

Negotiating identity *in situ*:
Chinese EFL learners' responses to native-speaker norms

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Abstract

In the rapidly expanding research fields of World Englishes and English as a lingua franca there has been a notable division of opinion concerning whether a native-speaker model or a proficient bilingual model should be adopted in the TESOL classroom. The article presents findings from a small-scale study which examined how Chinese college students responded to native-speaker norms of linguistic behaviour in two situated learning scenarios. The study found that the Chinese students were prepared to converge towards native-speaker norms in the post office scenario while conspicuously resisting those norms in the police scenario. In both cases, the students demonstrated their agency in negotiating and constructing their L2 identities in situ. They used native-speaker norms as an important reference point but were able to devise their linguistic behaviour in the given situation by drawing on both their L1 and L2 linguistic resources. Based on the finding that the Chinese college students were rational and reflective agents in determining their use of native-speaker norms, it is argued that the contributions of L2 learners have a place in the vexed debate regarding which is the appropriate model to use in the EFL classroom.

Introduction

One of the central criticisms that researchers into World Englishes (WEs) and English as a lingua franca (ELF) have raised about traditional TESOL pedagogies concerns the inadequacy of using a native-speaker model to teach L2 learners and test their language proficiency. These researchers believe that most L2 learners are unable to achieve native speaker-like language competence and that it is often unnecessary or undesirable to aim at this type of competency as an ultimate goal (e.g., Jenkins, 1996; House, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2007). The researchers argue that L2 learners have their own identity – distinct from that of native speakers (NSs) – and deserve to be considered in their own right. It has thus been proposed that proficient bilinguals tend to provide a more appropriate model than do native speakers, particularly if the L2 learners in question need to communicate mostly with other non-native speakers (NNSs) rather than with NSs (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002; Kirkpatrick,

2007). However, this proposal has been seriously challenged by other scholars, who have provided evidence that L2 learners still largely desire to imitate native speaker models (e.g., He & Li, 2009; Groom, 2012). These researchers have pointed to the difficulties and perhaps even unfeasibility of constructing a model based on proficient bilinguals that would be useful in EFL classrooms (Scheuer, 2010).

In response to the debate on the NS model and, to a larger extent, issues relating to ethics and equity in TESOL in the global context, the present study examined L2 learners' own responses to NS norms. It looked at Chinese college students' tendency to either converge towards or diverge from NS norms after they were informed of NSs' linguistic behaviour in two communication scenarios. This study follows a recent strand of research into L2 learning that draws on social theories to investigate L2 learners' agency and identity, particularly in relation to their actual or imagined communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Kanno & Norton, 2003). It is hoped that the empirical evidence will be useful in understanding, from the perspective of L2 learners, the way in which NS norms are relevant to L2 development and L2 identity formation.

L2 learners' agency and identity *in situ*

If we consider language use to be a form of social interaction, social theories that explain the mechanism of social interactions cast light on L2 learning and use. From the perspective of structuration, L2 learners, as capable and reflective social actors in general, act in verbal interactions by exercising their agency and negotiating with (social) structural constraints in a given situation (Giddens, 1984). L2 learners' identity is therefore not merely a given, but rather is constantly acted out *in situ*. Acting out a social identity is thus in essence the individual's way of personifying social roles by investigating his or her personality through these roles (Fairclough, 2003: 161).

Recent research on L2 learning has made extensive use of social theories (e.g., Kanno & Norton, 2003; Block, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson, Mohanty & Panda, 2009; Byrd Clark, 2010). Some of the studies most relevant to the present research are those conducted by Gu, who used a post-structuralist approach and critical discourse analysis to investigate Chinese tertiary students' agency and construction of national identity over their years of English learning at college (Gu, 2010a, 2010b). She found that the students' identities were discursively constructed, multiple and at times contradictory. This line of sociologically-driven research tends to examine identity from macro-perspectives. In contrast, the present study aimed at analysing language use at a micro-level through the use of communication scenarios, in order to reveal information about L2 learners' identity construction *in situ*.

The study

Situated linguistic behaviour in two scenarios

The study focused on Chinese-speaking students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at a tertiary institution in Macao (see Wang, 2011, for further details). The students first produced utterances in communication scenarios (e.g., the ‘post office’ and ‘police’ scenarios below). Next, they were presented with the linguistic behaviour of native English speakers (NSs) in these scenarios. This allowed the students to reflect on their own language use in the given scenarios and decide whether or not to adopt NS norms. Their responses to NS norms of linguistic behaviour were solicited in the investigator’s interviews with the students.

