Rediscovering identity: a more generous reality for Hong Kong pre-service non-native English teacher communicators participating in an immersion program at two Australian universities.

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Abstract

Identity and images of self that non native English speaking teachers have of themselves often separate teaching from language and is premised on technical communication expertise with English language. However, there remains a capacity for their identity and images of self to change and reflect a counter discourse because identity is something that 'each age and society recreates…over historical, social, intellectual and political processes that take place as a contest involving individuals and institutions' (Said, 1995).

This paper reports on research that critically examines ways in which Hong Kong pre-service teachers undertaking an immersion attachment at two Australian universities, have through collective and individual processes of making, remaking and negotiating their identity, begun processes that allow them to conceive of themselves as other than what constitutes efficiency in language learning and communication. It reveals how they draw on continuing links with their locations as they rediscover and reconstitute their identity beyond the binary division of self and the other. It further reveals much about an ongoing dilemma encountered in similar instructional settings where international non native speakers of English enrol. This dilemma relates to charting a course that favours a counter narrative avoiding the divisions of humanity into 'us' and 'them' and is premised on discovering a more generative and generous reality in teaching and learning.

Introduction

Images of self that non native English speakers (NNES) preparing to become English language teachers are constructed and modified by their personal experiences, their own history, relationships with colleagues and students and within the community (Lasky, 2005; Day, Kingston, Stobart and Sammons (2006). The images of self that NNES teachers have taken up and initially bring to pre-service training programs, often assume a reductive self image based on questions of what constitutes a communication technical efficiency in learning and teaching contexts (Medgyes, 1994). Such a belief has always run the risk of reducing notions of valued language communication to arbitrarily selected features of pronunciation, grammar and lexicon (Kramsch, 1998). It further risks both being bound up with its particular context and also determined by that context. (Ashcroft, 2001). Over time, such a reductive language communicator self image does not encourage NNES students to see themselves as free agents having a capacity to negotiate their different subjectivities and ideologies. It also does not encourage the freedom to adopt a subject position favourable to their empowerment… (Canagerajah, 1999: 29; Gao, 2008).

However, there has always been a capacity to resist such a totalising self image because all cultures and societies construct identity 'out of a dialect self and other, the subject "I" who is native, authentic, at home and the object 'it' or 'you' who is foreign, perhaps threatening, different, out there' (Fanon, 1986: 40). As Canagarajah (2005) explained, only recently have identities been understood as 'multiple, conflictual, negotiated and evolving… and that identities are not static'. By taking into account that there are always going to be parts of the social experience that do not cover and control how people both resist arbitrarily selected features used to label and value them and produce their own, it is possible to acknowledge human agency (Pennycook, 1998:48; Lasky, 2005).

The process of using language to acknowledge human agency to express NNES lived in experience as opposed to a comparative notion of the Other, is often not heard as a component of an ongoing resistance against the dominant discourse (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 2001: 107; Said 1994: xii). Resistance in this sense means far more than a simplistic conflation with oppositionality, retaining a binary relationship between others. Rather, the concept means favouring a more generous human reality and a world not constructed out of 'warring essences' (Said, 1994: 276). This conceptualisation of resistance makes it possible to recognise that all people have multiple identities that allow them to think beyond their local identities.

In this paper, I reflect on changes pre-service students made in relation to their English language self images. I draw on the Said's strategy for resistance that encapsulates a twofold process of recovering a geographical territory or 'voyaging in' and secondly changing the cultural territory or 'writing back' (1994: 252). Resistance then becomes a process of rediscovery and repatriation of what has been suppressed.

The project focus

This paper reports on changing pre-service Hong Kong teachers' self images during a semester length immersion program at two Australian universities: Curtin and Monash. It reveals journeys that the participants in the study undertook. These journeys were made up of events linked to the immersion experience that supported them to shed most of their debilitating technical language self images and comprehend truths about their own social situation as English communicators (Said, 1993: 258).

Background to the study

The study was conducted over a 6 month period among a second year cohort of Bachelor of Education students, preparing to be specialist Hong Kong Primary school English language teachers. The Hong Kong and Australian academics who planned the immersion program anticipated that through the provision of home stay accommodation, varied social and cultural activities, two semester length academic courses (Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers and Pragmatics) and an elective, usually Drama, the students would strengthen their knowledge of language, people and culture as well as increase their general confidence and world view (http://www.ied.edu.hk/eng/student/BEdLT.htm).

