

## ***British Students' Identity Transition in Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language***

Mengke Li, The University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

The European Conference on Language Learning 2019  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

This research focuses on investigating key identity transitions for a small number of British students studying Chinese in the UK as they experienced a placement abroad, learning Chinese in Mainland China or Taiwan. Eight British students who had studied Chinese in the China exchange programme at a Scottish university were invited to take part. Drawing on poststructuralist perspectives in establishing a theoretical position and narrative identity theory as a key conceptual frame, learners' experiences, beliefs and perceptions were explored in depth. The face to face semi-structured interview with students was utilised as the main research method. After analysing the data, three themes emerged: cultural identity shifts, motivation/investment, and influences. These themes reflected students' engagement with the target language and culture and their sense of self as they experienced Chinese and Chinese culture during their overseas study time and on their return. Finally, there was a discussion about different language power and identity when learning Chinese as a second/foreign language. Speaking a new language, is seen as the start of a new identity.

Keywords: Identity, Unbalanced Power, Investment

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Research Background**

China's increasing power economically has encouraged the development of Chinese Language Learning (CLL) and it is increasingly being seen as a strategic learning decision (Kecskes, 2013). While learning a language cannot be separated from identity and culture (Kanno, 2003; Riley, 2007; Jacob et al, 2015), which is applicable to both first and second/foreign language acquisition (SLA)/learning.

Norton is a very famous researcher in the field of language and identity, she (1995) uses the term identity to capture language learners' understanding of the relationship between the social world and themselves, how this kind of relationship is built through time and space, and how the learners predict the likelihood for the future. She (2013) also pointed out that when talking, the power between the language learner and the native speaker is unbalanced. In 1995, Norton extended the term motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), and pointed out the term investment, which signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language.

## **Methodological Framework**

I totally agree with Norton's (2010) perspective -- when learning a second language, it is not only a process of achieving linguistic knowledge, but also a social practice. Such perspective is rooted in poststructuralist theories of language, which originates in the structuralist theories of language (Saussure, 1966), but focuses on the individual and society, and takes the position that the symbolic practices of communities are places of struggle (Norton, 2010). Poststructuralist theories promote researcher to define identity as a way to understand the concept of who they used to be, who they are, who they are becoming, and the relationship between themselves and the social world, to construct the sense of self and sense of subjectivity through language learning (Norton, 1995).

A person's whole identity consists of varied narratives (Taylor, 2008), and the core element of narrative identity theory is the story, which means individuals construct his or her identity across their life through stories, which are told and retold about who they are and what they believe (McAdams, 2011). In other words, life narrative is the internalized and evolving story that can be constructed and reconstructed from past to now, and can be also imagined for the future (McAdams, 2001). According to this, using narrative identity theory as a conceptual frame to elucidate poststructuralist theories is a suitable and reasonable way to investigate the trajectory of the identity transition in the social context.

By learning from this, a qualitative approach is chosen, since the focus of my research is on individuals' journeys and narratives of participants. Through qualitative research, the data, which have been collected, could be more fully and deeply understood (Hamilton, 2013). Based on the aim of capturing the information about the case itself, rather than the whole phenomena (Hamilton and Corbett- Whittier, 2013), instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) is chosen, to define the whole small group as a case.

## Research Questions

As pointed out above, using poststructuralist perspectives in establishing a theoretical position and narrative identity theory as a key conceptual frame, I have investigated the experiences, beliefs and perceptions of the European students of Chinese at a Scottish university. The main research questions could be formulated as follows:

- How do these learners engage with the target language culture before and after studying in Mainland China/Taiwan?
- How does overseas experience influence these MA students' sense of self in their different educational and social communities?

## Participant

There are totally eight the UK participants from one famous Scottish university, including both undergraduates and postgraduates. Some of them chose Chinese as a major, and some did as a minor. All of them have been to China. Five of them are males, and three of them are females. The following table is about their detailed information.

