

To Be Or Not To Be “Part Of Them”: Micropolitical Challenges in Mainland

Chinese Students’ Learning of English in a Multilingual University

Introduction

The global spread of English and its rising socioeconomic importance has made it crucial for individuals to access English medium (EM) education in pursuit of social mobility in many contexts (Lin, 1999; Nunan, 2003). The appeal of EM education has also been sustained by a widespread belief in its role in helping language learners acquire a better command of the language. With language learning increasingly viewed as being contextually mediated, an EM institution could be considered a “community of practice” for learning English (Wenger, 1998, 2000), which provides learners with opportunities to use English in their academic studies. Such access to English facilitates students’ efforts to improve their English competence. However, the belief that successful learning of English is connected to EM education has been now considered simplistic as the use of English in EM educational settings is often undermined by contextual realities (e.g. Parks & Raymond, 2004). As a mainland Chinese student and researcher, I experienced and investigated these contextual complexities that many migrating international students were faced with in EM educational settings in Britain and Continental Europe (Gao, 2003, 2006). In both Britain and Europe, I became aware of the problem of how Chinese students could

acquire the necessary level of English to survive and thrive in EM educational institutions where they often socialized with each other in academic studies and had little contact with English-speaking students.

This paper reports on an inquiry that examined the contextual mediation of mainland Chinese students' efforts to improve their English competence in a leading EM university (hereafter called the University) in multilingual Hong Kong. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theorization of capital, the paper problematizes the notion of the use of English as one of the "shared" group norms in the University and investigates micropolitical challenges related to the participants' access to social learning networks in their socialization outside language classrooms. To this end, I will first examine "how communities and their practices are structured" by outlining the research context for the inquiry before exploring the participants' "access to the linguistic resources of their communities" (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 312).

Contextualizing the Inquiry

The participants in this inquiry were a group of mainland Chinese undergraduates in the University. In recent years, universities in Hong Kong have started attracting a large number of applicants from the Chinese mainland (Li & Bray, 2007). In 2006 alone, 10,230 students, who had qualified for first tier universities on the Chinese

mainland, applied for 270 undergraduate places allocated to these applicants by the University (“Editorial,” 2006; “Mainland applicants to Hong Kong’s universities,” 2006). It can therefore be inferred that all the participants in the inquiry were among the best academic achievers on the Chinese mainland. However, even these elite students, sharing the same ethnicity with Hong Kong’s Chinese population, may still experience both linguistic and cross-cultural obstacles in their socialization with their local counterparts.

Hong Kong has a fluid, complex linguistic situation, an issue that has been the focus of a large number of studies (e.g. Bolton & Lim, 2000; Davison & Lai, 2007; Lai, 2001; Morrison & Lui, 2000). These studies confirm that Cantonese, often regarded as a regional variety of Chinese, is the dominant language in daily life and the favoured language for most social, cultural, and political occasions. Cantonese is also commonly used for socialization on the campus despite the fact that the University has a high percentage of non-local faculty members and students. English is widely used in the business and professional sectors and constantly promoted as an important asset for individuals’ career and social development as well as a crucial means for Hong Kong to retain its international standing. The importance of Putonghua (also known as Mandarin Chinese), the national language variety shared by millions on the Chinese mainland, has been rising since the handover in 1997.

Mainland Chinese students, except for those from the neighboring regions such as Guangdong, speak Putonghua and little Cantonese. In my inquiry, only one out of the 22 participants claimed to have some knowledge of Cantonese.

Apart from the linguistic barrier, mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese have had dramatically different social, cultural, historical, and political experiences since Hong Kong was ceded to the British in the 19th century. For instance, when the Chinese mainland was still in a state of political turmoil, Hong Kong had already achieved enviable economic success in the region. These differences constitute a significant cultural gap differentiating the two Chinese groups despite the fact that they share a similar cultural heritage (Ho, Chau, Chiu & Peng, 2003; Ma & Fung, 1999; Schack & Schack, 2005). In recent years, although the differences between mainland Chinese and local Chinese are diminishing, it is fair to say that a sociocultural barrier still exists between the two peoples sharing the same ethnic origin, which may create potential problems in the socialization process for mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong.