Scenario A – You enter a post office to mail a letter to New York. Your letter is heavy, and needs to be weighed and stamped. What are you going to say to the cashier?



The first scenario above (abbreviated as ‘post office’) involves a common service interaction with a post office clerk who handles customers’ transactions, normally as a prescribed service. The Chinese college students used ‘I want to ...’ most frequently to make their request to mail a letter, followed by ‘Can you ...’, whereas native speakers of Australian English preferred to use ‘I need to ...’ and ‘I would like to ...’. When the Chinese students were informed that ‘I want to ...’ sounded rather coercive to native English speakers’ ears in this scenario, most were willing to use the more indirect and mitigated expressions. They readily adopted the expressions that native speakers used most frequently – e.g., ‘I need to (post this letter to New York)’ – treating them as useful additions to their linguistic repertoires. They did not insist on continuing to use the Chinese-flavoured expression ‘I want to ...’, and did not show explicit concern about linguistic identity in this scenario.

The ‘I want to ...’ construction is typically used by Chinese speakers of English across a wide range of request situations. This most probably relates to L1 transfer, because Chinese speakers rely heavily on 我要 (*wo yao* ‘I want’) and its mitigated form 我想要 (*wo xiang yao* ‘I think [that I] want’) to make requests for common services, and they consider ‘I want’ to be the closest equivalent of *wo yao* in English. The Chinese students’ readiness to reduce their use of ‘I want to’ and increase their use of ‘I need to’ in this scenario indicated a potential development in their command of language form in context, that is, in their ‘pragmalinguistic’ development (Thomas, 1995).

The students' pragmalinguistic response was also accompanied by the development of new 'sociopragmatic' understanding. Native-speaker norms for interaction with the clerk in the 'post office' scenario – in terms of language form and frequently occurring small talk – enabled the Chinese students to extend their sociopragmatic knowledge. They understood that the negotiation of such common services between staff and customers evinces a considerable level of politeness and friendliness in English-speaking settings, in stark contrast to their experience in Chinese-speaking settings. It has been well documented that Chinese speakers tend to consider common service interactions (e.g., at the post office or bank, or purchasing tickets for public transport) to be a form of 'out-group' communication, requiring a lower level of politeness (Scollon, 1991). Out-group communication – unlike 'in-group' conversations with friends, colleagues and family members that often entail a great deal of deference and intimacy – tends to be conducted in a utilitarian manner (i.e., for the purpose of getting the transaction done as swiftly as possible) with little interpersonal exchange. However, the 'post office' scenario presented the Chinese-speaking students with a situated learning environment in which native English speakers regularly express a considerable level of politeness and where they tend to incorporate some interpersonal exchanges (e.g., 'smart talk', phatic chatting), clearly differing from the type of out-group communication used in Chinese-speaking settings. When the students were made aware of native speaker norms, they were able to refer to these norms and exercise their agency as L2 users to determine their own linguistic behaviour. Most of the students were willing to depart from the Chinese-style utilitarian type of service communication and adopt a more native-like, mitigated and friendly register. This in turn reflected their negotiation of identity in the given scenario.

By contrast, in the second scenario in this study (abbreviated as 'police'), the Chinese college students did not readily accommodate native speakers' linguistic behaviour.

Scenario B – You park your car in a five-minute temporary parking zone in a busy commercial area and go to buy some take-away food. You run a bit late as you have to queue in the take-away shop. When you return to your car, to your horror you see that an officer is about to issue a ticket to your car. You know this will cost you dearly and want to persuade him to withdraw the ticket. What are you going to say?



The Chinese college students tended to be more indirect in their requests in the 'police' scenario than did the native speakers. The students used 'Can/Could you give me a chance?' most frequently, followed by 'Please give me a chance', while the native speakers used 'Stop it', 'Give me a break'

and ‘Don’t give me a ticket’ most frequently. The native speakers noted that they did not have a high opinion of parking officers and, more importantly, that it would be unlikely for the officer in this scenario to agree not to issue a ticket. This goes a long way towards explaining the direct manner the native speakers employed in their comments to the officer – e.g., ‘Give me a break!’ or ‘Stop it!’ – which expressed considerable discontent and disapproval.

When the Chinese students were informed of the native speakers’ language use and the underlying thinking behind it, they found such information useful in understanding the given situation (i.e., their ‘sociopragmatic’ knowledge). However, they did not want to make use of ‘Give me a break’ or ‘Stop it’ themselves, considering that these expressions sounded too confrontational. One of the female students reported that she might use such expressions on a day in which she was in a bad mood. However, on the whole the Chinese students appeared to be rather conscious of their non-native identity in English-speaking settings, and indicated that they would attempt to play it safe in their verbal interactions rather than indiscriminately copying what native speakers would say in the situation. They certainly paid attention to interpersonal factors in situated communication.

