"Business is Business": Constructing cultural identities in a persuasive writing task

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

In tandem with increasing attention to sociocultural contexts of learning, ESP researchers and practitioners have in recent years begun to advocate bringing into focus learners' identity, especially cultural identity, to further ESP's needs-responsive practice (Belcher, 2012; Belcher & Lukkarila, 2011). However, the research on cultural identity has for a long time tended either to essentialize cultural identity as being unified, permanent, and bounded to and by national culture or to romanticize it as readily selectable. Drawing upon the critical realist perspective (Archer, 2007; Block, 2013), this study analyzed 65 Chinese university students' discursive and meta-discursive acts in a simulated business writing task, including pre-writing group discussions, individual request writing, and post-writing reflective essays. By examining the (in) consistencies in these discursive and meta-discursive acts, the study revealed the multiple layers of cultural identities that the students constructed, co-constructed, and negotiated in the process. While the students seemed able to exercise agency in an attempt to claim ownership of Anglophone discourse in writing requests, they were unable to resist or undo the cultural stereotypes that make them feel culturally inferior. Implications for research and teaching in ESP and intercultural communication/rhetoric are discussed.

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1. Introduction

For decades, identity has not been the focus of ESP teaching and research (Flowerdew, 2011). Rather, the focus has been directed toward analyzing and meeting students' linguistic and communicative needs as exclusively defined by the learning of standardized generic features rather than also including liberating features for specific purposes. In recent years however, in tandem with increasing attention to the sociocultural contexts of learning, ESP researchers and practitioners have begun to advocate bringing into focus learners' identity, especially cultural identity, to further ESP's needs-responsive practice (Belcher, 2012; Belcher & Lukkarila, 2011). The scope of needs analysis, as Belcher and Lukkarila (2011) argue, needs to be broadened to consider "not just what learners want to be able to **do** in a language but also who they want to **become** through language" (p. 89, original emphasis).

Cultural identity is however a slippery and evolving notion; some recent reviews carve out the theoretical development of this notion from essentialist to social constructivist, and currently to critical realist (e.g., Belcher & Lukkarila, 2011; Block, 2013; Holliday, 2010a; Young & Sercombe, 2010). For quite a long time, culture has been essentialized as being unified and permanent, and cultural identity as being bounded to and by national culture. Even today, Hofstede's (1980, 2001) and E. Hall (1976)'s

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cultural theories are still among the most influential and the most cited theoretical frameworks in the literature of intercultural communication (Cardon, 2008), and Kaplan's (1966) doodles on culturally bound writing patterns still have a significant impact on teaching and researching second language writing. Doubts, however, have been cast on them from research and socio-political perspectives in recent years. Cardon (2008), for example, critiqued E. Hall's model as being "unsubstantiated and underdeveloped" (p. 399), for Hall did not provide any descriptions of how the rankings of cultures from low-context (LC) to high-context (HC) were conceptualized, or whether rigorous methods such as sampling techniques, triangulation, or review by inquiry participants were used in the data collection. While Cardon's critique of Hall's cultural model points to questions regarding research validity, Holliday's (2010a, 2010b) critique of Hofstede's model is more from a geopolitical perspective. In Holliday's view, cultural dichotomies such as individualism versus collectivism, although seemingly neutral, are in effect ideologically constructed, as they project an idealized Western Self versus a non-western "Other" bounded by tradition and groupism. In an exploratory study, Holliday (2010a) interviewed 28 participants who had confronted the issue of culture through travel, marriage, or immigration, and asked them about the major features of their cultural identity and the role nation plays in it. His findings indicated that national culture exerted only a minor influence while "small" cultures, such as religion, ethnicity, class, workplaces, and even artifacts, such as clothing, play a more important role in their cultural identities.