Micropolitical Processes in Language Learning

In this inquiry, I see language learning as a process involving not only cognitive activities taking place within learners' brain but also their efforts to access and sustain

their access to “the possibilities their various communities offered them” (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 312; also see Oxford, 2003; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Language learning efforts help learners not only improve their linguistic competence but also achieve non-linguistic objectives such as membership in a community or desired self-identities, making language learning “both a kind of action and a form of belonging” for learners (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). Language learners’ access to these “possibilities” are established and sustained by a micropolitical process of individual and collective investments through social exchanges in accordance with Bourdieu’s (1986) theorization of cultural and social capital.

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to inherited or acquired “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” such as one’s linguistic competence in the *embodied state*, “cultural goods” including material resources for learning English in the *objectified state*, and “a form of objectivation” such as educational qualifications from a leading English-medium university or a prestigious secondary school in the *institutionalized state* (p. 242). Social capital is conceptualized as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources” that are related to “a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, or in other words, to membership in a group” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247).

Bourdieu (1986) further theorizes that a social network is not a “natural” or

“social given” and it is “the product of investment strategies”, sustained by continuous exchanges of valuable resources (p. 249). In the language learning process, linguistic competence can be used by language learners to acquire membership in a social network while membership in a particular social group also helps them improve their linguistic competence (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995). However, such exchanges are often related to a process of contest and power play, determining whether or not particular resources are valuable and how these resources can be exchanged. Social exchanges of resources are also processes of social positioning and negotiation towards emergent social networks, revealing individual members’ exercise of beliefs and capacities as well as the profound mediation of pre-existing contextual realities (Gao, 2008; Layder, 1993; Trent, 2006). As a result, even for these elite mainland Chinese students in the inquiry, by theorizing the University as a “community of practice” for learning English, one may risk “exaggerating the internal cohesion and cooperation of collectivities and [...] understating the operation of discourse and power through the communication of group norms” (Morgan, 2007, p. 1046). In fact, when they came to Hong Kong in pursuit of better academic credentials and English competence, they entered a setting with “complex and overlapping communities in which variously positioned participants learn specific, local, historically constructed, and changing practices” (Norton & Toohy, 2001, p.

312). Within these communities at the University, the participants had to deal with micropolitical challenges in gaining access to language learning opportunities.

The Longitudinal Inquiry

This inquiry adopted as its methodological approach a longitudinal ethnographic study and addressed the question:

How do contextual conditions mediate mainland Chinese students' efforts to improve their English competence in the University?

The inquiry is ethnographic in the sense that the study bears features of full-scale ethnographies but can be distinguished from them by its narrow focus on the participants' language learning efforts (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). In the inquiry, I made no pretense of “noncommittal objectivity and scientism encouraged by the positivistic empirical attitude behind descriptive ethnography” in the research process (Canagrajah, 1993, p. 605). However, my ethnographic research has been done in a “systematic, detailed and rigorous” way as advanced by Waston-Gegeo (1988, p. 588) through an extended engagement with research participants to obtain a “thick description” and holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Geertz, 1973, p. 3; also see Harklau, 1994; Willett, 1995).

Data Collection

As can be seen in Table 1, the inquiry was undertaken in three research stages over a period of twenty months (two academic years) (Gao, in press). In the first stage, I interviewed 22 mainland Chinese students in either Chinese or English about their language learning experiences on the Chinese mainland and their perceptions of Hong Kong upon their arrival in Hong Kong. In the second stage, I followed six students for two academic years with a focus on their language learning efforts, using a variety of means to collect data, including regular conversations, observation, field notes, and email correspondence. Two of them left the study after one year as they were “overwhelmed with academic studies”. In the third stage, 15 out of the 22 participants who had been interviewed two years previously, including the longitudinal participants, were interviewed in Chinese or English about their language learning experiences in Hong Kong.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Most of the data in this paper came from the second research stage while data from the third research stage are also included. In the second research stage, I worked as a part-time English instructor at the University and lived with Zhixuan (all the participants’ names are pseudonyms), one of the longitudinal participants, in the same undergraduate hall. Consequently, I was able to observe the participants’ socialization

inside and outside of regular classes to have a better understanding of their learning experiences. Meanwhile, I held weekly meetings in English for two years with Liu, Mengshi, and Yu, who regarded these meetings as opportunities to use English. In most of these informal conversations and meetings, the participants were invited to recount their language learning experiences and reflect on them, apart from talking about anything that might interest them. For this reason, all the data from Liu, Mengshi and Yu were English originals while Zhixuan, my hall mate, always used Chinese with me in our conversations. Regular meetings and conversations helped enhance our mutual interests (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001; Sonali, 2006) while in the process, friendship also developed, which could be considered a way to enhance the trustworthiness of data collected (Tillman-Healy, 2003).