All volunteering students grew up in Cantonese speaking families and communities. English generally entered their lives when they began kindergarten. Some participants attended 'Chinese Medium of Instruction' secondary schools where English was taught formally while some had attended' English Medium of Instruction' secondary schools where all subjects were taught in English, although English was a formal subject. They were all taught English by Local English teachers (LET) although some students had had Native English Teachers (NET) for weekly English lessons for some of their secondary schooling. NETs have been appointed to secondary schools as part of the Native English Teacher scheme implemented in Hong Kong in its present form since 1998. This scheme along with a similar scheme implemented in 2002 in Hong Kong primary schools, recruits NETs to enhance the teaching of English by acting as resource persons assisting in school-based English specialist teacher development and to foster an enabling environment for students to practice their oral English skills (Storey et al., 2001).

English was the language of instruction used in pre-service lectures in Hong Kong, but often Cantonese was used in tutorials. The lectures at the Australian universities were all in English and students could only communicate with their Australian lecturers, tutors, fellow students and the wider community in English.

Methodology

Introduction
The main means of data collection was through semi structured interviews held pre departure as well as during and after the immersion experience. Semi structured interviews were selected because they allowed for an in-depth probing of the informants experiences and responses. The interview questions focused on how:
  ➢ the students perceived of themselves as emerging English language professionals
  ➢ specific experiences and practices had shaped this perspective
  ➢ immersion experiences had impacted on their perceptions of 'self' as emerging English language professionals.(see appendix 1).

Sampling
The researcher approached the cohort of students (29) undertaking this Australian immersion study. Eight students took part in the three interviews, including 3 students who would attend Curtain University and 5 students who would attend Monash University. Student identities remained anonymous.

Data collection
The researcher conducted the first round of pre-departure interviews soon after the initial pre-departure information sessions. The second round of interviews was conducted in Australia by an academic staff from Hong Kong Institute of Education who liaised with the Australian universities and visited the students. Finally a third round of post interviews was held when the students returned to Hong Kong. Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes, was conducted individually in English in a quiet setting.

The semi open questions were based on observations, discussions with colleagues and readings the researcher had previously engaged in as well as at that time being the designated HKIEd staff support for students in country.

Data analysis
The researcher adapted a form of Hycner's (1985) phenomonological analysis of interview data because it presents a way of reducing and analysing data as an investigative approach to remain 'true' to the phenomenon and not compromise its integrity. The approach required the use of 'processes' to understand the meaning of what had been said in interviews in its own right. This included listening initially for a sense of the whole (gestalt) before determining general units of meaning. The term general meaning units meant getting at the essence of meaning expressed to the researcher including verbal and non verbal communication. The general units of meaning were then addressed to the research issue outlined in the introduction to determine if the participants responses addressed this. Some units were eliminated as they were redundant but others were retained and reviewed to identify common clusters of meaning. The common clusters of meaning were reviewed to determine if they could become central themes, common to all interviews. It then required a validity check by returning to the participants to determine if the summaries and themes were correct and possible corrections being made.

The Participants responses have not been altered for linguistic accuracy.

Findings

From the students responses it is possible to identify those experiences that reveal where more generous realities of community among cultures, people and societies are possible (Said, 1994: 262).

1. *A master narrative – pre departure*

From the pre-departure interviews it was clear that many students' English language identity reflected their past experiences and what Medgyes (1994) called the 'dark side of being a non native language teacher'. These students had taken up perceptions of comparative linguistic inferiority with native speakers, drawing on native speakers linguistic skills. The comparison students drew, reflected a shortfall in their own language skills that they believed were necessary to communicate as effective professionals (Day, Kingston, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). It also reflected, as Borg (2003) found elsewhere, that Participants referred to their grammar skills as a shortfall because they had prioritised their past learning experiences at school with NETs over their more recent experiences as a pre-service teachers in Hong Kong.

Participant A said:

> I am not fluent enough to communicate with native speakers. I am worried my English is a bit Hong Kongish and I think my fluency, pronunciation and oral language is weaker than that used by the NET's.

Participant B added:

> For me, my accent is not so accurate compared with the NET's. English is my second language. Further, I am weak at listening and a bit scared to handle conversations with native speakers.

Again from Participant C:

> I am a local teacher. I think my grammar is good as is my written language. Of course my pronunciation and oral may be weaker than those of the NET. It is true that students can pronounce the words with more intonation and accuracy of accent if they are taught by a NET.

Participant C felt that she:

> …can talk more with my home stay family but because we will spend most time with them. My word knowledge is strong but my accent is weak as well as my pronunciation. I am a little scared that they will speak too fast and I will lose meaning.

