

THE ROLE OF SELF-CONFIDENCE AND L2 IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION ON THE INDONESIAN STUDENTS' SOCIAL INTERACTION IN NATURAL ENGLISH ENVIRONMENT

Nur Alfa Rahmah

Post Graduate Student of State University of Malang

ABSTRACT

Language learning involves a dynamic process of self confidence construction. A research by Jianwei Xu (2011) on the lived-experience of two Chinese advanced users of English in Australia shed a light on this. It also confirmed the nature of language as a complex social process that is closely bound to power relations and learner's previously established L2 identity. However, it failed to notice how the self confidence and L2 identity play a role on maintaining smooth social interaction in natural English environment. In addition, the local and cultural boundary covered in the study was just coming from Chinese students, whom their mother tongues has quite different lexical form and structure from English. Indonesia, on the other side, has rather close lexical form and structure to English. Therefore, the research on the Indonesian learners' self-confidence in using English might show different result. This paper, then, is attempted to bring the discussion further and deeper to Indonesian users of English and how they undergo social interaction with their self-confidence and L2 identity in the English-speaking country. The researcher will interview three students from English department of State University of Malang who had experienced studying abroad to know how they construct their identity and confidence during their interaction with native-speakers and how does this contribute to the development of their English use.

Key Words : Self confidence, L2 Identity Instruction, and Students' social interaction

Nearly all the available literature suggests that self-confidence is very much related to second language development. Researchers have concluded that lower anxiety levels and a tendency to be outgoing were connected with successful L2 learning (Dulay, et.al., 1982: 75). Learners who are eager to try new and unpredictable experiences are likely to seek out situations that require real communication in the new language. According to Dulay, et.al. (1982), these people have been observed to use a wider range of forms in the target language than those with "wait and see" personalities who are at the same level of L2 development. Self-confidence, then, possesses a crucial part in language learning.

Language learning involves a dynamic process of self confidence construction though. A case study by Xu (2011) on the lived-experience of two Chinese advanced users/learners of English who were taking their doctoral degree in Australia shed a light on this. It also confirmed the nature of self-confidence as a complex social process that is closely bound to power relations and learner's L2 identity. Following Norton (2000 in Xu, 2011), Xu believed that learners would seem to perceive more confidence if their previously established L2 identities were confirmed.

Xu's research (2011) tried to offer a social constructive approach to the issues of self-confidence in L2 learning to capture some dimensions that might have been missed by a number of researchers, such as Clement (1980, 1986 in Xu, 2011) who proposed the social context model in which self-confidence was perceived as the key construct that determines the motivation to learn an L2 in multicultural setting and will develop along with pleasant interaction with L2 community. Some experts (Clement, 1986; Clement & Kruidenier, 1985; Noels, Pon, & Clement, 1996; Yang, Noels, & Samuere, 2005 in Xu 2011) concluded that the more confident the learners are the greater communicative competence they will achieve and the easier they adapt to the natural environment. According to Xu (2011), those experts have not touched the nature of interaction between the individual learners and their social context of learning as well as the effect of those on shaping their confidence. The quantitative measure conducted by them, then, might have overlooked the unique cultural, linguistic, psychological, social, and cognitive characteristic of the individuals.

The two Chinese users of English that Xu (2001) investigated presented fairly interesting phenomena. The first informant, Yolanda (35 years old), perceived English as the vehicle through which she can have access to different sociocultural context. Yolanda's experience showed evidence that power relation plays quite a big role in the dynamic change of her self-confidence. Yolanda, who back there in China had a wonderful profession through her engagement with English, on an occasions underwent the lack of confidence when she was overpowered by native receptionist abroad and felt the most confident when her self-image of being a competent speaker of English was reinforced. It highlighted Pierce's (1995) notion of L2 identity investment, which construct and organize the sense of who the learners are and how they relate to the social world, particularly L2 environment. In other words, if the learners of English cannot claim ownership of this language, they might not consider themselves as legitimate speakers.

The second informant, Fiona (27 years old), however, invested a more flexible identity that allowed her to mingle very well in her "imagined community" (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007 in Xu 2011), the English speaking environment. Because learning English, for Fiona, is not only a matter of mastering the language skills, but more about relation to other people meaningfully in a communicative setting. She emphasized her personal enjoyment of being able to use English to enter the unknown world of native English speaking people (Xu, 2011). Fiona's case supported another sociocultural framework suggested by Lave and Wenger (1991 in Xu 2011) which views that the acquisition of new L2 knowledge and skill comes from growing sense of belonging to and participation in the L2 community and increasing identification with them.