Data Analysis

As the inquiry was to examine the participants' language learning efforts, narratives emerging from the interviews, conversations, and meetings became the focus of analysis. The data were analyzed paradigmatically to “produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5; also see Benson & Nunan, 2005; Smeyers & Verhesschen, 2001). In the analysis, themes related to their struggle for better English in academic studies and

socialization soon became apparent as the data made frequent references to them. These themes were also confirmed by the use of Bourdieu's (1986) theorization of capital in the analysis. The concept of "capital" in Bourdieu (1986) is associated with less empirically accessible components of the social world such as social relations. In this inquiry, the notion of capital is used in a way underscoring the benefits that individuals can have by possessing certain skills/knowledge or having privileged access to certain social networks (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Palfreyman, 2006). Consequently, the analysis focused on how the participants negotiated and sustained their access to cultural and social resources in the language learning process. In this way, Bourdieu's (1986) theorization helped move the thematic analysis "beyond a list-making activity" and allowed me to "pinpoint the links between the current themes and conceptual constructs" (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 167).

In the second research stage, data analysis started as soon as the data collection began. After each conversation, I carefully listened to the recording, summarized it in writing, and made a note of the conversation topics for reference purposes. Sections related to the participants' language learning were also transcribed verbatim straightaway. Then I relied on ongoing reflections on the data collected through various sources (see Table 1) and made regular attempts to refine preliminary interpretations of the data with the participants (Cho & Trent, 2006; Merriam, 1988;

Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first-hand knowledge and experience of campus, including the undergraduate residential hall, and classroom realities helped me interpret the participants' accounts of language learning.

In the research process, the themes that gradually emerged from the analysis became the main plot for me to write drafts of research narratives concerning the participants' language learning experiences at the University. I then sent these drafts to them for confirmation and arranged special meetings to exchange our views concerning the drafts. During these meetings, they also worked together with me to confirm the major themes in their biographical learning experiences in Hong Kong. It was through such an extended engagement with the participants that the participants and I were able to co-construct a "thick description" and holistic understanding of their language learning experiences (Geertz, 1973, p. 3).

To Be Or Not To Be "Part Of Them"

The analysis of the data from the second and third research stages revealed a variety of socialization experiences which had profoundly mediated the participants' efforts to improve their English competence. As an example, Jing, a law student, recalled in the third research stage the following incident:

Extract 1:

Whenever I go to a social occasion and speak English well, they will not say that I am from the mainland. Even if I start speaking Putonghua to them, they still think that I am from some foreign country [...] it makes me feel that they cannot accept a mainland Chinese who speaks good English. [...] When somebody tells me that I am not like a mainland Chinese student at all, this means that he or she has a particular type of mainland Chinese student image in their minds. Even if you actually want to praise me [by saying that I am not from the Chinese mainland], I still feel very bad about it (Jing, May, 13th, 2006, translated from Putonghua¹).

The incident proved to be discouraging her active engagement to learn English as she felt that her legitimate right to speak English as a mainland Chinese student was questioned by local students.

In contrast, Luonan, a business student, had a totally different experience when she was interviewed about her two years' stay in the University. She found that her expertise in drawing comic (Manga) figures was highly valued in a student society for comics appreciation. Her expertise, plus her incompetence in Cantonese, made English a useful and meaningful medium of communication in her socialization with other society members. She described her experience in the second interview:

Extract 2

In the beginning, I relied on an interpreter to interact with local students. She [...] can speak Putonghua and Cantonese very well. [...] If she was not around, we had to speak Putonghua but Hong Kong students' Putonghua was poor. I cannot understand a word of Cantonese so we had to rely on English, [...] the language we all have in common. Then gradually, I found that English was a convenient tool for daily life. I realized that I should learn it well. I also had a few good local friends. [...] They would recommend that I read some English novels, interesting stuff, [...]. Because we are all young, we have similar interests in reading. I found what they recommended me to read was really interesting

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, as is the case with this passage, interview excerpts are English originals.

