Adult and Higher Education (2025)
Clausius Scientific Press, Canada

DOI: 10.23977/aduhe.2025.070105
ISSN 2523-5826 Vol. 7 Num. 1

Language and Social Identity Empowerment of International Students in Higher Education

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Keywords: Language; Identity empowerment; International students

Abstract: This paper explores the pivotal role of language in shaping social identity and its impact on the learning experiences of international students in American higher education. Drawing from Vygotsky's emphasis on speech as a mediator between mind and brain, the study delves into how language functions as a site of struggle for self-definition and control among these students. Qualitative approach was employed by the author through conducting interviews with three international students to gain insights into their lived experiences. By analyzing their narratives, it aims to uncover strategies for empowering students' linguistic capabilities and fostering a more inclusive learning environment that acknowledges and respects their diverse backgrounds. The research also calls for educators to adopt a holistic perspective in addressing the unique needs of international learners, thereby enhancing their educational journey in the U.S. classroom.

1. Introduction

The very first milestone of human development is marked both by the degree of organic development and by the degree of mastery in the use of tools. The latter factor is the key to link the "mind" and "brain". Although there are various forms of mediation, Vygotsky especially points out the essential role of speech in the organization of high psychological functions. In this paper, I focused on the role of language, and how it co-relates to social identity. Additionally, although current scholars pay much more attention to how language and social identity affect ESL migrant students or English native speakers' learning experiences, I chose international students in higher education as my focus group to fill in the gap of the literature. American university educators tend to assume that international university level students are "mature" and/or "powerful" enough to embody the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" American credo. However, it is still ignored how the language and related social identity of university international students affect their learning experiences.

According to some researchers, learning is the acquisition or appropriation of, the resistance to, and/or the reconceptualization of skills and knowledge that have the potential to make and remake selves, identities, and relationships[1]. Language communication, as argued, is a form of struggle over the control of one's making and remaking of self [2]. If that is a negative struggle, how can students and/or teachers empower students' language and social identity and then foster learning experiences in the diverse U.S. classroom? Furthermore, what is the system of meaning and power that people build, reproduce, and contest in and through their interactions with one another? In this paper, I

conducted interviews with three international students. Guided by qualitative methodology, I recorded and analyzed their answers to my prepared questions. In this way, I hope to extract useful information for navigating students' learning difficulty and individualizing students' learning. It should be kept in mind that we should consider each international student as a whole person influenced by culture, identity, and power.

1.1. Theoretical Background

Sometimes, as people point out, language can have a large influence on the dominant social ideology, even before people can speak that language (in this case, English) [3]. At other times, we can also inevitably realize how language ideologies in schools, in several ways, are involved in the process of students' construction of "self", "others", and the distance between "others" and "self". During the process of self-construction and relationship construction with others, students may feel powerless sometimes due to the large distance between dominated self and dominant others. In other words, language ideology may function as a cultural resource with differential influences on action by students and educators. Related back to my topic in this paper, I will first discuss the meaning of learning experience from critical sociocultural theory paradigm and then share definition of identity, and point out international students' identity transformations who are trying to squeeze themselves into the dominant country. What's more, I will list what kinds of empowerment can be particularly passed on to international students.

1.2. Learning

Learning is situated in participation within discourse communities [1]. If learning is situated in discourse communities, and discourse communities produce struggle over cultural tools, resources, and identities, then it follows that learning is shaped by power relations. If we consider international students' learning as an experience, then in that experience, language is central to the formation of subjectivity. For international students, learning experience and power distance can be felt in and out of the classroom. The most obvious and direct way of feeling is "talking". That is to say, the time international students open their mouth and speak out a single word, others who are listening will label those international students as a group they prefer to be around or not. For another example, when being silent in the classroom, it is not because of the unwillingness of participation, rather it is because of the immature mastery of dominant language. All individuals involved in the learning process have an impact on the learning that occurs, not just teachers, but also everyone else [4].

2. Identity

As we may all know, identity has been defined in countless ways through history. Some scholars argue that definitions of identity have moved from the assumption that identity is a single, stable state that one achieves over time and development, to a more complex and shifting phenomenon, one that is always in flux, dynamic, and context-related [5]. While rejecting notions of identity as stable and achieved, researchers do not accept the idea that identity is constantly shifting or undefined. Instead, they argue that identity can be considered "an enactment of self-made within particular activities and relationships that occur within particular spaces at particular points in time" [5].

2.1. Identity Transformation

The contradiction between homeland preserved identity and American new identity will be part of life to those international students. Additionally, scholars persuasively note the way to better

understand social identity when considering it cloaked in power [5]. Some researcher thoroughly and clearly summarized the transformation process as seven stages which are arrebatos, nepantla, coatlicue, compromiso, putting coyolxauhqui back together, the clash of realities, and shifting realities [6].