Indeed, the globalization in this century, in combination with the rapid development of the Internet, has given rise to the exposure of people to multiple cultural influences that extend beyond the national culture. This development had led to "the blending of a diverse set of cultural repertoires" (Rubdy, 2009, p. 166) that makes it difficult to define cultures and cultural identities in exclusive ways. The social constructivist understanding of culture identities as being fluid, hybrid, and complex, defying pre-categorization, is now widely accepted (Holliday, 2010a, 2010b; Young & Sercombe, 2010), especially among language educators, who see individuals as "agentive, strategic and reflective beings" (Fairclough, 2006, p. 163), able to negotiate their identities to their advantage when facing unequal sociocultural orders (e.g., Canagarajah, 2013; Grimshaw, 2010; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Phan, 2009). Phan (2009), for example, described how eight Asian international students studying at a university in Thailand proactively took ownership of English to their own advantage and resisted being described as uncritical, passive, and obedient Asian Other. Their confident "colonization" of English created a "third space" (Kramsch, 1993) for them, in which they reclaimed their "Asian" identities, and produced and reproduced their multiple identities in complex and dynamic ways. Similarly, the Chinese students in Grimshaw's (2010) ethnographic study were observed to engage in acts of "crossing" (Rampton, 2005), creatively appropriating "Western" discourses in communicative events such as "international evenings" and "debate contests", and in so doing, negotiating hybrid identities and producing contradictory subjectivities.

In many cases, we can indeed see the work of agency in successfully choosing, enacting, and negotiating a range of identities. However, how agentive can an individual be in intercultural communication if s/he comes from a geolinguistically and economically "periphery" country (Wallerstein, 1991), given the prominent status of English as the lingua franca and the varying value scales indexed by different forms of English (Canagarajah, 2013)? The above two cases of competent negotiation of multiple cultural identities (Grimshaw, 2010; Phan, 2009) both occur, as we can see, among in-group members of peripheral communities, in other words, in a safe environment with no obvious power differentials. By contrast, Liu's (2011) study described a semester-long cross-national email writing activity in which Taiwanese undergraduates found themselves caught in a power differential when communicating with American counterparts because of their perceived inferiority in linguistic and cultural status. As a result, some Taiwanese students resorted to passive strategies, such as delaying responses or changing from an informal to a formal writing style, to negotiate the power differential. Liu's study testifies to Collier's (2005) view that cultural identity theory should not imply that individuals can freely select their cultural identities in chameleon-like fashion and neglect the unequal global order, social hierarchies, and other contextual constraints.

In an in-depth discussion of the theoretical tension between structure and agency, Block (2013) points out that the literature on identity has tended to prime agency over social structure. The pedagogical motivation to empower periphery learners and resist "othering" could be an explanation. In Gao's (2014) conceptualization, the identity prototypes of L2 learners/users of English, "as embedded in research discourses" (p. 59), have developed in the past half century from *faithful imitator* who strictly models L2 use and cultural conduct on native speakers, to *legitimate speaker* who claims equal language standards and rights with native speakers and *playful creator* who creatively constructs hybrid language use for self-expression, and finally to *dialogical communicator* who has the reflexibility to transcend the self-other dichotomy and embrace cultures with openness and criticalness. The latter three identity prototypes have clearly recognized and given weight to the exercise of agency. However, as Gao observes, the *legitimate speaker* and *playful creator* "appear to be powerful in L2 research, but may remain quite powerless in social reality" (p. 68); for example, the creative language use is mostly seen and allowed only in "marginal" domains such as recreation or informal talk rather than in major domains such as politics and education. And the development of the *dialogical communicator* "is yet to come" if a nurturing environment is granted (p. 72).

Therefore in this paper, we aim to examine the role of agency in EIL (English as International Language) learners' cultural identity construction, and attempt to unravel the socio-cultural factors that have a bearing on students' identity construction. Drawing upon the critical realist perspective (Archer, 2007; Block, 2013), we refrain from prescribing or defining cultural identities on the one hand, and reject the "radical relativist narratives of intercultural 'becoming'" (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2012, p. 561) on the other. Echoing Jones (2013), we see cultural identity both as a verb and as a noun; in other words, we recognize the exercise of agency in choosing and negotiating identities, as well as the constraining effect of structure, such as the unequal center–periphery global order, or the local education system, on individuals' agency and reflexivity in constructing cultural identities. In order to analyze the complex identity construction process, we draw upon Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) interactional view that sees identity as constructed through social action, especially through language. Thus, in the