(Luonan, May 26th, 2006, translated from Putonghua).

However, without being received by local students as a valuable member to their community, it would be unlikely for Luonan to think that she “should learn [English] well” since she used to “hate” it on the Chinese mainland.

The two incidents reported by Jing and Luonan represent the extremes of the range of experiences that the participants had during their studies in Hong Kong. These incidents indicate that the participants’ sustainable access to opportunities for learning and using English was closely related to whether or not they could be considered one of “them” by their local counterparts, who likely either rejected or chose to ignore the participants’ mainland Chinese origin. These findings, retrospectively reported by the participants, were confirmed by my extended engagement with the four case study participants (Mengshi, Yu, Zhixuan and Liu) in the second research stage. In the coming sections, I will use snapshots of key incidents, co-constructed by these participants and me in a reiterative process, to illustrate the micropolitical challenges facing them and their efforts to deal with these challenges in the language learning process.

Mengshi's Language Learning Dilemma

Like many other participants in the inquiry, Mengshi, a business student, found it difficult to conduct academic discussions in English with local students when doing group work. Local students usually used Cantonese to ensure effective discussions since they were reluctant to use English among themselves (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Apparently, the use of English in academic discussions, though something that Mengshi clearly wanted to see happen, might not be what local students in the same group wanted. The use of English, as experienced by Mengshi, often led to divisions in a large group consisting of local and mainland Chinese students. After being asked repeatedly why he found it difficult to use English in academic discussions, Mengshi made the following comment:

Extract 3:

They preferred Cantonese but sometimes we use English. [...] I cannot determine which language is to be used. [...] What can we do? [...] If I had a choice, I would probably choose English because my Cantonese is even worse. Of course, if we insist on using English, they will use English. But when they communicate with each other, they will use Cantonese. It seems there is a wall between them and us. (March 11th, 2006).

As can be seen from Mengshi's experience, academic studies in this EM university presented a dilemma for mainland Chinese students like him, in which they felt obliged to subordinate their pursuit of English competence to the use of a language preferred by local students.

For this reason, Mengshi had undertaken strenuous efforts to learn Cantonese, the main medium for socialization with local Chinese students, so that the “wall between them and us” could be torn down. In the very beginning of his stay in Hong Kong, he not only saw that it was “necessary [for him] to learn Cantonese” (Oct. 2nd, 2004), but he also admitted that “I like to learn Cantonese, [...] I want to understand what people think in Cantonese” (Feb. 5th, 2005). His attitude towards the learning of Cantonese was so positive that he had even tried to join a softball team within his residential hall as the sports team activities helped him “have opportunities to communicate with local students” in Cantonese (Oct. 2nd, 2004). However, a few months after arrival in Hong Kong, Mengshi had already found himself heavily burdened with a dilemma between socialization and language learning:

Extract 4

If I do not work hard (and get good academic results), it does not make difference for me whether I study in Hong Kong or not. [...] I want to work here. [...] or I want to go further abroad. [...] In order to achieve them, I need to improve languages, both Cantonese and English. I need to do well in my academic subjects. (Oct. 25th, 2004)

He became aware of the dilemma when he was becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that local students, with whom he wished to socialize, shared different life priorities and academic aspirations. As can be seen in the above extract, Mengshi was highly committed to acquiring linguistic competence and achieving academic success, believing that the two would “make difference” in his life. His local hall mates

apparently shared no such commitments with him. Gradually, he began to complain about his “noisy” hall mates in our meetings and at one time he even accused them of “doing nothing apart from practising sports and screaming” in his residential hall (May 6th, 2005). Meanwhile, he neither acquired a good command of Cantonese nor integrated well into the local students’ community in the end.

To have more opportunities to use English, Mengshi attempted to use English with his hall mates but local students mostly responded to him in limited Putonghua before Cantonese became the medium for such social exchanges. Apparently, English was not considered proper by them when socializing with a mainland Chinese student. As a result, Mengshi insisted on socializing with exchange students in his hall or professors on the campus:

Extract 5:

[...] so we at least can have some daily conversation. [...] all sorts of things. Politics, [...]. One of the students is from Germany. He is a kind of politics person. He is a law student. He always talks about politics. Other students talk about the Second World War and talk about some nationalists. (Mengshi, April 1st, 2006)

The problem with his effort to socialize with exchange students, as mentioned later by Mengshi, was that he was sometimes lost in these conversations as he lacked sufficient knowledge of the issues being discussed. As a student specializing in economics, he was not able to have debates on historical and political issues, for which he lacked vocabulary or other linguistic means to make meaningful

contributions. As a result, he did not think that such interaction benefited his learning of English as his participation in these conversations could not be sustained.