British English has long been and is still the model and norm presented to English language students in Hong Kong (Braine, 1999). It is understandable that students express a preference to speak English like native speakers (Bottom and Kwok, 1990). Such a preference is premised on the view that 'native' English speakers are superior English language teachers because their language is:

> Normative irrespective of the diverse contexts of communication; that the corruption of the language can be arrested by the prescriptive role of the native speaker and
that   language acquisition is conditioned by the dialect of the teacher to which the student is exposed (Canagarajah, 1999:80).

It would appear that the students had taken up a subjective position on their language proficiency based on technical efficiency and expressed as a lack of fluency, uncertainty about the appropriacy of their language use, underdeveloped listening and speaking skills and a lack of familiarity with most idiomatic and colloquial Englishes. They also expressed a comparative notion of inferiority based on their belief that there were 'desirable' language skills and these were necessary if they were to have the status of an effective and proficient communicator in a first language context.

Despite the above, the pre-departure interviews also provided a glance into those parts of their social experience that went beyond linguistic proficiency. Participant F expressed a degree of confidence to use English in situations she had found herself in. She indicated that:

> Actually, I think that we can communicate. We can use verbal and body language. But maybe the grammar is not very accurate. But we can transfer meaning, I think.

She was joined by Participant G. He said:

> I think the basic communication is OK for me. For instance, if you want to make friends with others, you have to talk a lot more about your feelings. Maybe not good enough my English but basically that is ok.

Then Participant F added in relation to:

> …cultural contrasts between different nations. Maybe different people have their own habits of doing things. Yes, I do not think the communication problem is the main issue, just the cultural contrasts.

These two participants had encountered contradictions and complexities related to beliefs and experiences they held as they realised that their world as English communicators is made up of multiple identities. It is in the processes of negotiating the constructions of their multiple identities that there is the potential to challenge, remap and renegotiate the master narrative boundaries of as well as provide a space where the process of revision can begin. It is from this place the potential to discover new ways of seeing reality and the frontiers for difference is revealed (hooks, 1990).

2a.   Border Crossings - during immersion

While it was not possible at this time for participants to ignore aspects of technical efficiency linked to their language proficiency, some participants had clearly begun during the immersion experience, to 'voyage out' from under a binary opposite position premised on 'us' or non native speaker and 'them' or native speaker. Yet, for others this was not evident at this time.

For Participant G, this process was underway during his immersion experience. He said:

> that other non Australian students could communicate with the Australian students in class. The Chinese and Arab students did not speak English as a first language. I began to think that it did not matter that I have a funny accent as others understand what I can say. In fact I now believe that no one can tell immediately from my accent where I come from. What is important is that I speak in English.

By drawing on the work of Bhadha (1986), it is possible to argue that for NNESs such as Participant G that he was beginning to voyage out and take up a position for himself beyond language proficiency. The diverse contexts of being a NNES student at an Australian university revealed that he was becoming aware of a new space to think about his English language identity. Participant G had confronted his former English language identify and was beginning to develop understandings about how previously held perceptions and identities based on proficiency could both privilege and exclude him. He did not begin by expressing his 'poor' language communication skills. Nor did he believe that there could be an inferior homogenous language status for of all NNES. His identity formation was changing based on his immersion experience. For him, what was important was that he was taking part in the social life around him and was speaking in English.

It is from this point that the potential for 'writing back' and discovering a more generous reality is revealed. Participant G's identity could only be explained a desire to engage with the social situations that presented themselves and that for him, there were no privileging positions.

2b.   Intertwining and overlapping territories – during immersion

From the differing social situations Participant E found herself in during the immersion experience, a new space for thinking and acting in and around language began to emerge for her. At that time, she spoke about how her identity as a NNES communicator had been recreated within a complex relationship of diverse influences:

> It was not so difficult as we thought. We can communicate. Our English is not good but we can communicate. We talked with our home stay families. We spend a lot of time with them. We also talked to friends that we met in Perth. In our university program, we talked to our lecturers. We also watched TV and there were no English subtitles and I had to depend on my listening skills. I used body language, facial expressions and gestures. I learned a lot about how to use English. Previously I had only read it in books. Over time I tried English out and I developed confidence.

As part of the process to recreate her identity, Participant E had begun to construct an identity in a variety of social interactions she took part in. This process was not an end point of how she saw herself because she will inevitably continue to develop a counter narrative as she further engages in social contexts that are new for her, creating a self image that reflects freedom from the perceptions that once marginalising her identity as a NNES.

