

Exploring the Relationship between Language, Culture and Identity

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Abstract

This paper will explore the interconnectedness of language and culture, and how language and culture impact upon one's identity. It will first define the three constructs – language, culture and identity. This will be followed by an overview of the work of social theorists and educationists. The paper will then present a review of literature of research studies in the field. Recent studies on the interplay of language and culture and its impact on social and cultural identity in the field of Second Language Acquisition will be highlighted. Lastly the paper concludes with a discussion of recent research studies on language and identity in the Malaysian context.

Introduction

The relationship between language, culture and identity is an intriguing one. There is a lacuna of research on how language impacts one's identity. Culture is inextricably linked to language. Without language, culture cannot be completely acquired nor can it be effectively expressed and transmitted. Without culture, language cannot exist. Language and culture are so interconnected that it is difficult to define the parameters of language and culture, and whether language impacts culture or vice-versa. It is generally agreed among trained scholars though, that culture is a broader umbrella concept, and that language is a part of culture (Trueba & Zou, 1994). In the early years of socialization, both the linguistic and cultural symbolic systems that an individual is raised in will play an instrumental role in socializing an individual, and in shaping his perceptions and his persona.

Language can be defined as the system of communication comprising codes and symbols which is used by humans to store, retrieve, organize, structure and communicate knowledge and experience. Language is not a static process. It is the primary instrument in the expression, transmission, and adaptation of culture. Language is used to maintain one's own culture and to acquire a new culture and new knowledge. The learning of a second or foreign language enables one to view life through another cultural lens.

Culture has many definitions. It is a set of beliefs, values, norms, customs, traditions, rituals, and a way of life that differentiates one group from another. Tylor (1958) views culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of

society. Banks (1988, p. 261) defines culture as, “a cluster of attributes such as values, beliefs, behavior patterns and symbols unique to a particular human group.” Goodenough believes that culture “is made up of the concepts, beliefs, and principles of action and organization”(1976, p.5).

In reality, culture is not a static entity. It has the ability to acquire new characteristics and forms. It is dynamic - its permutations can take place from one generation to another or from one geographical location to another. To the trained social scientist and traditional anthropologist however, culture is “still *composed* of socially shared elements, socially shared norms, codes of behavior, values, and assumptions about the world that clearly distinguish one sociocultural group from another” (Trueba, 1993, p. 34). Anthropologists and social scientists basically agree that sharing a culture of a group means being able to operate effectively in that particular group.

Clifford (1986) states that culture is not an object to be described, nor is it “a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent” (p. 476). Britzman (1991) defines culture as that site where identities, desires and investments are mobilized, constructed, and reworked. If culture is such a dynamic negotiation site, then there is much in linguistic and cultural actions that need to be understood, and much in learners’ roles and identities that need to be deconstructed and understood.

George and Louise Spindler (1990) have argued that culture is a transactional process. It is during the cultural transmission from one generation to another that culture is being recreated, redefined and restructured by those involved. Much of the literature on cross-cultural research that explores cultural socialization, cultural conflict and learning (Moll and Diaz, 1987; Ogbu, 1987; Roosens, 1989; Trueba, 1987, 1988, 1989; Trueba, Jacobs and Kirton, 1990) is influenced by the work of the Spindlers. The Spindlers (1994) talk about the three dimensions to the self - the enduring self, the situated self and the endangered self. The enduring self is the sense of continuity that one has with the past, a personal continuity in experience, meaning and social identity. The situated self encompasses those aspects of the person as he continuously adapts to the pragmatics of everyday living and to new settings. This self is the instrumental self and is attuned to the attainment of ends defined within the framework of a social context. Lastly, there is the endangered self. When the adaptation of the situated selves is incompatible with the enduring self, conflict results. The responses that humans make when facing such conflicts are a reaffirmation of their ethnic identity, compensatory adaptation, withdrawal, and oppositional behavior. These adaptations are ways of avoiding self-destruction. Spindler and Spindler (1994) state that the “basic cultural assumptions and perceptions held by people of different cultures seriously influence behavior, perceptions and communication. They are the starting point of differential rewards, punishments, oppositions, consequences, and the use of power to coerce, eliminate, damage, and promote” (p. 29-30).

