieldwork visit, two students I had informal conversations with had positive comments on my English by saying, "Your English is really good!"

Personal Reflection Snapshot #4 (Jan. 30, 2015)

I do not remember exactly when I began to be proud of my bilingual abilities, since I can speak one more language compared to so many other NESs! I did feel proud to share the same L1, Mandarin, with the majority of the class. Being a bilingual has allowed me to freely switch between Mandarin and English; sometimes acting as others' resources in and after class. Working at restaurants before has allowed me to be quite familiar with dining out in Vancouver, and I often help translate the menu, or explain the ingredients in a cuisine to my classmates. When I am with my peers, I feel a strong sense of belonging. This fact has created an interesting phenomenon: the majority of the students who speak Mandarin and English have become the dominant group in this Master's program, whereas people of other nationalities are somewhat marginalised. This is how I feel from a few conversations with my peers. The group I belong to plays a partial role in constructing my identities, too.

Personal Reflection Snapshot #5 (Dec. 5, 2014)

During the first term, we were asked to do a peer review for our reading responses. The first classmate who read mine was unable to comprehend what I attempted to describe; the other classmate who read after her was able to capture my ideas. Then, I talked to the professor to see what she thought. I was afraid of missing the chance of making a valuable point in this assignment. Her comment was, "It looks fine. Just add something here, and delete something here." After class, one of my classmates talked to me, asking for my assignment for her read. She was told by others that my writing had some critical insights, and she was curious to see it. This experience had encouraged me in writing along with acting as a role model for others.

The Story of Myself

Before I proceed to the literature review and findings, it is important to look into my own history which helps shape who I am today. History, in a general sense, can refer to past events or stories the older generation passes on to the younger generation. However, Vygotsky (as cited in Johnson, 2004) interpreted history as the story of oneself. In this sense, I would like to illustrate this point with my mini autobiography. The story of my experiences and educational journey has influenced who I am today; the earlier snapshots capture the essence of my identity formation and transformation during these years. My negative experience at Brock University was in stark contrast to my current experiences at SFU. I believe those moments are able to partially answer how the Master's program at SFU offers a site and opportunities in training for NNSs, and how it assists me to construct positive identities during the process. My SLA journey has contributed to my positive identities, and that is why my history is so significant in understanding my case.

Of course, there were ups and downs in my SLA journey. My first frustration when I came to Canada to study originated from my Canadian peers when they did not value my presence in class. On one occasion during my presentation in class, they cut me off before I finished my instructions for the group activity. I felt rather discouraged; yet fortunately, I had met other international ESL students who were impressed with my grasp of the English language. After the program at Brock University, I was able to further advance my oral and communication skills at my job, as I had to train multicultural employees, listen to customers with different accents, and try to understand some non-proficient language users with minimum survival English. This particular job experience enabled me to understand various accents from NNSs as well as different English varieties. It also allowed me to develop interpersonal relationships with others, excel in organization, and feel confident about myself. My past history has made who I am today, and it truly affects me in constructing my identities within my present M.Ed. cohort at SFU. For one thing, I like to organize class events topromote peer bonding and to support each other's learning. For another Some of them turn to me for advice on writing assignments, asking me for recommendations on what literature they can use to support their ideas. Thus, I feel valued by others, which assists my positive identity formation. My interaction with peers has therefore showcased what Bourdieu (1977) defined as cultural capital: "knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms" (as cited in Cervatiuc, 2009. p. 257).

Through these reflections, I noticed my past learning experience at Brock was unpleasant, in that the negative image I had of myself resulted from how NSs positioned me in that particular academic setting. However, the immersion of SLA literature and peer support have showed me the way to affirmative identity formation in the current program, and how the resources can successfully assist me in building such identity through training and interaction with my peers. I will now turn to the discussions of literature review and findings.

Literature Review and Findings

In reviewing literature regarding SLA, I find the following scholarly journals and book chapters relevant to explore my topic on forging positive identities in an academic setting: Norton & Gao's (2008) identity and investment ; Bakhtin's dialogism (as cited in Huang, 2014; Ilieva, 2010; and Johnson, 2014); and the notions of interactive others (Kettle, 2005) along with multicompetence (Cook, 1996, as cited in Block, 2003).

Norton & Gao's (2008) theory of identity and investment (inspired by the work of Bourdieu, 1977) investigates how language learners invest in a language with the understanding of obtaining a greater extent of material and symbolic resources, which will boost the cultural capital in turn. Unlike traditional notions of motivation that sees language learners' personality as single, fixed and static, this investment framework views "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" (Norton & Gao, 2008, p. 110).