A related experience was narrated by participant A who also revealed a developing counter narrative made up of various themes that for her played off one against the other resulting in a degree of heightened social consciousness and confidence as she engaged in her immersion experience. She said:

> When I first arrived, it was hard to express myself. I could express myself briefly but I wanted to have more discourse but I did not know how to say it in English. I went to church with my host mum. Sometimes she introduced me to the other people. When I listened and talk to them, they are so helpful and try their best to explain to us. Now I can say 'Hello' to everyone on the streets. They helped us be confident.

By initially operating within the reductive discourse that she had taken up, she inhabited an inherited identity. However during her immersion, she had engaged in experiences that enabled her to scrutinise the 'self' of her inherited identity. The tension was still there but it was through this tension she was able to take up with that which gave her a sense of freedom and enabled her to develop a more generous reality for herself as a NNES.

2c.   Creating a space for agency – during immersion

During the immersion, some students developed the capacity critically confront a myriad of multiple identities that surrounded them as language communicators and reconstruct their own self image. Participant D had begun to take up a perspective that resonated with a personal theory of learning as she recreated her identity and a perspective that suggested she had begun to articulate a counter discourse:

> My face is Chinese. I show my new class mates that I am a Chinese person and that we can speak English. I am the first person from my town to show you this. I am here and I take part in discussions and attachment school just as other students can.

She has clearly questioned the criteria she previously used to judge herself as an English language communicator. It did not take her long to realise that there was never an idealised native speaker existing in a completely homogeneous speech community (Chomsky, 1965). And in part this gave confidence to take part in the life of her academic classes and beyond. She continued:

> When I was student in Hong Kong I think it is impossible for Chinese people to speak English fluently. At attachment school (Faculty of Education), I see many Chinese students who can do that. The criteria I use now is not how much vocabulary I know or how complicated and correct the grammar in sentences is. The important thing is communication. If you want to know more about people you are talking to, you will want to express yourself more and you will learn better.

She has begun to take up different criteria to judge herself as an English language communicator. Prior to the immersion, she had been sedimented in notions of cultural positivism that allowed only an analysis of questions of efficiency in learning and teaching and questions about the extent to which schools acted as agents of social and cultural reproduction based on grades (Giroux, 1983). She said:

> I was educated to avoid mistakes in my secondary school but in reality it is very common to make mistakes such as you forget to put a 's' on the end on plural nouns.

It was in her present location that she realised that what she had previously taken for granted as the hallmark of effective and idealised communicators who had according to Braine (1999) a better command of fluent, idiomatic, correct language forms, were more knowledgeable about cultural connotations of a language, and were the final arbiters of the acceptability of any given samples of language, was based on attempts to purify and standardise the English language native speakers used.
She had begun to 'write back' from the dominate discourse that had once shaped her identity as a marginalised 'Other'. She had begun to create a more generous space for her identity within that discourse (hooks, 1989).

3.   Post immersion

Participants on their return to Hong Kong continued to speak of their evolving confidence as English language communicators. Participant B said:

> I had a chance to use English in my daily life in Perth. I talked with my home stay family and also talked to friends that I met in Perth. I would say 'hello' and 'thank you' to the bus driver and I would say 'hello' to people in the streets. Sometimes I talked to them on the bus. I am confident to use English now. I now use it with my friends at HKIEd and in class with my professors. I am not afraid to speak English.

Participant B expressed an evolving confidence as a communicator in numerous social contexts. Her self image was being renegotiated as she could now think beyond her previous local identity taken up in Hong Kong.

It was not until the participants were probed about difficult situations they had found themselves in, did they reveal technical issues associated with their language proficiency. Participant A said:

> I think I lack vocabulary. For example when I arrived there, it was hard for me to express myself in class. I could express myself briefly, but maybe I want to have discourse, but I do not know how to say it in English.

Participant G added that sometimes he:

> was not able to understand what people were talking about. I do not know if it was because of their accent or because they speak too fast. Because I went to football with my host family, they introduced me to other people. When I listened to them, I sometimes cannot catch up.

How the participants spoke about linguistic issues they faced had changed. They did not consider an almost litany of a skills shortfall. Instead Participant A spoke about academic discourse which had remained an issue for her earlier. However, she had found by this time mid immersion that she could communicate confidently in the social contexts she found herself in. Her identity was now multiple, reflecting efficiency but also the need to communicate regardless. Participant G similarly referred to earlier experiences in the immersion and chose not to focus on former valued technical skills. Rather his concern was the speed at which social English was spoken. He was keen to participate but sometimes he found he was left behind. He was now keen to actively communicate and felt he could do this with friends he had made at the university.