Identity is not easy to define - it is best seen as a plurality and not a unitary construct. Identity is the individual’s concept of the self, as well as the individual’s interpretation of the social definition of the self, within his/her inner group and the larger society. Identity formation is not simply a conscious process but is influenced by unconscious psychological processes (DeVos, 1992). Identity is a dynamic,

complex and ongoing process. Norton (1997) defines identity as, “how people understand their relationship to the outside world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 410).

Theory And Research

A number of social theorists have examined the concept of identity (Bourdieu, 1977; Weedon, 1987; West, 1992). West (1992) identifies identity as a concept linked to desire: the desire for recognition, affiliation, security, safety, and/or material acquisition. In today’s materialistic societies, people who have much wealth and material resources are the ones who have access to power and privileges. According to West (1992), it is people’s access to material resources that will define the terms on which they will articulate their needs and desires.

While West (1992) has focused on the link between identity and power relations, Bourdieu (1977) focuses on the relationship between identity and symbolic power. Bourdieu points out that the value attached to speech cannot be understood or weighed apart from the speaker who is uttering it and the speaker cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships, many of which are unequally structured. For example, if a junior executive says something noteworthy in a meeting, he may be dismissed, but if the Chief Executive Officer says the same thing, he may be applauded or praised for coming out with it. Bourdieu argues that an expanded definition of competence should include “the right to speak” or “the right to impose reception” (1977, p.75).

Weedon’s (1987) work explores how prevailing power relations can affect the life chances of individuals. Weedon links individual experience and social power in a theory of subjectivity. Subjectivity, as defined by Weedon (1987), is, “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p.32). She attributes language as having a central role in her analysis of the individual and the social world, and states that language is the place where the actual forms of social organization and its consequences are both defined and contested. The subject is not viewed as a person. Personhood is conceived as both subject and subjected to relations of power within a particular social site. Of central importance in the theory is that subjectivity and language are mutually constitutive.

Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is an important concept in education as it reminds us that educational settings are not natural settings, nor are educational practices such as groupings according to ability, testing of discrete skills, tracking or stratification. These creations are all social creations and socially constituted, and underestimates the learners’ potential, because their abilities are analyzed in isolation. He calls for educators to promote change by facilitating new forms of mediation. Ways of facilitating change are to utilize the learners’ natural social, genetic and cultural resources that represent their primary tools.

Vygotsky’s theory is important as it is instrumental in creating an awareness of the relationship between sociocultural and cognitive factors of learning as well as the

collective and individual factors determining cognitive development. The disparity in the academic performance of minority groups in the U.S. could be a result of the linguistic, social and cultural disparity between the learners' school and home environments (Vygotsky, 1978). The child's comprehensibility of what he learns, is not so much determined by the curriculum or instruction in school but is a result of his ZPD. Vygotsky's (1978) theoretical framework argues for appropriate and meaningful interaction, both culturally and linguistically, and through this type of meaningful interaction, the child may develop a sound and suitable cognitive structure that is continuously revised by new experiences and feedback.

The work by Trueba (1987,1988, Trueba & Delgado-Gaitan,1988) and scholars such as the Spindlers (1987a, 1987b), Moll (1986), and Moll & Diaz, (1987) shows that there is a very close relationship between language, culture and cognition. The ethnographic data from these studies gathered suggests that culture affects the entire process of knowledge acquisition and information processing regardless of the historical backgrounds of the students. Many of these scholars argue that from a neo-Vygotskian perspective, intellectual development is socially and culturally based, and what takes place in the larger society is crucial to an understanding of the learning processes and academic achievement of all learners. Trueba (1988) argues that the conditions for effective learning are created only when the role of culture is recognized and used in the settings under which learning is taking place. These environments should recognize the importance of culture in specific instructional settings and attempt to integrate the home and school cultures into the teaching pedagogy. When cultural conflicts arise, they should be resolved instead of being dismissed. Children should be assisted through meaningful and culturally appropriate relationships in the internalization of mainstream values.