Assumed name	Nationality	Gender	Programme	Time spent in China	Education background
John	The UK	M	PG-Master	1 Year and a half	Philosophy - Major Chinese - Minor
Adam	Slovenia (the UK resident)	M	PG-Master	1 Month	Computer Science - Major Chinese - Minor
Colby	The UK	M	PG-Master	One Year	Chinese - Major
Alice	The UK	F	UG	One Year	History - Major Chinese - Minor
Diana	The UK	F	UG	Two Years	Chinese - Major
Fairfax	The UK	M	UG	One Month	Chinese - Major
Fiona	The UK	F	UG	One Year	Chinese - Major
Payne	The UK	M	UG	One Year	Chinese - Major

(Note: The UK for the United Kingdom, PG for postgraduate, UG for undergraduate)

## Research Method – Semi-Structured Interview

According to Pavlenko (2001), L2 learning stories are 'heart and soul' sources about the relationship between language and identity in SLA research. There are two main ways of collecting L2 learning stories data. One is autobiographical accounts, the other one is about the field trip and interviews (Block, 2007). Thus, face to face semi-structured interviews with students will be the main method of data collection as well as my own field notes and documentary analysis, to explore their understandings, notions, beliefs towards identity and Chinese as a second language learning, as well as their cultural and linguistic self-positioning in different sociocultural contexts (Kanno, 2003).

### **Three Main Themes**

The data collection process lasted about two months. After transcribed all the interviews, I classified the data into ten raw categories, which are first impression of China, attitude towards Chinese culture, big difference (reflections on experience), uncomfortable moment, the reason for choosing Chinese as a major/minor, motivation/investment, benefit, personal change, international friendship, and future plan. By analysing and synthesising these categories, I developed three main themes, which are cultural identity, motivation/investment and influences. I will explain the data depending on these three themes below.

### **Open A Whole New World -- Learning Chinese**

*Why did I choose to learn Chinese?*

From eight participants, some of them have the travel experience before they chose to learn Chinese, some of them have relatives in China, some of them want to work in China because of the developing commercial and technical opportunities there, and some of them know nothing about China before they learned Chinese. They have various background about Chinese and Chinese culture, but when I asked them the reason to choose Chinese as a second or foreign language to learn, most of them gave me similar answers: *English and Chinese are quite different. I want to try something different. I am interested in the Chinese culture.*

That is to say, the big cultural distance (Lojeski & Reilly, 2008) between Chinese culture and British/European culture is the most interesting point that encourages them to learn Chinese language. From this reason, I can make an assumption that these participants have an open-minded cultural identity to accept different culture, or at least they are risk takers and have the curiosity to try something new. Otherwise, they would not choose an unfamiliar and difficult language to learn. However, many people could have curiosity to try at the beginning, but how can they persist? Like Fairfax said, *at the beginning maybe because interesting, but I never thought I could continue for so long.* This is the point of the investment (Norton, 2010), so now let us explore more about their Chinese learning experience both in the UK and China.

### **Learning Chinese is a Process with Sweet and Bitter**

*At the beginning – learning Chinese in the UK*

Before they went to China to learn the language, most of them had learned Chinese at least one year in the UK. However, relatively negative feedback about their Chinese learning outcomes was shown by them. One of the most common reason is the non-Chinese speaking environment, which means they seldom had opportunities to practice Chinese after class, and lecturers in classes always taught them Chinese by using English, to help them understand easily.

*There are a lot of Chinese students, but they're kind of in their own bubble, in their own world, and I don't really come across Chinese people so much here. (Diana)*

*In our first two years here, it was done totally in English, so yeah well not totally English, but a lot in English. (Fiona)*

From these two answers, it can be seen that they had the motivation to learn Chinese in the UK, but they did not have enough investment both in and out of the class. What they had learned was more text-based, or exam-oriented, so they might have some knowledge about Chinese politics and history, could do some Chinese reading, and even Chinese handwriting, but they still did not have clear concept about what Chinese culture actually is, how Chinese people are like, and what change they had made after choosing to learn this new language. In other words, in this step, learning Chinese is just like learning a new language, their beliefs and sense of self seem no significant change.

*It was a big shock – learning Chinese in China*

As mentioned above, there is a big cultural distance between the UK and China. Undoubtedly all of participants told me they experienced a big culture shock when they just arrived China, such as the air pollution, the accommodation, the weather, the strange views to them from Chinese people, the crowded society and the different table manners (share dishes). Like Adam said, *there are many weird things that happen in China every day, like normal people, like an angry mother. I've never seen that before...Not unacceptable but it was something that I just couldn't understand why or how, but otherwise I love it.*

From these, it is not hard to find that living in China for them was not just learning a language in the native speaker context, but facing many unknown challenges. As I assumed, they could be risk-takers, and from their answers, expectably, it showed that most of them could accept and accustom these challenges very soon. *Chinese people were very nice to me.* As most of the participants mentioned, according to Chinese culture, Chinese people are always very nice to guests, especially international guests. Therefore, when they talked with Chinese people, even they were in a relatively weak position (because they might not understand what Chinese people said), Chinese people still gave the power to them, to encourage them to speak Chinese, or spoke in English instead. In other words, Chinese people are willing to spending investment with them. Such warm atmosphere could help them reduce the anxiety of living alone in a strange country, and accept the different culture.