The theory of identity and investment helps portray the complex issue of how I am able to affirmatively build identities by accessing different resources and social interaction provided by the particular sociocultural context. I realized my identity was not fixed or static after immersing myself in the program discourse. In fact, my identities have become complex and are reproduced in situations where I engage in conversations with professors or peers, when students during my fieldwork made positive comments on my English, and when my classmates wanted to see my writing. My identity is constantly changing, depending on with whom I am conversing. For someone who just met me, they perceive me as a fluent bilingual; for my current M.Ed. cohort, I am their 'mother' who always looks after others.

Since entering SFU, I have been investing in the target language with the aim of increasing my cultural capital as the ultimate goal. The program itself opens up possibilities and constraints with regard to identity formation in and through social interaction. Similarly, how I perform in the program echoes Bourdieu's (2000) concept of habitus, which refers to "the way that an individual has learned to perceive and act in the world based on previous experiences" (as cited in Menard-Warwick, 2005, p. 255); I have developed a habitus. As illustrated in my communications with peers and previous coworkers in my autobiography, my own history has affected me the way I have learned to view and behave in front of others. Without my unpleasant encounter with native speakers at Brock, I would not realize how friendly my current Canadian friends are. Without my previous job experience working at a restaurant, I would not be able to become more fluent expressing myself in English, and more tolerant toward listening to English of different accents. All these experiences have accumulated to influence me. My ongoing investment in the current program has also demonstrated what Norton & Gao (2008) said, "An investment in the target language is in fact an investment in the learner's own identity" (p. 11).

These points about interaction and habitus bring me to consider that Bakhtin's (1981, 1994) dialogism (as cited in Huang, 2014; Ilieva, 2010; and Johnson, 2014) also serves as an interesting uptake to forge my positive identities during the process of

learning. Bakhtin (as cited in Johnson, 2014) indicates that the words we produce were once from other people's mouths. Even when we speak to ourselves, we are in a dialogue with our imagined selves. Ilieva (2010) further discusses that identity processes are dialogical and are co-constructed in a given political and sociocultural environment. Huang (2014) also explores that "one responds to and appropriates the words of others to cast one's understandings of self based upon others' perspectives. These self-understanding, anchored to the multiplicity and contradiction of language use, guide one's behavior, thought, and speech" (p. 120).

This dialogic perspective examines the relationship between self and others, and meanwhile values the co-construction of identity in a given context. Just earlier, I discussed how my interactions with different interlocutors played a vital role in my identity formation. My former job experience allowed me to build close interpersonal relationships with others and become more advanced in my oral English skills. The training of multicultural employees in turn had benefited me throughout this M.Ed. program at SFU because I highly value my relationships with others in the community. My case reflects Ilieva's (2010) view that identity processes center on dialogism, and it is through the engagement with dialogue and mutual discussion in class that actively forms my identities within the cohort.

Dialogue goes beyond speech acts, everything we say or do conveys a message and has a meaning. Within our M.Ed. cohort, we have created some new words to play with the language as insider jokes. For example, we use the word 'ninoticing' to indicate that one pays attention even to minor details; the word 'emmom' to mean that one is caring and reminds everyone what to bring all the time, and the word 'kristinian' to express that one is knowledgeable and intelligent. Only people in my cohort can grasp the meaning of these words we created, and it surely conveys a message beyond literal translations. Our creation of the new words demonstrate how "One responds to and appropriates the words of others to cast one's understandings of self based upon others' perspectives. These self-understandings, anchored to the multiplicity and contradiction of language use, guide one's behavior, thought, and speech" (Huang, 2014, p. 120). It is through dialogism that I learned to understand the meaning of my own speech in relation to others', and how our language for amusement leads my behaviour and thinking, as one example. It is also through language that we co-construct the meaning of words together, and illustrate different aspects of collective identities here.

The last two notions I find intriguing to explore are the concepts of interactive others (Kettle, 2005), and Cook's (1996) multicompetence (as cited in Block, 2003). Kettle (2005) argues that Woody, an international student in an Australian university, had direct access to an interactive other, who was his lecturer. His teacher facilitated his legitimacy by opening up a space for him to be "audible" (p. 56). Furthermore, Cook's (1996) multicompetence model sees learners who have knowledge of more than one language in their mind, and the abilities to use those languages in appropriate ways in particular contexts to varying degrees. Whether having complete or incomplete competence or not, "L2 learners are not failed monolinguals but people in their own right" (p. 64).

Experiences of interactive others and multicompetence have similarly assisted in building my confidence as a NNS. I have been receiving generous academic support from my professors as my interactive others. For instance, I have been grateful for one professor's assistance in providing grammar check and constructive comments in my assignments. Occasionally I feel my ideas being challenged reading his comments, then I start to question myself in writing. One vital factor which has helped me blend in the current academic setting more smoothly is having professors who act as interactive others to encourage me to share my ideas freely, acknowledge and accept me as a legitimate speaker of English. Also, several peers have continued to offer critical insights regarding the literature, and at times we have (dis)agreements with the professors. My peers have great acceptance and patience when I speak or make comments in class and it impacts my identity formation positively. In each scenario, I always feel supported by my professors and colleagues who offer me a space to be heard.