Trueba and Zou (1994) conducted a research study on the cultural identities of an ethnic minority group in China called the Miao. Their study of Miao undergraduate students and their life in the university, an institution dominated by the majority Han Chinese, revealed that even when placed in a different learning environment, the strong cultural identity of the Miao students allowed them to draw on this affiliation for an increased motivation to succeed academically. Learning a second language and a new culture did not in any way detract from but in fact, enhanced their pride in their identity and strong affiliation to their ethnic group. The study found that the Miao subjects who came from a very impoverished background from the remote interior of China, did not suffer from any lack of self-esteem in terms of materialistic acquisition but drew strong emotional support from their own social identity. They were driven by a desire to succeed so that they could repay their family and village members for their sacrifices with the prestige attached to being university graduates and members of the educated elite. This study has important implications because it shows that being empowered in a new learning environment does not necessitate forsaking one's own culture and language; indeed their empowerment in a new society depended on their "being Miao" and retaining their identification and affiliation with Miao traditions, culture and language.

Another study conducted on the preservation and/or loss of cultural identity is the study by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) in Latin America. Their study on Mexican youths in Mexico helped to debunk the 'cultural deprivation theory' put forward by theorists to explain the poor academic performance of Latinos youths in

the USA. Proponents of this theory argue that some certain cultural backgrounds of certain ethnic groups do not encourage or promote academic success, nor provide their children with the tools so vital for successful functioning in schools. The findings, however, showed that their young Mexican subjects were very highly motivated, achievement and family-oriented. This casts doubts on the generalization that Mexican culture was not conducive to the development of the abilities needed to succeed in a dynamic society. Trueba (1987) states that the cultural deprivation model adheres to the American notion of ethnocentrism, that minority problems are caused by their peculiar culture (the Latino culture) and not by inherent problems and shortcomings within the American educational and social system. The study by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) showed that while the group of Mexican subjects were academically successful in Mexico, their parallel group of Mexican subjects in the USA performed poorly academically, were not motivated and displayed a sense of disenfranchisement. The results of this study showed that the sense of powerlessness and discrimination suffered by the Latino immigrants in the USA could be attributed to the problem of low self-esteem and poor academic performance, and not the traditional culture of the Latinos.

The work by DeVos (1992) supports the findings of the Suarez-Orozco's study. The fundamental principle put forward in DeVos'(1992) work is that to understand behavior, we have to examine the intimate relationship between the social and cultural contexts of behavior and the psychodynamics of personality structure. In discussing differential achievement motivation, DeVos states that humans, during the early years of the socialization process, may develop coping mechanisms or defensive mechanisms to deal with learning experiences. DeVos calls this strategy "selective permeability" and states that "by the time individuals are collectively exposed to formal education, they are not perceiving the same stimuli in the school situation. They are not equally ready to internalize the same educational materials. Depending on the degree to which internalization is threatening to one's social identity, they are "selectively permeable to school experiences" (1992, p. 241).

DeVos states that there can be no doubt that the degree of social receptivity in the majority culture plays a determinant in majority attitudes toward assimilation, based on extensive documentation in social science studies. Immigrants from north-west Europe who immigrated to the U.S. were accorded rapid receptivity far different from those from southern or eastern Europe. In turn, immigrants of African or Asian origin or Caucasoids from outside the European sphere have been received "with relative degrees of continuing rejection based on what are generally termed racist attitudes" (1992, p. 209). If rejection and discrimination by the majority group lead to poor self-identity concept and disenfranchisement of minority ethnic groups, then how does one account for the differential achievements of these groups? DeVos states that, "one must quickly note that such acceptability or rejection is also crosscut with forms of ethnic behavior which is judged acceptable or unacceptable" (1992, p. 209). For example, certain Asian ethnic minorities have attained a measure of success economically and academically in the US. Japanese Americans, by and large, have succeeded relatively well educationally and occupationally, despite a history of strong prejudice against them. DeVos' study of the Japanese in Japan and America revealed that the culture of the Japanese played a large part in contributing to their success. He found that the Japanese were very strongly motivated towards any form of accomplishment, and continually preoccupied with competence and adequacy. They

were prone to guilt, which they internalized with a constant desire *to achieve*. They displayed a preoccupation with group harmony at the expense of individualism and emphasize hierarchy over horizontal affiliation. They also displayed a greater emphasis on mutual interdependency than found in American culture.