Otherwise, Chinese people's investment did not always help them. *I tried to speak Chinese to them, but they spoke English to me. I didn't know why (Fairfax).* There was a conflict between their investment. Chinese people wanted to learn English, and they wanted to learn Chinese. This is because the different language position in the world – English is the worldwide dominant language (I will explain this more in the discussion part). Payne pretended himself as a Russian student to avoid his Chinese friends speaking English with him. Thus, it can be seen Chinese people's strong investment to learn English, which definitely has negative impact on participants to learn Chinese. For some students, who do not have very high motivation to practice Chinese, and just want to pass the exams, may lose this investment, and speak English with Chinese people all the time.

Sometimes, Chinese people did not give the power to the language learner. *I feel so frustrated when I cannot understand anything a native speaker's words. Um..*

*Because it's too fast. I did not want to speak Chinese anymore at that time (Alice).* Here, we can find that in some site, due to the dialect accent, or some reasons that the native speaker do not want to slow down their speed, the language learner is in a passive position. Such position may give them a negative feeling and reduce their investment in the conversation.

From these positive or negative stories, we can find that there is an unbalanced power (Norton, 2013) between the language learner and the native speaker. The more investment the native speaker puts, and the more power the native speaker gives to the language learner, the more investment the language learner would be willing to put, which would help the language learner learn the target language and engage themselves in the target social community.

*I find a new myself*

During the interview, when we talked about personal changes after studying in China, their answers are undoubtedly similar, which are about the improvement of the Chinese language ability, international communication skills and the acceptance of difficult culture. *I think Chinese keeps me be more like open (Alice). More accepting of people, accepting cultures and I feel like my brain has expanded a bit in a different way (Diana).* The learning experience in China not only improved their language ability, but changed their way of thinking, and even changed their views of the world. That is to say, their sense of self, belief and some perceptions have been changed, which means there is an identity transition during this learning procession. *The way that I look at foreigners in the UK now has certainly changed (Fiona).*

## **Results – Based on Identity Transition**

*Cultural identity*

From the data analyse above, it can be found that participants obtained a multiple cultural identity, which means they not only built a new language ability, but also rebuilt their native language ability. Like many participants said, they developed their mutual cultural understanding. They got the knowledge about how to avoid sensitive topics to not offend Chinese people, how to respect Chinese culture, and how to live in a Chinese way when they were in China. All these lead to change their sense of self, and sense of belongings. When they came back to their own country, their way of thinking Chinese students in the UK has also changed. That is to say, their identities are different from what they used to be, and the relationship between themselves and others in social world have also been changed.

*Motivation/ investment*

During the time of learning Chinese in China, we discovered that there is an unbalanced power between language learners and native speakers. In many situations, native speakers (Chinese) have relatively stronger power, but they chose to invest more with the language learners, which means most Chinese people are always happy to help them to learn Chinese, and slow down their speaking speed or speak Chinese in some easy-understanding words to try to help language learners understand what they are talking about easily. All these gave language learners a reasonable way to

learn Chinese language and engage the Chinese culture. However, in some special occasion, due to the accent, or some urgent affairs, Chinese people may not invest themselves much in the conversation with the language learner, which could influence the learners' investment directly, or even make the learner feel disappointed. From these, we can speculate that the process of learning language in the social context depends on the mutual investment between the native speaker and the language learner.

### *Influences*

The influences mainly focus on the language ability and choices of the future career. After learning Chinese in China, all the participants said that their most achievement is the Chinese language ability. One of them even told me he could not speak a whole sentence in Chinese before he went to China, but now he can speak Chinese very fluently with full of confidence. As for future design, many of the participants said they had the plan to work in China after the graduate. Only one told me he would not work in China, but he still plans to work in a Chinese-related company in the UK. Therefore, the Chinese learning experience in China really influenced their future plan, and all of them never plan to work without Chinese, wherever they plan to work.