Xu's research (2011) did not explain why she chooses Chinese students for her research instead of students from other countries. In fact, English and Chinese differ in many fundamental ways, either in writing system, pronunciation, phonology, grammar, or vocabularies, which makes learning English a serious challenge for Chinese native speakers (Mark, 2009). The linguistic differences and difficulties to bridge the two languages were evident in the two researches conducted by Schmitt, et. al. (1994) on commercial communication and Yang (2001) on English writing.

Indonesian, on the other side, has rather close linguistics structure to English compared to Chinese. A research by Boroditsky, et. al. (2002) demonstrated the flexibility of Indonesian-English bilinguals to look just like English speakers when tested in English, and much more like Indonesian speakers when tested in Indonesian. It indicated that learning English for Indonesian students, be it involves having a native-like pronunciation, might bear a rather moderate difficulties in comparison with learning English for Chinese natives. In light of the possible different condition, here the researcher tries to offer another dimension of perspective from Indonesian context.

This paper, then, is attempted to bring the discussion to Indonesian users of English, their already established self-confidence and L2 identity, and how they undergo social interaction in the English-speaking country. The researcher will interview two students/alumni from English department of State University of Malang who had experienced studying abroad to know how they utilize their identity and confidence in the interaction with native-speakers and adaption to the environment and the ongoing effect of the interaction to their later established confidence and L2 identity. The research questions underlying this research are formulated below:

1. How did the the Indonesian students perceive their self-confidence and L2 identity in using English before they go overseas?
2. Did they undergo the dynamic change of self-confidence and L2 identity during their social interaction in the natural English environment? And why?
3. How does being in natural English environment contribute to their self-confidence and L2 identity in using English?

Inspired by Xu (2011), here, I make no distinction between L2 learner and user, since they are qualified as both L2 users and learners, judged from their fairly minor difficulties in using L2 before their going abroad and their on-going social interaction process in L2 community.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

Participants

The data was drawn from two English Department students/alumni of State University of Malang under the pseudonyms Rizal and Olin who had experienced studying abroad through scholarship program. The first was Rizal, a participant of Encompass Trust to England, who joined the two-week program in the second semester of his undergraduate degree. The second interviewee was Olin, one of the guarantees of the GLOBAL UGRAD scholarship program to Mississippi, who went there in her seventh semester and spent about half a year studying at the University of Mississippi.

Procedures

Descriptive qualitative method was used in this study. Data collection was obtained through in-depth interview. Since the research tried to dig some data from the personal perspective of the scholarship guarantees, the interview was conducted as natural as possible to be able to explore more about their opinions and feelings in relation to their experiences using English in natural environment abroad. Therefore, the researcher did not exactly limit the flow of their statements,

only focus on the data to be collected. The guideline questions here functioned as the initiators that lead to the flow of open statements by the interviewees and guide the researcher in the data collection (see: Appendix 1).

The interview was audio taped with a cell phone and transcribed to a computer for data analysis. The interview with each participant lasted differently one from the others ranging from half an hour to almost an hour, depending on the amount of experiences the interviewees shared to the researcher, their speaking speed, and their relative personal openness. Parts of data transcription presented in the discussion later was written according to the original statement given by the interviewees regardless some minor error in grammar and other linguistic features. This is meant to demonstrate the real atmosphere of the interview to the readers. In the transcription though, the researcher omitted some words or sentences that are not really relevant to the research—indicated by “...” sign—, so that the data is presented as efficient and effective as possible. The data presentation is not chronological but integratedly adjusted to the findings and discussion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To avoid jumbled analysis, the researcher will present findings and discussion in the following order:

1. the interviewees’ previously established L2 identity before going abroad and their expectation with English language in the overseas program;
2. unique experiences during interaction process abroad starting from the very first day to the last one that is relevant to explaining their self-confidence state; and
3. the contribution of overseas experience to the identity and self-confidence construction of the interviewees.

Rizal’s Story

Rizal was known as easy-going, confident, open, and friendly person among his friends in his department. When I asked how he felt about his English, he responded:

“It’s good...it’s really good, well...it is always up from 3.3...Friends of mine of the same cohort think that my English was quiet good, may be because we respond to what lectures say.”