Yu's Struggle to Learn English

Unlike Mengshi, Yu, an architecture student, had no access to English-speaking exchange students in her residential hall. She also had to spend most of her time working on her designs in the studio, often in pairs or in teams, while her teammates were most likely to be local Chinese students. As a result, she found that the necessity for her to speak Cantonese was overwhelming:

Extract 6

I try to communicate with my classmates in Cantonese because local students, after all, like to use Cantonese. If I use Putonghua or English, it will cause barriers in our exchanges. They will not be willing to talk to me. If I use Putonghua, Putonghua will be too difficult for them. (Sept. 28th, 2004)

Like Mengshi, Yu had tried to learn Cantonese through participating in various social and academic activities with local students in order to be “part of them” (Nov. 20th, 2004). In a relatively short time, she managed to understand Cantonese and speak it. However, a functional command of Cantonese did not make her life and study easier. She still felt stigmatized when her accent betrayed her mainland Chinese identity and a local student switched to Putonghua after talking to her for a while in social gatherings. Although she appreciated that it was most likely to be a good-will gesture

on the part of the local speaker, she also saw the change as “an act to differentiate my identity from theirs”, a reminder of her failure to be “part of them” (Nov. 20th, 2004).

Yu also struggled to learn English as she did not want to “lose face” before her local study mates who had a high command of English. In English lectures and tutorials, she had to defend her architectural design ideas in English before them. Unlike Mengshi, when working in pairs, she soon discovered that she could make use of her incompetence in Cantonese to create opportunities to practise English. Apparently, her local partner found it important for them to work in a medium in which both could make themselves understood. In fact, it is possible that working in pairs had made it difficult for Yu’s local Chinese student partner to keep using Cantonese without undermining their shared pursuit in academic studies. In comparison with Mengshi’s local teammates, the local student did not have much choice and could not possibly exclude Yu from participation when working with her. In several meetings, Yu mentioned her use of English with the local student partner:

Extract 7:

I cannot express myself in Cantonese efficiently. So I use English and Cantonese at the same time. (Nov. 20th, 2004)

Extract 8:

When we (my partner and I) were designing the model, I kept talking English. (Dec. 18th, 2004)

Unfortunately, once Yu’s incompetence in Cantonese disappeared, so did her

legitimate opportunities to use English with local Chinese students. Consequently, a recurring theme of the conversations that I had with her over the two years was the regret that she had “been using too much Cantonese and had no opportunities to use English” (Dec. 4th, 2004). In addition, Yu also found it difficult to use English when working in large groups. This suggests that the use of English was permitted when all the members needed it to pursue academic knowledge collaboratively. Once there were alternatives, especially those that were more preferable to local students, mainland Chinese students like Mengshi and Yu would find it difficult to insist on the use of English. In other words, EM tertiary education meant no guaranteed access to the use of English and such access had to be negotiated by the participants with other members in the same setting. Such negotiation required them to utilize various resources, in particular those valued by “others”, rather than simply use their incompetence in Cantonese to justify the use of English.

Zhixuan's Diplomacy in Language Learning

Among all the participants, Zhixuan was most active in utilizing his valuable resources, such as expertise, competence or knowledge, to “barter” for access to learning opportunities and the English competence of local and non-local students in the same setting. Zhixuan, a chemistry student, always believed that he would go to

the United States for postgraduate studies upon graduation and regarded his stay in Hong Kong as transitory. Immediately after arrival in Hong Kong, he attended a summer English camp, in which a group of American college students acted as tutors. My observation of the camp activities together with his narratives confirmed that he experienced using English intensively for social communication in the camp. He was physically close to the American tutors in the observed events and had developed an ongoing relationship with them through email exchanges afterwards. His understanding of American culture in particular, his knowledge of American classics such as De Tocqueville's work, must have impressed his American counterparts deeply. His interest in Christianity and his perception of Christianity as an integral part of American culture might have also made it easier for him to establish a close relationship with the American tutors, all of whom were evangelical Christians. In the camp, he believed that he had made significant progress in speaking, though he considered himself "probably the weakest among all the scholarship students" (July 27th, 2006, translated from Putonghua) in English in the beginning.