The Chinese college students used ‘give me a chance’ extensively in this scenario, which is related to the Chinese expression 给我个机会, a word-for-word equivalent of ‘give me a chance’, which Chinese speakers employ to plead for special consideration or mercy from a more powerful authority. English speakers also use ‘give me a chance’, but generally in different contexts. For example, a search for ‘give me a chance’ in the British National Corpus results in 40 hits, mostly in cases where the speaker wants ‘a chance’ to give a good – or hopefully outstanding – performance. This differs from the sense of pleading in the usage of the formulaic phrase by Chinese speakers. The Chinese students, although understanding that their use of ‘give me a chance’ was not native-like, did not express much willingness to adopt native-speakers’ modality in this scenario.

The results therefore suggest that the Chinese college students’ L2 identity is constructed *in situ*. Taking the contextual factors into account, they tended to reflect on their own language use and decide whether they wanted to converge with native norms or retain their L1-related characteristics.

Discussion

These findings reveal that L2 speakers were able to use their agency to choose linguistic behaviour and negotiate their identity *in situ*. There are two main implications that emerge from the present study. First, it is not entirely fair to benchmark L2 learners against native speakers in terms of linguistic behaviour and to judge the learners as deficient in their ‘native-likeness’. This echoes

previously raised criticisms of the use of NS models in L2 testing (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 2007). The findings from the current study show that Chinese college students can and will make strategic decisions to opt for non-native-like linguistic behaviour in some contexts. This also supports the position expressed in the ELF literature that it is often undesirable for L2 learners to attempt total convergence with native-speaker pragmatic norms (House, 2003: 573). A more appropriate model for testing L2 linguistic behaviour needs to take into account the distinct identity of L2 speakers *in situ*.

Secondly, the conflict between the NS model and the proficient bilingual model in EFL pedagogy becomes easier to reconcile if L2 learners' agency is acknowledged. L2 learners, who are active and reflective agents in social interactions rather than mere followers of rules, do not become native speakers simply because they are taught a NS model. The study showed that the Chinese college students do not blindly adopt the expressions that native speakers would use in situated contexts. The Chinese students, and probably L2 speakers in general, draw on multiple linguistic resources – such as native speaker norms, their mother tongue and other bilingual speakers' language use – in situated communication. Native speaker norms provide them with a valuable reference point for unmarked linguistic behaviour in English-speech communities, while proficient bilingual speakers' language production shows them how local (non-Anglo) experience can be expressed effectively in English. Such linguistic resources may not be mutually exclusive and, perhaps most importantly, adult L2 speakers are capable of choosing from these resources and negotiating their language use in context. From this perspective, a model for EFL pedagogy is likely to be more beneficial if it comprises multiple resources, rather than either an NS or a proficient bilingual model exclusively.

It would be particularly useful if the language materials given to learners contained essential information about the speaker (e.g., NS or bilingual with Chinese as L1 and English as L2) and the communication context (e.g., English-speech community or diglossia). Such situated and classified language input may help L2 learners to construct their agentive identity *in situ*. At this juncture, insights from social theories that acknowledge language learners' agency as rational and reflective social actors become relevant and explanatory (Erickson, 2011). Acknowledging L2 learners' agentive role in their L2 use suggests that their opinions may also be of great value in the debate on the most appropriate model to adopt in the EFL classroom (e.g., Remiszewski, 2005; He & Li, 2009). Considering L2 learners' views to determine which language models to use in the classroom may also pave the way for the implementation of more learner-centred pedagogies across the board.

Conclusion

The present study examined Chinese college students' responses to NS norms of linguistic behaviour in two communication scenarios. It found that the students used their agency to determine whether or

not they wanted to converge toward native speaker norms, actively taking contextual factors into account. The students used the native norms as a reference point, and were capable of drawing on their L1 and L2 linguistic resources to produce linguistic behaviour and construct their identity *in situ*. The findings suggest that a model for TESOL that comprises multiple linguistic resources, rather than either an NS or proficient bilingual model alone, are most useful for students. This study contributes to the ongoing debate on the most appropriate model for EFL pedagogy by examining the factor of L2 learners' agency. It also stresses the importance of eliciting L2 learners' views on the model that will be used in their English language learning classroom.

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