In brief, Rizal statement showed strong investment in his L2 identity that he had good English even before he went overseas. His score and his social perspective apparently were supportive to his self-confidence. Furthermore, Rizal expected going abroad can increase his confidence and he can join with the world societies.

Fortunately, in the end of his second semester, he was guaranteed Encompass Trust to United Kingdom, joined by five countries—Indonesian, UK, Scotland, Israel, and Palestine—which is aimed to promote peace, tolerance, and understanding through the participants who are considered as the representatives of each country. However, the identity he had already

established in Indonesia was somehow challenged during his days overseas. The first coming days Rizal spent there were quite intimidating to his confidence. He summarizes below:

“I felt like, if I can count like from one to ten, I would like to give score, before I go there: six...because I don’t really get highly score on TOEFL...or may be maximum, seven...When I when there...at the first or second day, I would think that I was the dumbest person in the world...I don’t know, may be because, first, I get the nerve, and second, I don’t really feel that I have the same equality, because I’m thinking that Ok...English is their first language...I don’t really get what they say...some people say that it is because of their accents. So British”.

The confidence Rizal already build about his English was decreasing due to some intimidating power relation in which he felt that British people were the legitimate speakers of English and he, with his English capacity, was somehow nothing among them. The L2 identity Rizal had, in this case, was also shifted since he had not seen any support in the new environment to his competence. Moreover, his true identity as easy-going, confident, open and friendly was also suppressed. He even was shocked when he found that the surrounding perspective over him initially considered that he was a silent and ‘muted’ person, the characteristic that do not belong to him. The first-day condition, of course, circumscribed his adaptation process and communicative interaction to the L2 environment.

Eventually, though, Rizal can overcome his nerve in the following days. Nevertheless, in the second day, he started to think of his stereotype, and encouraged himself to say ‘hi’ and talk to them, the foreigners. In the following days, he discovered his image changed from being ‘muted’ person to humorous person, ‘the funniest man’, and the most supportive in the group. His confidence started to rise when his fellow scholarship recipients from other countries come to understand his jokes. He said:

“So, I think that when they can understand my jokes, it means that my English is quite good...well, I can communicate with people...and I am really confident that I can speak to them, foreigners, abroad”

The above statement depicted a great improvement in his confidence. His L2 identity is started to be reconstructed again and even gain better than before. Rizal finally came to his desired communicative result.

Rizal’s case has actually supported two theories presented in the beginning chapter about Pierce’s (1995) notion of L2 identity investment. Rizal organized sense of who he was among the English native speakers. Only when his confidence grew from the social support and he thought he can claim the ownership of the English language, he begun to consider himself as legitimate speaker. On the other side, Rizal also bore the dream of “imagined community” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007 in Xu 2011), where he wished to be, that later encouraged him to step out from being inferior to growing the confidence and engagement with the community. The growing sense of belonging to the community helped to fill the previous gap between him and the natives and also contributed to perception of being a competent L2 user in the interaction (Lave and Wenger, 1991 in Xu 2011). In brief, Rizal’s L2 identity assisted him to

maintain the balance between his inferiority and confidence that enable him to finally gain success in the interaction among natives.

Going abroad, for Rizal, was really crucial to increase L2 learner's confidence. He proved it himself that after going there, not only the way people look at him that made him proud but also the way he sees at himself too. He admitted:

“After going there, well, definitely there are some changes happen, the score should not be six anymore, like, can be seven, or 7.5...But if you asked me whether it gives me confidence and gives me better than the others...in some point, yes...I once got chance to go abroad, means that it's not thing that not most people have. I should prove to them that I'm worth to be chosen as scholarship recipient...”

People's support to his L2 identity and confidence is manifested in his part-time career as the announcer at some radio station in Malang. His experienced going abroad drove people at his work field to assign him an interview duty whenever there is a foreigner come to the radio station. He was also once offered a job as MC because of his English abilities.

Olin's Story

Different from Rizal, Olin joined a scholarship program abroad, GLOBAL UGRAD, in her seventh semester, when she had already obtained sufficient English input. Therefore, the feasibility of successful adaptation to and participation with the natural English environment there is more obvious than it is in Rizal's case. It is slightly implied when the researcher asked how the experience abroad was; she said it was fun.