Cummins' (1986) work in the United States shows a need to recognize the linkages between language culture and identity, and how a negation of students' cultural identity can lead to underachievement and failure in schools. Cummins (1986) presents a theoretical framework for analyzing minorities' school failure and the relative lack of success of attempts at educational reform. He argues that the variability in minority students' academic performance under different educational and social conditions suggests that there are more complicated and interrelated factors at work. Citing Ogbu (1978), Fishman (1976), Wong-Fillmore (1983) and Paulston (1980), Cummins states that anthropological and sociological research suggests that status and power relations play a part in determining minority students' failure.

Cummins categorizes society into two groups -- the *dominant* and the *dominated*. The dominant group comprises those who control the institutions and reward systems within society; the dominated group is regarded as inherently inferior to the dominant group and denied access to high-status positions within the institutional structure of society. The dominated status of a minority group exposes them to conditions that predispose children to school failure even before they come to school. Membership in the two categories is not predetermined: students, even if they are in the dominated group, who are empowered by their school experiences, will develop the ability, confidence and motivation to succeed academically. They participate competently as a result of having developed a strong cultural identity as well as appropriate school-based knowledge and interactional structures (Cummins, 1986). Students who are disempowered by their school experiences will not develop a strong academic foundation nor positive self-esteem.

Cummins believes that the incorporation of students' language and culture into the school program helps to boost the students' self-concept, and reinforce their cultural identity. Research studies (Cummins, 1986, Campos & Keatinge, 1984) indicate that incorporating students' first language and culture-based programs are a significant indicator of students' success in schools. Two projects, the Carpinteria program discussed by Cummins (1986) and the Kamehameha project (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988) are good examples of how the culture of the learners is incorporated into the learning activities.

Cummins (1996) introduced the concept of additive and subtractive bilingualism. Educators' roles in relation to the incorporation of minority students' language and culture can be placed along an "additive-subtractive" continuum.. Additive bilingualism occurs when educators see their role as adding a second language and cultural affiliation to their students' repertoire, whereas subtractive bilingualism is when educators gradually replace students' primary language and culture. Cummins draws a difference in power relations, categorizing them into coercive and collaborative power relations. Coercive power relations are used by the dominant group to maintain the status quo whereas collaborative power relations can serve to empower and not marginalize. Thus, in this view, power is not a predetermined quality but can be negotiated and mutually generated in interpersonal and intergroup

relations. By extension, relations of power can be exercised to maintain, constrain or enable the range of identities negotiated in the classroom or in the community.

Research in Second Language Acquisition

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, two research studies are significant in examining how the sociocultural context impacts upon the learners' social and cultural identities in learning English. Peirce's (1995) work has contributed towards a better understanding of social identity. Drawing upon her research of immigrant women living in Canada, and her reading in social theory, in particular, the work of Weedon (1987), she draws on the poststructuralist conception of social identity as a multi-layered construct, subject to change and negotiation and a site of struggle. She argues for the use of the term *in vestment*, rather than motivation. She states that the traditional concepts of motivation dominant in the field of SLA do not take into account the complex relationships of power, identity and language learning. The term *investment* more accurately signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of the subjects in her study and the ambivalent attitude they have towards learning the target language. Drawing on Ogbu (1978), the return on investment in learning a language must be seen to commensurate with effort expended on learning. If learners invest their time and effort on learning a second language, they do so with the expectation that their efforts will be rewarded with a "wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital" (1995, p. 17). Thus an investment in learning the target language is an investment in a learner's own social identity, which is not static but constantly shifts across time and space (Peirce, 1995).