Correspondingly, I have considered myself as a multicompetent NNS through the engagement in the M.Ed. program as well as interactions with my colleagues. This sense of multicompetence decreases my feeling of inferiority as a NNS. Since learners develop distinct linguistic systems in L2, they should not be compared to monolingual speakers. As illustrated in my snapshots, I do not consider myself a failed monolingual; rather, I am proud of my bilingual competence, and how I use both languages to support my own learning, and meanwhile offer or act as resources for others. I also mentioned that the majority of the class is composed of fluent bilinguals, allowing me to feel a strong sense of belonging in the group, and to feel valued by my peers. Overall, multicompetence contributes to a segment of my positive identities, since I am able to switch between Mandarin and English freely and properly in various contexts.

Conclusion and Implications

After carefully examining the theoretical framework and my personal anecdotes, here are some challenging issues for NSs to consider while constructing their identities. One issue may surface from the native speaker ideology is that NNSs' teaching competence can be questioned by educational administrators, parents and even students. This ideology will not be changed overnight, but educators or NNSs can start to consider having their voices heard by institutions and parents either through public speech or writing. People with the native speaker ideology should be told that NSs are not the only option to teach their children English, and NNSs deserve a chance to teach before they are turned away. NNSs should also consider voicing their concerns and perhaps form small groups or even academic communities to support others.

On the other hand, as Canagarajah (1999), Sayer (2014), Golombek and Jordan (2005) argued, most ESL/EFL schools prefer to hire native English teachers, and the native speaker ideology is prevalent almost everywhere. Such ideology makes it more challenging for NNSs to serve as role models at the very beginning in front of their students since they all seem to presume their teachers to be native speakers. Students then may feel resistant to acknowledge NNSs' status and withdraw from their studies. Numerous NNSs are affected by the native versus non-native distinction, which

automatically positions them under the category of being non-proficient language users who will never attain the native-like pronunciation (Canagarajah ,1999; Golombek and Jordan, 2005; Sayer, 2014). NNSs will then most likely spend more time and efforts convincing their students that they are capable of teaching. Thus, teacher-training programs should help NNSs build their confidence before they enter the job market. The current program I am attending now serves as a good site to offer such resources

Through my reflections, one thing I noted was the assistance from the current Master's program by bringing awareness to students' multicompetence. That raises one important question: how many teacher-training programs in Canada or those worldwide are doing that? If reading relevant SLA literature is powerful to help NNSs, how can it be more efficient to pass on this message and to gradually eradicate NNSs'suspicions of their own abilities? Furthermore, teacher-training programs can not only incorporate course readings on multicompetence as one example like the case study on Pavlenko's (2003), but also guide pre-service teachers through constructing their professional identities. In Pavlenko's (2003) work, she argued that NNETs perceived themselves as failed monolinguals due to their perceptions of non-proficient English competence, their struggle to acquire the target language, and their endless frustrations accompanied by their inability to achieve native-like competence or master the pronunciation. In order to break out of such a binary, she offered NNSs alternative way of perceiving themselves; that is, she offered the notion of multicompetence suggested by Cook (1992; 1999, as cited in Pavlenko, 2003). Her case studies revealed 14 international students' self-identification as failed language users before the concept of multicompetence was introduced to them in class. However, their self-positioning in the English-dominant community gradually shifted after realizing that they were not incompetent language users.

So, why did I center my inquiry on the identity formation? I really want to encourage other NNSs to think confidently of themselves, particularly when they are compared to NSs in teaching practices. I noticed that some of my peers still do not think highly of themselves just because they are NNSs. One interesting discovery I noticed throughout my inquiry was that the majority of my class speaks Mandarin as L1, which could silence or marginalize those who do not speak Mandarin. Indeed, I have felt very much accepted in the dominant group, and also valued by them with my bilingual fluency. My case may serve as a good role model of a group of people who share the first L1 to give them a sense of belonging, and a space for them to be heard more often. But more importantly, I wanted to show how a NNS could access different resources and training, making use of everything around him or her. Despite the negative image of non-native, I keep in mind that NNSs are still able to break out of this prejudice. I am aware that when I finish the Master's program, looking for teaching jobs in the real world can be frustrating. I am afraid of being asked where I was born again; I am afraid of being devalued just because of my skin color, or the languages I speak. However, this M.Ed. program has helped me construct my positive identities and how I have learned to be proud of being a NNS. I can be an agent of change to turn these stereotypes around. It starts now.

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