Talking about her L2 identity that she had build before going abroad, we should understand first than Olin is well-known as a smart and confident girl among her fellows and lecturers in the department. Her proud of her English can be inferred from her following statement:

“I'm quite confident using my English, especially I can, like, easily, you know, imitate how people of American and English people speak in English...even before I went there.”

Different time of going abroad between Olin and Rizal showed quiet a big difference. Olin obviously had already been mature in terms of preparing herself to become part of in international communities. She expected that going abroad not only can improve her English, but also broaden her network and insight about western culture. She even thought more on professional goal with her plan abroad; she wished she could apply what she learned there about how to teach English well to her students.

Surprisingly, Olin admitted that she had not undergone some experience where she felt inferior. She even implied some disappointment with the image of America was because she previously she thought of America as a very sophisticated country. Regardless she was a little bit worried with her first days there, later on, she concluded that American students are of no difference with Indonesian students in terms of academic quality and dedication to class participation. Her perspective over American students there in Mississippi is stated below:

“I don’t know but I don’t think I experienced that feeling because when I was there, I feel like, well, all American are somehow similar to Indonesians in a way that, well, I lived in a big university...and it was like there are a lot of...students there....And you know... it just resembled how the UM goes, I mean like there are a lot of good students and there are a lot of bad students. You know, just like my classmates...they like to be absent from school. They are not as cool as what, you know, Hollywood movie describes as Americas. They are just laymen like us....So, there is just minor cultural shock for me.”

According to Olin, her Indonesian classmates could show better academic performance than Americans, implying that she had not hidden any sense of inferiority of being Indonesians there. She had not also any trouble with her English competence in communicating with them. To her, the university she attended abroad for half a year has a lot of resemblance with her previous university in Indonesia. Her confidence was evident when she told the researcher that her American friend was amazed with her English and praised her.

Finally, to Olin, going abroad is of crucial important, not to increase her self-confidence, but to challenge her English proficiency. She said:

“In terms of my English proficiency, I feel my vocabulary, especially in an idiomatic expression, American slang words, and such things”.

She thought that now she can be proud of saying that her vocabularies get enriched and her accents get better after going abroad, “more native-like” as she said.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored the dynamic process of L2 identity and self-confidence construction in the English use of Indonesian’s students during their participation in L2 communities abroad. The findings have shown that first, the learners’ confidence can be intimidated if their previously established L2 identity was not confirmed. Second, the confidence is shaped under the influence of external factors such power relation, where they feel that they might not the legitimate speakers of English. However, L2 learner can maintain or recover the self-confidence when by the time they discovered gradually that their L2 identity has been acknowledge by the surrounding community. Third, when the L2 learner has already prepared well for mingling with the international English community very well and the L2 identity is confirmed, the self-confidence will increase and the learner can grow the sense of belonging to the community. Fourth, going abroad is good to increase even challenge the L2 learner’s state of confidence and identity that later will contribute to future career or even excel their improvement in English compared to those who has not experienced studying abroad.

This research also shed a light on the fact that Indonesian students might have more chance to be successful in participating with international English community compared to Chinese students. It is because Indonesian and English languages bear a lot of resemblance linguistically compared to Chinese language. It is evident that even though the students being interviewed in the present research were much younger then the two Chinese students, and their level of education was also lower than the level education of them, the Indonesian students can grow

self-confidence better and are more flexible in mingling with the natural English environment abroad.

Overall, this research strengthened Norton's (2000 in Xu, 2011) belief that self-confidence is a dynamic process, and vulnerable to intimidation from external factors, such as power relation. Nevertheless, as long as the L2 learners can recover their self confidence by maintaining their previously established L2 and tried to see English more as instruments to gain access to the unknown unique international societies, they eventually can grow the sense of belonging to both the language and the community. In that way, they may have already achieved one of the important goals of second language learning, that is, to gain and enjoy the communicative function of the language.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Guidelines

1. How do you feel about your English before you go overseas?
2. And your score? And people's perception on you?
3. Did your perception of you English change after u came overseas?
4. Why was that? What did you do about it then?
5. What was your personal expectation that underlies your reason applying the scholarship overseas?

6. Tell me some interesting experience in relation to your English there! Did you ever feel inferior or get more confident with your English? When and Why?
7. Is there any improvement/change to your English after you came to Indonesia?
8. Do you think going abroad is important? Why?
9. Do you think going abroad has something to do to your English? In what way?