### **Discussion – Power and Identity**

Bremer (1993, 1996) mentioned that the language learner takes the main responsibility to guarantee the conversation working between the language learner and the native speaker. Norton extended his idea and pointed out that *identity is a site of struggle* (2013), and she believes that the language learner takes the role of both *subject of* and *subject to* the relation of power in some particular occasion. From these ideas, it is not difficult to discover that due to different identities, as a language learner and a native speaker, in one conversation, their power is unbalanced. The native speaker holds the power to lead the conversation, but the native speaker is responsible for the mutual understanding of the conversation. This theory is applied in the field of teaching and learning English as a second language.

However, when we want to discover the relationship between the language learner and the native speaker in the site of learning Chinese as a second language, does this theory totally work?

Here, I cannot say no, but at least in my research, as I mentioned in the former parts, even Chinese people (native speakers) hold the power in the conversation, in many particular sites, they are willing to give such power to the language learner, and try to construct the mutual responsibility to ensure the conversation proceeding. Thus, it is kind of different from the pattern of learning English. The reasons for this are as following.

Firstly, different from English, which is the *lingua franca* (Crystal, 2003) in the world, there are few people choose Chinese as a first language except Chinese people. Even though as the development of the international influence of China, there is an increasing number of people in the world people choose to learn Chinese, while compared with the amount of people who choose English as a second language, the amount of learning Chinese as a second language is still very small. That is to say, the

English native speakers may feel normal that a foreigner can speak very fluent English, while for Chinese native speakers, they may feel surprised when they hear a person with blue eyes and ginger hair speaking good Chinese. Such different language positions in the world leads the different attitude towards language learners, and because of such surprise, many Chinese people intend to invest themselves more to help foreigners learn Chinese.

Secondly, as I mentioned before, according to China's five-thousand heritage culture, Chinese people are always very polite to guests. They treat the language learners (foreigners) as guests, so they are very warm-hearted to them. This is also the reason why some participants noticed that Chinese people were nicer to foreigners than their compatriots. From this point, the reason can also be found to answer the question that Chinese people sometimes give the power to the language learner, and try to construct the mutual investment in the conversation.

Therefore, Norton's idea partly works in the field of learning Chinese as a second/foreign language – there is an unbalanced power between language learners and native speakers, and the native speakers hold the main power. However, the investment and responsibility for the conversation are more mutual in the Chinese context. This is the different point, which is worth to research further.

### **Limitations**

This is an on-going study, so some of the ideas are still very raw, which need analysing more deeply, such as legitimate speaker (Bourdieu, 1977), anxiety and confidence (Norton, 2013), different investment in Chinese listening, speaking and writing, to explain the relationship between identity and investment more comprehensive. Also, the data are specific and the research method is single, which will not be generalizable in a traditional sense, but this research still extended Norton's theory of identity, to some degree.

### **Conclusion**

From Poststructuralist Theories of identity, identity is changing over time. From the cultural identity, motivation and investment and influences, we can find that British learners do have identity transitions, but the process is kind of different from them who learn English as a second language. Over all, speaking a new language, is seen as the start of a new identity.



## References

- Bourdieu, P. (1997). The economics of linguistic exchanges. *Social Science Information*, 16(6), 645-68.
- Bremer, K., Roberts, C., Vasseur, M. –T., Simonot, M. and Broeder, P. (1996). *Achieving Understanding: Discourse in Intercultural Encounters*. London: Longman.
- Crystal, D. 2003. *English as a Global Language (Second edition)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, R., & Lambert, W. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second-language learning*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Hamilton, L. (2013). “Silence Does Not Sound the Same for Everyone”. *SAGE Open*, 3(3), 1-12.
- Kanno, Y. (2003). *Negotiating bilingual and bicultural identities : Japanese returnees betwixt two worlds*. Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum.
- Kecskes, I. (2013). *Research in Chinese as a second language*, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- McAdam, D. P., Narrative Identity. In S.J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), (2011). *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (pp. 99-116). New York: Springer Science Business Media.
- Norton, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29 (1): 9–31.
- Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation*. Second Edition. Bristol, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Saussure, F. de (1966) *Course in General Linguistics*. (W. Baskin, trans. [1916]). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Stake, R.E. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research: Perspective in Practice*. London: Sage.
- Taylor, J. (2008). *The Construction of Identities through Narratives of Occupations*, PQDT - UK & Ireland.
- Weedon, C. (1997) *Feminist practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Second Edition. London: Blackwell.

**Contact email:** Mengke.Li@ed.ac.uk