The second research study was a two-year study conducted by McKay and Wong (1996) of four adolescent Chinese immigrants to California, USA. In their findings, they stress one more dimension - that of *agency* to Peirce's premise (drawn from Weedon, 1987) that identity is multiple, fluid, and often contradictory. The language learner is both positioned by relations of powers, and resistant to that positioning, and may even set up a counter-discourse that puts him in a more powerful rather than marginalized position. In their findings, they stress that the language learner is not a "generic, ahistorical "stick figure" painted in much literature on second language learning" (McKay and Wong, 1996, p. 603), but is a complex social being with a multitude of fluctuating, at times conflicting needs, and desires. They exist in complex social environments with overwhelmingly asymmetrical power relations, and are subjected to multiple discourses. Learners' subjectivities are sites of contestation. They constantly wrestle with power positioning - resisting positioning, attempting positioning, deploying discourses and counterdiscourses. They are constantly conducting delicate social negotiations in order to obtain viable identities.

Like Peirce, McKay and Wong (1996) conclude that it is important that we recognize the language learner as a complex social being with multiple identities and that the classroom, especially the ESL classroom, be seen as a contestatory discursive site. Anything less, they argue, would make the task of developing helpful educational practices more daunting in these times of rapid demographic change. Both research studies by Peirce (1995) and McKay and Wong (1996) show that the identities of the learners are a site of constant struggle, multi-faceted and non-unitary in nature. The studies by Peirce and McKay and Wong reveal that learning a second language is not

a simple uncomplicated process. It can be a complex social practice that engages the social identities of the language learners in ways that have received inadequate attention to date in SLA theory.

Research on Language and Identity in the Local Malaysian Context

A review of literature shows that there have been a few research studies conducted locally in the Malaysian context on language and identity. Asmah Haji Omar states that interest among Malaysian sociolinguists in language and identity seems to be confined to studies on national identity (Asmah Haji Omar, 1998). This is due in part to the gradual implementation of the national language policy in Malaysia since its Independence in 1957. Asmah Haji Omar (1998) states that “identity, on the lower level, for example the community or group, has not really been given much attention to by the researchers” (1998, p.2). The few studies conducted on identity issues in Malaysia are Maya Khemlani David’s (1996) research on the Sindhis, a minority group, Asmah Haji Omar’s (1991) study on a group of bilingual non-Malay academics, and Asmah Haji Omar’s (1998) investigation on whether there is a correlation between language and ethnicity.

Maya K. David’s (1996) study on three generations of Sindhi settlers in Malaysia found that there has been a great deal of shifting in linguistic usage amongst the Sindhis, namely from the mother tongue, Sindhi, to English. The third generation of Sindhis who have undergone the national system of schooling where Malay is the medium of instruction, have no proficiency in the Sindhi language. A conclusion derived from this study is that Sindhi is no longer an identity factor for the Malaysian Sindhis to characterize their cultural identity.

Asmah Haji Omar’s (1991) study on a group of bilingual non-Malay academics, which comprised mostly Chinese and Indians at a local Malaysian university, found that the primary language of these two ethnic groups usually does not play the role of giving a label to the ethnic group. Most of the subjects responded that they were using the language they were educated in, which was English, as they had been educated in English medium schools. However, there was a gradual trend towards reversing the language shift when it came to their children. Several Chinese and Tamil subjects responded that they were ensuring that their children learn their mother tongues through private tuition, indicating a revival of pride and interest in their ethnic and cultural identity. Asmah states that this can be interpreted as a conscious rebirth of their ethnic heritage (Asmah H. Omar, 1991).