The initial arrebatos, the initial pain brought on by dominant society, leads into nepantla, where one does not know whether to assimilate, separate, or isolate from the demands of the dominant culture. In the coatlicue state, one must come to deal with this type of fragmentation. During this stage, one can run from it and deny the fragmented state they have been forced into or they can work on their fragmentation. This journey can be transmitted in a way that can bring about the next stage of compromiso, where one accepts that fragmentation has occurred, and transform toward the potential hybrid identities that incorporate the many fragments into a new conversion, incorporating the multicultural resources within oneself.

In repairing coyolxauhqui, one begins to heal from the oppressive arrebatos and then makes the shift from having worked on one's own fragmentations and reconfigurations into the important work of then acknowledging that people are constantly negotiating and renegotiating nepantla in a constant reconstruction of ever-shifting identities, and are therefore life-long "in-betweeners'' [7] or nepantlers. By acknowledging that, international students shift their own perspectives from being isolated or dominated into the state of "us". International students realize and overcome the struggle and look for ways to be empowered.

2.2. Student Empowerment

Scholars distinguish between three dimensions of student empowerment, which are labeled as academic, social, and political empowerment [8]. Academic empowerment within education requires that students be taught competitive academic knowledge and skills so they can equip themselves with meaningful and valuable knowledge while also be taught to think critically about the ways these structures affect their lives [9][10]. Social empowerment refers to student-student relationships and teacher-student relationships being safe and supportive. Especially, students do not feel oppressive or biased when speaking up in the class [10][11]. Political empowerment is defined as students intentionally recognizing and critically examining the structures and forces that establish and maintain power inequities within the sphere of political participation. This includes whether students have "the consciousness and ability to question or even challenge current structure" [11] within and outside of schools.

3. Methodology

I interviewed three international students, Ema, Clair, and SJ, with different backgrounds to respond my prepared questions. Ema is a junior Japanese student, majoring in Biotechnology and staying in the lab most of the time. Claire is a Chinese sophomore student, majoring in Accounting who got a great GPA in study, preparing for an incoming accounting competition in which she hopes to "impress" the judge and other professors. SJ is a Graduate Korean student, majoring in Education Psychology who also works on campus as a GA. I set up the time when they were available, asked questions and recorded all the discourse between each of them and me. If there is any jargon they do not understand, I explained it to them. For example, related to students' empowerment, I used the identical explanation I listed above, in order to get a better understanding. The interviews went well for each of them and we continued the topic after the interview for a long time.

4. Results

As I assume, since they share commons of being international students and second language learners, there are overlapping answers to those questions. First question: What language do you speak? To whom? When? Where? Why? Three participants will speak in their native language to their parents and their "native language" friends. It is worth mentioning, Claire specifically pointed out that she will speak to American born Chinese in the language that ABC choose. In other words, if her ABC friends speak in Chinese, they will talk in Chinese. But if their friends start the conversation in English, then she will switch into English. What's more, for those three, they feel comfortable talking in their native language and it will be out of consideration of speaking English to their "native" friends. However, Claire told me that she had a senior friend who insisted in speaking English all the time, even to Chinese friends, in order to practice and fully immersed in to the English speaking environment.

The second question: When do you speak English? To whom? When? Where? Why? Other than native relatives and native close friends, they will choose English as their academic or communicating language. Besides, they all said that classroom is particularly the place to speak in English and English only. They all agree with it since "this is America". SJ works in a child education center where the teaching environment is also monolingual and English dominant. So, even she has Korean students, English is still her working language and the final goal is English acquisition.

The third question: How do dual-languages affect your learning at school? They all showed negative opinions on this question because as Ema said, she needs to spend much more time figuring out those difficult terms and read articles more than one time. Being non-native English speakers hinders their full understanding over some English sentences. However, they all expressed their positive opinions of being bilingual. For Ema, she is glad that she has Japanese as her first language so that she can use the language to mediate her learning and Japanese is her back-up plan when she encounters unfamiliar English words. To Clair, although, in the beginning, she is really uncomfortable of being taught in English, it turns better after a month, and now she is used to understanding difficult jargon via English explanation and she joked that even if those barren terms are in Chinese, she could not understand them. As to SJ, she identified that being bilingual offers her a new way of "looking and thinking" than those who are monolingual. In Korean, being submissive is valued in English, she found so many sentences of encouraging you to be assertive, to express, to say whatever you want to say. That conflict is both enlightening and frustrating for her.

The forth question: What social identities do you label yourself and how do they affect your learning? They all informed themselves as international Asian students, but none of them want to use ethnicity to define themselves. Ema said that being an international student implies that she is getting more academic support from classmates and professors. She was really thankful about that. Clair expressed that she is a good team leader or team member, good student and daughter at home, so she does not think social identity affects her score that much and her motto is doing the best all the time. SJ indicated that she did not think a lot about social identity before coming to the states, and after coming here, she started to compare and contrast the difference of being Korean and being American. She did not consider that social identity will affect her learning result if she tries really hard. Related to learning experience, they all share similar struggles of not understanding others or not being understood, far or less. Due to the fact of being English language learners, they all examined the role of first language as being the 'thinking' tool and second language as being the 'saying' tool.

