

Reflections on Identity and English Language Teaching in China

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Abstract

This paper starts by introducing the major development of language theories and teaching approaches in history, followed by the presentation of theory of identity and the relationship between identity and language learning with an introduction to some major related contributions of scholars in this field. Such as “imagined community” proposed by Wegner and the notion of “investment in language learning” put forward by Norton. Based on their theories, a conclusion can be made that language learning is closely related to the identity a learner assumes in certain community, and a successful learning is based on how much a learner invests his time, energy and money in it. The latter part of the paper aims at exploring the possibilities of more efficient and effective language learning in China’s context with the application of the theory of identity and language in language teaching practice after distinguishing the differences between an ESL context such as in Canada and an EFL learning context such as in China; hence, suggestions on how to apply the identity theory in Chinese teaching practice are put forward as the final part.

Key terms: language theory, identity, imagined community, language acquisition, Chinese context

Introduction

Since the eighteenth century, great changes have taken place in language theories and language teaching pedagogy. During this period of time, scholars and linguists have conducted lots of researches on establishing the origin of language, the nature of language; hence, some language theories have been put forward as productive results such as the structural view of language, the communicative view and the interactional view, etc. With different theories proposed and established, different teaching methodology was investigated and discussed in response. The past two hundred years witnessed many language teaching approaches, such as Audiolingual Method, Total Physical Response and the Silent Way, the Communicative Approach and the Natural Approach, etc. All these approaches or methods mainly focus on language skill training. But with the social development and international relationships changed, the situation of second language or foreign language learning is changing to meet the specific demand of language. At the end of the last century, with the development of technology and the wide use of the Internet, some scholars and experts were fond of autonomous learning by means of exploiting learning resources and materials on the Internet. Teaching practice is learner-centered, with teacher’s role as monitor and supervisor. Lots of researches have been done on how to use the materials on the Internet, how to build up learner’s autonomy in language classroom and how to define teacher’s role when the learning process is learner-centered. Great achievements have been attained.

Theory of Identity and Language

The comparatively new theory on language and the new exploration in language teaching is the poststructuralist

theory, which is built on the structuralist theories on language but is distinct from structuralist theory. Poststructuralists take the position that “the signifying practices of societies are sites of struggle and that linguistic communities are heterogeneous arenas characterized by conflicting claims to truth and power”. The focus of the poststructuralists is on identity and language learning.

When a language learner asks “Who am I? How do I relate to the social world? Under what conditions can I speak?” he is seeking to understand the complex relationship among identity, language and learning. When a language learner interacts with a member of the target language group, he is not only searching for words, phrases and idiomatic expressions, but also asking to what extent he will be able to impose reception on his interlocutor. Therefore, language learning engages the identities of learners, because language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols; it is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to an utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks. This view on language is interesting. It not only focuses on the mastery of the linguistic system of signs and symbols, but lays emphasis on the relationship between learners and language, learners’ identities and learning. More social and psychological concepts are adopted and combined to produce a sound way to learn language. Several researchers have made influential experiments in this field. What they have made and reached provide teachers and learners a new and insightful enlightenment to language learning.

Poststructuralist Bakhtin takes the position that language needs to be investigated not as a set of idealized forms independent of their speakers or their speaking, but rather as situated utterances in which speakers, in dialogue with others, struggle to create meanings. One interesting thing is that he sees all speakers constructing their utterances jointly, on the basis of their interaction with listeners, in both historical, contemporary, and actual and assumed communities. Another well-known poststructuralist is Pierre Bourdieu, a contemporary French sociologist, who focuses on the unequal relationships between interlocutors and the importance of power in structuring speech. In his opinion, “When a person speaks, the speaker wishes not only to be understood, but to be ‘believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished’”. In order to stress the inequality in interlocutors, he argues that the communicative competence should include “the right to speech” or “the power to impose reception”. Gunther Kress plays an equally important role in poststructuralist theory. He shares a similar language theory to Bourdieu’s in that he sees social relationships as central to his theory of language. He thinks “Language always happens as text, and as text, it inevitably occurs in a particular generic form. That generic form arises out of the action of social subjects in particular social situations.” (Kress 1993: 27) Like Bourdieu, Kress stresses that language theories of language can not be developed apart from the understanding of social relationships and social relationships are rarely constituted on equal terms.

Wegner’s proposal of “imagined community”

Considering language in terms of assuming social relationships, and assuming that the intention of speech is to assume the power to impose reception, researchers have begun to investigate the relationship between identity, language, and learning. They consider language learning is a socioculturally situated social practice, and second language learning is a relational activity that occurs between specific speakers situated in specific sociocultural contexts. Not seeing learners as independent individual language producers, but members of particular social and historical communities, the anthropologist Jean Lave and Etienne Wegner argue that “Learning is an integral and inseparable part of social practice”. They view that communities are composed of participants who differentially engage with the practices of their communities and this engagement or participation in practice is “learning”. From this perspective of view, educational research might focus on the social structures in particular

communities and on the variety of positions available for learners to occupy in those communities.

