



English as a lingua franca and global identities: Perspectives from four second language learners of English in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a qualitative study that explored the perceptions of a group of advanced second language (L2) learners of English with respect to their desired identities as global citizens and their accent preferences in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) communication. Data were drawn from in-depth interviews with four case study participants from a Hong Kong university who explicitly expressed their desire to enact a 'global' identity in ELF contexts. The analysis shows that despite their identification with the global community, these L2 learners held rather different views about what they meant by their own global identities in ELF communication. It was also found that their accent preferences varied considerably among the participants. The findings of the study suggest that the expression of a global identity in ELF contexts is not necessarily perceived to be associated with any particular accents of English.

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1. Introduction

Research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been gaining considerable attention in the field of applied linguistics in recent years (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011). As English has now become a global language, it is increasingly used by speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds for intercultural communication. Given that second language (L2) speakers of English outnumber native speakers of English in today's globalized world, most ELF communication takes place among L2 speakers themselves, often without the involvement of any native speakers. In the last decade or so, one of the main focuses in ELF research concerns the issue of identity (Jenkins, 2007; Li, 2009; Sung, 2013a). For example, given the trend of globalization, some researchers argue that many L2 learners and speakers of English around the world may desire a global identity which gives them a sense of belonging to a worldwide culture in ELF contexts (Arnett, 2002; Ryan, 2006). Another main research focus of ELF research is concerned with accent (Jenkins, 2000, 2007). As Walker (2010) suggests, the choice of accent involves various issues, not only phonological, but also sociological, psychological and political. As it is generally accepted that accent is inextricably related to one's identity, some ELF researchers argue that the accent which individual speakers choose to use expresses their identities in ELF communication (Jenkins, 2007). With a focus on both identity and accent, this paper reports findings from a study that examined a group of advanced L2 learners of English in

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Hong Kong¹ with respect to their perceptions of their identities as global citizens and their accent preferences when they engage in ELF communication.

2. Literature review

ELF refers to the use of English as a contact language for communication between speakers with different first-language (L1) and lingua-cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011). When these speakers use ELF with each other, they also adapt the language in order to suit their own lingua franca purposes in specific contexts (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011). While ELF is largely conceived of as a tool for intercultural communication, Baker (2011, p. 46) suggests that ELF is “neither a culturally impoverished nor identity neutral form of communication”. It is therefore important to investigate the issue of identity of L2 learners and speakers when they are engaged in ELF communication.

Identity, according to Norton (1997, p. 408), is concerned with “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future”. From the post-structuralist viewpoint, identity is not a fixed or predetermined category, but is conceptualized as dynamic, multiple and subject to changes (Norton, 1997). As Duff and Uchida (1997) aptly note, identity is contextually negotiated and transformed on an ongoing basis. When L2 learners speak English, they are also negotiating and reorganizing their sense of self in relation to the rest of the world. Furthermore, identity is often seen as a site of struggle for L2 learners (Norton, 1997), given that speaking an L2 often entails “a struggle to forge a new identity that is true to self” (van Lier, 2007, p. 47). For the purpose of the present study, identity is primarily understood as “self-definition by groups or individuals” (Edwards, 2009, p. 258).

In the era of globalization where English is losing its national cultural base (Dornyei & Csizer, 2002; Canagarajah, 2005), the issue of identity has become more complex than ever. A wider range of linguistic identities are available at the disposal of different L2 learners and speakers. For example, some L2 users may wish to express their L1 and/or national identities in ELF communication. As Polz (2003) puts it, L2 speakers can ‘export’, appropriate or re-invent their cultural identities in ELF settings. Alternatively, some L2 users may wish to signal their belonging to a wider global ELF community. In the latter case, they often associate their use of English with a sense of a ‘global identity’ and develop a desire to become ‘global citizens’. According to Arnett (2002), a global identity often involves an awareness of one’s relation to the global culture. Similarly, Yashima (2002, p. 57) suggests that a global identity is related to ‘international posture’, which is seen to be made up of an “interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and, one hopes, openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude towards different cultures”. In addition, according to Pennycook (2007), the expression of identity among L2 speakers may be tied up with identification with both local and global contexts. For example, L2 speakers could express individual, local, national and global cultures and identities in dynamic, hybrid and emergent ways (Baker, 2011).

In one study, for example, Lamb (2004, p. 3) found that young Indonesian learners of English appear to aspire towards “an English-speaking globally involved version of themselves in addition to their local L1 speaking self”. Another study revealed that German learners of English saw the possibility of “redefining their sense of national identity in reference to the local, national, European and/or global communities they identify with” (Erling, 2007, p. 128). However, it should also be acknowledged that struggles and tensions inevitably accompany the construction of a global identity that may co-exist with local and/or national identities (Lamb, 2004). As such, the desire to become a global citizen in ELF contexts may not necessarily be a universal aspiration among all L2 learners and speakers (Roger, 2010).

Accent, in particular, is considered a powerful linguistic marker of identity in ELF communication (cf. Crystal, 2003; Luk & Lin, 2006). Several ELF scholars argue that L2 learners and speakers are entitled to the right to express their L1 identity through their L1-influenced accent (Jenkins, 2000). For example, Jenkins (2003, p. 125) suggests that L2 speakers “frequently voice a desire to preserve something of their L1 accent as a means of expressing their own identity in English rather than identifying it with its L1 English users”. As a result, she considers it insensitive to expect L2 speakers to get rid of their L1 accent, since the maintenance of their L1 accent in English can be attributed to their “conscious and subconscious feelings of L1 group identity” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 208). In addition, Kirkpatrick (2007) suggests that preservation of L2 speakers’ distinct accents may help L2 speakers establish a sense of identity in their own varieties of English. From the ELF perspective, therefore, L2 learners and speakers should be allowed to speak English with their distinct L1 accents that express their origins in lingua franca contexts (Jenkins, 2000, 2007).

In a study on the relationship between accent and identity in ELF, Jenkins (2007) investigated non-native EFL teachers’ identity choice in English by carrying out in-depth semi-structured interviews with seventeen EFL teachers of different nationalities. Her study found that these non-native EFL teachers expressed mixed feelings about their membership of an international ELF community or an ‘L1 identity’ in their L2 English. In particular, these teachers were found to desire “a

¹ Hong Kong is considered an interesting site for investigation since it is a cosmopolitan city in Asia where English serves as the major lingua franca for intercultural communication with people from the rest of the world (Sung, 2010, 2011). In addition to the English-language speech community primarily made up of native speakers from ‘inner circle’ countries, there is a sizable population of settlers and sojourners from continental Europe and other parts of Asia, especially the Philippines and Thailand (Evans, 2011).

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