Discussion

The students' responses throughout the immersion processes revealed the complex, multiple and at times the contradictory nature of their experiences in their changing locations. Specifically it revealed both 'colonising' and equally resilient influences at work throughout the immersion. Initially the predominant discourse of the 'native speaker fallacy' seemed to prevail (Medgyes, 1999). Participant A indicated a shortfall in her oral language fluency and 'Hong Kongish' pronunciation. Participant C added her perceptions of the desirability of being taught by native speakers. Their pre-departure perceptions emphasised the necessity of having technical language skills.

During the immersion experience, a new space for thinking and acting began to evolve where the participants were engaging in a different interplay of power and culture. Many participants indicated that they had begun to move beyond the 'normalising gaze' of binary opposites (McNally, 1994), creating an image of themselves as English communicators based on a need and desire to communicate in the variety of contexts.

What had become important at that time was how they reconciled the contradictions between beliefs they once held and a desire to communicate. They had to mediate between the complexity of beliefs they held about themselves and the knowledge that they were taking part in during the immersion to learn by active participation. It was at this crucial point that there was the potential to disrupt the dominating discourse they had taken up as their current experiences revealed how they could successfully inhabit the new contexts they found themselves in (Said, 1994).

For instance, while Participant G initially indicated that his English communication would support the needs of his basic social encounters, he also needed to communicate in a diversity of academic contexts at university. Before the immersion when he reviewed his language proficiency against 'native' speakers, he found he had accent and grammar shortfalls. However during the immersion, he had begun to take on a multiple identity beyond simplistic proficiency formulations he once accepted. He realised that other NNES were able to communicate effectively in class and that he could also. This realisation marked a significant development in the evolution of his self image. In the immersion experience, he actively took part in a wider community of English communicators. His confidence grew and expressed a more generous reality for himself as a non native speaker.

During the immersion, Participants E and A were confronting and contesting their former self images as language communicator in a complex relationship of diverse influences. They spoke of holding a social consciousness beyond the taken up consciousness they had arrived with.

Participant D's narrative was also significant in that she revealed where her immersion experience had provided a 'space' to reflect and name her identity. Her experiences enabled her to take up a position of strength. The expression of her identity had become part of her very being as she was able to account how she got to that point. It also reflected a more generous reality for her.

Further, by drawing on the work of Fannon (1986), it is possible to argue that Participant D is recreating an identity and consciousness in the process of 'decolonization'. Her subjectivity was like a web of intersecting threads that had been and were continuing to be determined in a relationship between herself and the larger social world of the immersion. This social world was mediated through a diversity of social interactions. Her former identity in Hong Kong and her experiences throughout the immersion as an English communicator have enabled her to question the beliefs and self image she once held. Her newly taken up identity is embedded in the world as well as her locale.

The participants' experiences during the immersion have encouraged them to imagine another world; a world in which they are able to confront and contest their belief of a skills shortfall without simply rejecting it. It is important to realise that how they continue to accommodate and resist will be an ongoing dynamic for them. The immersion experience has enabled them to take up a more generative edge in and around notions of value placed on on-NESLTs. It reveals that it is possible to develop a self image beyond that language proficiency to one that reflects the importance of having confidence and actively engaging in social and academic interactions, regardless.

Conclusions

This paper reports on a small scale study. There is much more to discover about how students have charted a course that favours taking up a more generous reality for NNES. There are some guiding principles that are important if NNES are to develop a consciousness of being confident communicators with the freedom to adopt a subject position favourable to their empowerment.

 What made up the immersion experience was of immediate, authentic and social concern for the students. They were surrounded by people with different first language backgrounds in divergent social and academic contexts. They needed and wanted to communicate in English with them as a normal part of their daily lives. When participants confronted and engaged in these social contexts, over time they discovered a potential and the support to create a new consciousness of themselves as English language communicators. It was in this experience that the participants confronted that what they had taken as a hallmark of an idealised communicator and they found that these perceptions could no longer sustained them. Instead they have found the potential to recreate for themselves multiple identities that allow them a more generous reality.

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Appendix one

Pre departure

- How do you feel about yourself as an English learner and communicator? (How do you imagine yourself with respect to English?
- One of the reasons for participating in the immersion is to improve your English. What do you think you will do when you are overseas to improve your English?
- What situations and contexts may you find the most difficult in which to use English?

During immersion

- How do you describe yourself as an English language learner / communicator?
- You have had many opportunities to use English now. Which ones do you find most difficult and why?
- How do you feel talking to local university and international students?
- Do you think that your overseas experience is changing how you feel about being an English communicator? Why?

Post immersion

- How do you now think of yourself as a learner and or communicator of English?
- What particular aspects of your university life were difficult?
- How do you feel now about using English with your fellow students?