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger stress that it is through co-participation in community practice that learners learn. As nonparticipation appears in classroom, researchers are trying to figure out “What community practices do learners who withdraw from classroom activity seek to learn? What, in deed, constitutes the community for them?” In response, Wenger proposed the concept of “imagined community” which helps to explain the learners’ acts of resistance. With regard to the participation and nonparticipation in the community practices, Wenger hypothesizes that there are three modes of belonging, called engagement, imagination and alignment, respectively. By imagination, he means “the extent to which we create images of the world and see connections through time and space by extrapolating from our experience.” Although learners are engaged in classroom activities, the realm of their community extended to the world outside of the classroom – their imagined community. Imagined communities refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible accessible, with whom we connect through the power of imagination.

Norton’s contributions

Greatly inspired by the notion of “imagined community”, Norton tries to investigate further how the notion of imagined community might enhance our understanding of language learning and identity by exploring the examples of two immigrants’ language learning process. Norton contributes much to the investigation on imagined community and educational possibilities, while her notion “investment” rather than motivation in language learning opens a new door for language teaching. She takes the position that if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. By symbolic resources, she means such resources as language, education and friendship, whereas the term material resources refer to capital goods, real estate, and money. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on the investment in that language that will give them access to unattainable resources. The learner’s investment in language learning is also an investment in learner’s own identity. Norton also illustrates the relationship among the imagined community, the investment and language learning.

Reflections on the possibilities of the application of the identity and language theory in Chinese context.

We believe that there is a strong tie between investment and language learning. If the second language is considered very necessary and useful, and it will bring the learner the resources he dreams of, such as higher education, lifelong friendship, respectable social status and fortune, the learner will be willing to invest time and energy in the language learning and will try to make great efforts to learn, with high motivation.

Most of the experiments and investigation on identity and language learning are conducted in the Western World, with the aim to help immigrants (for example, in the United States) to learn English as a second language more efficiently, which certainly may be different from learning English in Chinese context where English is a foreign language but not a second language. The differences are as follows. Firstly, the physical environment for learning is quite different. Students in the United States have frequent contact with English. Nearly all of the people around the students are English speakers, so in their daily life, students are exposed to the target language any time and any place. They have every chance to use English, chances range from daily purchase to important decision making, so evidently English is considered a part of life, they can do nothing without the language skills. Undoubtedly, the motivation to learn is comparatively high, as a result, they would like to invest in it, for at least, language will help them survive the society and make their living much more conveniently.

In contrast, the chance for Chinese students to learn and use English is only confined to language classroom besides materials available in the library. Students have the only access to English by listening to teachers and taking notes and practicing oral English by talking with their classmates and Chinese English teachers in class, who may present not so authentic English as native speakers do, which may result in low motivation. But the key point for Chinese students' low motivation may attribute to the fact that they can live conveniently without English, they can accomplish a good job without English, they can earn a big sum of money without English, etc. In a word, English is not essential and a necessity in their daily life, and thus their learning motivation may be low. Secondly, the environment of language classroom is different. There is a widely accepted distinction between ESL and EFL contexts based on whether English is spoken by the host community or not in which English is being learned or taught. When the host community is primarily an English speaking community, then it is considered an ESL context as in Australia; when the host community is not English-speaking, then an EFL context as in China. In ESL countries like the United States and Canada, there are adequate professional language teachers and trainers. Language is taught in a small classroom with about 15 students. Thus, every student has enough chance to practice English. While in China, English is a compulsory course, every student is required to learn English, so English teachers are in great demand. But in fact, English teachers only account for a small proportion compared with so many students. There is a great imbalance in number between English teachers and English learners. As a result, English is usually taught in a big class with forty students or more, also it is not surprising to see English is taught in a class with more than sixty students. Accordingly, it will be hard to organize teaching activities to offer each student enough chance to practice English, therefore, students have much less chance to practice English, which may again result in inefficiency and low motivation.

Although the situation of English learning in China are different from that in English speaking countries, from the perspective of identity and language learning, it is still possible to improve students' English proficiency by motivating their interests in learning by means of establishing their identity in classroom or at school. School or classroom is a small community, in which every student assumes certain responsibility and plays a certain role. Every student hopes he can do something to make himself known to others, and attain power to speak. If he fails to do so, or if he can not find a good way to do so, he may remain silent in classroom, day by day, he may probably be neglected by teachers and other classmates. In a sense, his identity fails to be established. From this perspective, the teacher needs to be aware of the situation and intends to help the student to establish his identity in class. Teacher can purposely create chances for the students to show his talent before the class in order to help him regain his confidence or teacher can assign tasks to let him serve the class so as to help him realize he is an important member in class, and he does not study in isolation. As a result, the student may build a harmonious relationship with classmates and be willing to engage in classroom activities. With his identity established, he may be highly motivated and try to learn well.

From the point of view of investment, it is also workable to motivate students to learn by informing them of the potential resources that language may bring to them. For most students, they see no chance to work in an international company or work in a transnational corporation as his career in the future. They don't think English is useful and practical, and English is of no sense to them at all, so they consider it unnecessary to put efforts to learn English. For these students, it is advisable to make them willing to invest in English learning by helping them realize that with English increasingly becoming an international language there are many possibilities for them to work in a foreign company and, anyone who has high English proficiency is likely to find a better job with a higher pay. Investing in English learning is rewarding and profitable, which may make the higher education come true; build a lifelong friendship; earn a respectable social status; and make a fortune.

Meanwhile, the government may create a better English learning environment and atmosphere by providing more chances such as organizing social activities for students to take part in and learn. Thus, both Chinese English teachers and English learners can benefit a lot from the theory of identity and language.

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