For Ema, her supportive classmates encourage her to clarify and answer the questions. For Clair, she was forcing herself to speak out in order to get the bonus points. And for SJ, she indicated that she was being trained to rote and then being told to speak up in front of everyone, to think, to question, to be creative, and to be alert to western academia which exhausted her in the beginning.

The fifth question: Recalling one recent project (better teamwork), in what way do you feel social empowerment? Academic empowerment? Political empowerment? They were empowered academically and socially by teamwork, project, or presentation but political empowerment is overlooked for all of them. For Ema, her major is biotechnology and most of the time is in the lab individually. But she mentioned that for the genes presentation she recently accomplished, she felt supportive, safe, and non-discriminatory with classmates and the professor. She understood much deeper about genetic terminology and felt confident to use the knowledge in the real world.

For Clair, she benefited very much from the recent competition. She had four team members with different ethnicities from different country origins. She was respected by them since she was a sophomore and they would understand each other's theory even though they hold different stands. Interestingly, she assumed that she would not be that comfortable if all her team members are male, middle class white students and would worry about being ignored.

For SJ, she recalled her working experience at the child education center and perceived supportive colleagues and got the chance to collect data for her future dissertation. She cherished the working experience because through working, she understood what theories do work and what do not. What's more, she compared working station in the states and that of Korea and developed critical thinking skills. Not unexpected, they do not feel political empowerment through any learning experience. In fact, Ema believed that school is the authority and she did not have the power to challenge. Clair expressed that she made reasonable suggestions in one class but they did not work well and after that, she gave up the idea of influencing school structure. SJ evaluated the "danger" of challenging and looking for any better alternative to change micro instead of the macro.

The sixth question: If you get a chance to get rid of your language accent or social identity, which one will you choose and why? Ema hopes to get rid of her language accent because she believes Japanese English is not English. Clair imagined that it would be more relax and free if she is a middle class white English native student. She may not choose the major she has now and also there is no need to be away from family, friends, and country. For SJ, she hopes to keep her accent in order to keep her identity but she also hopes to be a middle class male American student because it would be interesting to see things as an "insider", not "outsider".

5. Data Analysis

The time we open our mouth and make the first syllable is when we begin to recognize and construct our own identity. When speaking in front of the others in English at school, we are representing a preferred social identity. Discourse allows each of us to "create new ways of being" [12]. In this study, through constantly choosing a certain language over another with native speakers, international students begin to construct their own identity and all the above inevitably affect their learning experience, in and outside of the classroom. The affect can be both positive and negative which can be attributed to past learning experience, home culture, or even personality. For some, the struggle is minimal, as what the self is asked to re/make is in close keeping with the self brings to formal learning spaces, relationships, and activities. For others, the struggle is greater, because the home culture is quite different or even contradictory with the new culture.

After the interview, all participants share with me their own American school learning adjustment strategies. For Clair, she pushes herself really hard to speak up in the class and be assertive in a group, which is quite different from her past learning experience. For Ema, her personality is quite reserved and shy, however, her classmates are supportive and empathetic. Every time, her classmates will wait for her answer and clarify terminology for her.

At the same time, we can realize the value of projects or assignments. If they are assigned well and unbiased, it offers international students a great way to be engaged and show what they can really

do. For example, Clair really appreciates her professor's teaching style which is that the professor will assign readings and ask them to prepare several questions before hand. Thus, before class, she has already rehearsed the answer several times and then can answer the questions confidently in class. When teachers are raising questions which are immediate and dominate culture bonded, she does not get a chance to answer at all. For example, in one class, her teacher asked them to describe "cloak" and the relationship between "cloak" and "clock". She struggled to answer the questions or relate clock with cloak. What's more, it is important for teachers to think of the purpose of assignment. To what end do university educators direct international students to achieve? Based on the interview results, none of them feel politically empowered, only socially and academically.

6. Conclusion

What has been implicit throughout our analysis of data in this paper is the role that identity, agency, and power play in international students' learning. In all ways, language can be the reason and result of certain social identity. Since we are all living in the society with imbalanced power distribution and this society is the source of our internalization, so we choose to use one language under certain social situations over another. For teachers, they may utilize teacher talk to show teaching authority. For native speakers, they may use native speaker talk to show your language mastery. They all represent identity at that time in that place under that situation. Education can train students to accept dominant ideologies and continue with society's governing way of thinking, or can raise students' consciousness by acknowledging and learning to challenge those ideologies [13]. It should be noted that this article cannot be constructed as a condemnation of individual teachers' native classmates or international students, however. When we study in multi-ethnic situations, we are looking for the effects of unconscious habits of organizing talk on the unfolding interaction. How to empower international students socially, academically, and politically through in class and out of class assignments should be a goal that educators keep in mind.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by the Tianjin Science and Technology Popularization Project, "Development and Application of Teenagers' Scientific Inquiry Experimental Courses Based on Maker Thinking" (Project No.: 23KPZDRC00080).

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