In the third study, Asmah H. Omar (1998) set out to investigate the correlation between linguistic identity, an individual’s ethnic heritage, and the place of linguistic identity in the individual as a member of a group or groups. Data collection comprised interviews with 12 respondents from 3 ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese and Indians) and a questionnaire survey of 83 university students. The findings showed that linguistic identity in the individual is not inborn and not a fixture but “changes with the individual’s development, environment and situations of language use” (1998, p.21). As a result, an individual has multiple linguistic identities which are projected with various degrees of strength. Asmah (1998) states that all in all, identity building comes with nurturing. It is a result of comparing and contrasting, and does not find a breeding ground in homogeneity. For the Malays, the Malay language seems to have

quite a stable existence throughout their lives because of the indigeneity factor of the language, and the fact that speakers use the Malay language as the national language, and as the medium of instruction in their school education. For minority groups, movement away from the original linguistic group is not always towards the majority group. There is a preference for the language which has a higher prestige in the context of the wider world as seen in the movement towards English. Another factor that Asmah cites to explain the defection towards English is its perceived neutrality. Unlike the vernacular languages, English does not possess a first-language speech community in Malaysia, hence movement towards the language means a membership without other cultural constraints (1998).

A recent doctoral research study by Lee, Su Kim (2001, 2003) set out to investigate the impact of the English language on the construction of the sociocultural identities of a selected group of ESL learners in Malaysia. Using a qualitative research approach, 14 Malaysian participants were interviewed using critical ethnography research methods (Carspecken, 1997), personal narratives and a questionnaire. The findings reveal that in a multicultural, post-colonial society like Malaysia, identity issues are complex and multi-layered. Identity shifts take place frequently in strategic and non-strategic ways, and identity constructions of the participants are heavily dependent on the localized contexts. The participants possess a range of diverse identities depending on the contexts and the reference groups they are interacting with, and have to subtly manage the complexities of their multiple identities in order to fit in or belong to the group they were interacting with. The findings revealed that within certain contexts, it is *the non-use* rather than *the use* of the English language that enhances conformity and acceptance. Using the English language within certain contexts where there is resentment towards the English language may bring about hostility, marginalization and even alienation. Effective acquisition of the English language then acquires a new meaning as an effective user in post-colonial multicultural societies means someone who knows not just *how and when to use it* but also *when NOT to use it* . The findings also reveal that knowing English affects identity in non-interactive ways: it offers the user a certain 'neutrality' as it frees the user from the cultural and moral stance of one's native tongues, and allows the user a means of direct self-expression other than the mother tongue. Participants reported that knowing English makes a person more 'open-minded', allows access to alternative views and ideas, and facilitates a more reflective and critical attitude towards one's own culture.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is obvious then that understanding learners' struggles in learning the English language involves not just his/her difficulties in the classroom but also an awareness of how sociocultural meanings are linked in complicated ways to sociocultural identities. Even if no immediate pedagogies arise from research with a contextualist orientation, creating and fostering a critical awareness is an important step taken. Teachers and practitioners should be aware that the classroom is not a neat, self-contained mini-society isolated from the outside world but an integral part of the larger society where the reproduction of many forms of domination and resistance based on gender, ethnicity, class, race, religion and language is a daily event. In Malaysia, it is not uncommon to hear English language teachers complain that their students need to practise the target language more often outside the classroom. This

does not mean that teachers should not encourage their students to use the target language but that they should be aware of the problems their students may face beyond the classroom and teach their students coping strategies. This is more vital especially with students in particular settings who may experience resentment when they use English.

There is a need for more exploration and reflection on how to develop and organize pedagogies to help students in such settings and a need for more appropriate classroom approaches based on a sharper awareness of learners and the complex problems they face outside the classroom. Teachers should engage in self-reflection and examine their own teaching foundations and experiences and cultural biases. The cultural underpinnings of language curricula and teaching must be examined further particularly so in intercultural solutions in which participants are negotiating their sociocultural identities as well as the curriculum. Textbooks and teaching materials should contain local culture and knowledge and writings from local writers and the region to inculcate a sense of pride in one's own cultural and national identity.

In conclusion, the theoretical perspectives and research studies discussed above suggest a distinctively inseparable relationship between language, culture and identity. Individual personal attributes do not predetermine one's destiny in life but are intricately enmeshed into a complex scenario with other dimensions: one's own cultural values, the sociocultural context, language ideology, power relations, the politics of language, which impact upon one's identity causing it to be in a constant state of flux, ever-changing and shifting depending on the changing contexts.

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