After the summer camp, Zhixuan continued carefully selecting friends to socialize with according to their English competence. For instance, he used his chemistry knowledge to negotiate with his local Chinese course mates for opportunities to use English in academic discussions. As he had a much better

understanding of chemistry than his local counterparts, his chemistry knowledge empowered him with the right to decide the medium of discussion with local students.

In these discussions, he could appropriate other discussants' English usage for immediate application:

Extract 9:

I made a few friends with my department because we have business to do. [...] Of course, they talk in English. Some people will try to get something from me [...] because I know a lot of chemistry terms in Chinese [...]. I learnt all my chemistry in China in Chinese. (Zhixuan, Feb. 7th, 2005, translated from Putonghua)

Apart from socializing with other students in English, he was also committed to improving his English through an intensive study of English texts. Right after the English camp, he mentioned that he “had already begun to read English books, mainly to improve my English and my vocabulary” (August, 25th, 2004, translated from Putonghua). Two years later, he elaborated on how he struggled to acquire a better command of English through reading and writing as follows:

Extract 10

In Hong Kong, I mainly focused on reading and writing because they were very useful. At that time, I could only finish one page in one hour. [...] whenever I met an unknown word, I would look it up. It was hard. In the beginning, [...] I spent much more time learning English than I planned. [...] I just focused on learning English. (July 27th, 2006, translated from Putonghua)

As can be seen in his account, he saw no short-cut in learning English even though he always made efforts to make it possible for him to use more English.

Apart from hard work, there was also a personal price for Zhixuan to pay. Later in the inquiry, he admitted that his insistence on using English somehow undermined his quality of life in Hong Kong. Though he had been quite successful in deciding which language should be used in academic discussions, I was aware that he alienated himself from local students in his residential hall, who mostly spoke Cantonese. In his words, he had “a lot of business with [his] classmates but not with [his] hall mates” (Feb. 7th, 2005, translated from Putonghua). He did not have the linguistic means to interact with them and neither was he in a position to impose English in his socialization with them. As a result, he saw such interaction bringing no returns for the effort that was required of him:

Extract 11:

I just sleep in my hall and spend most of my time outside of my hall, either in the library or classrooms. I seldom talk to my floor mates. They can only speak Cantonese. And they are too shy to speak Putonghua. (Feb. 7th, 2005, translated from Putonghua)

Consequently, although he could manage his language learning more successfully in Hong Kong than many other mainland Chinese students, he still suffered from social isolation as a mainland Chinese student committed to academic studies and learning English. In other words, Zhixuan had to compromise part of his well-being to pursue his language learning goals. In the end, his learning efforts did pay off in the form of improved English competence.

Liu's Ingenuity in Language Learning

In contrast to Zhixuan's decision not to socialize with local students in Cantonese, Liu was proactive in utilizing the dynamic linguistic complexity to support her efforts in learning English. She saw herself as a "go-between" between the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong. In fact, among all the longitudinal case study participants, she was the only one who developed fairly balanced competence in both English and Cantonese. She invested her time and energy in making friends and socializing with local students at her residential hall and in her department, which contributed to her expanded access to local students' community and Cantonese use as well as her increased social opportunities for using English. She managed her pursuit of English competence by utilizing her own linguistic resources to build and sustain a mutually beneficial relationship with a local student as follows:

Extract 12:

One day, I got a message from an Arts student, a girl. She said that she was interested in learning Putonghua. She asked me whether I was interested in language exchange with her. At that time, my Cantonese was poor. So I agreed. For the first time meeting, both of us talked in Putonghua because I could not express myself in Cantonese. Last night, both of us were speaking in Cantonese (laughter). [...] Because her Putonghua was not too good, sometimes she would use a lot of English to explain herself. Once she started speaking English to me, I would switch to English. But when she switched back to Putonghua, I would try to speak in Cantonese. If I failed in my attempt, I would use Putonghua. It was just like that. In the beginning, I would ask her about basic terms in

Cantonese. In the middle, we spoke more English because she found my English was good. So she was interested in practising English with me. In the end, both of us switched to Cantonese. I think that it is funny. (Liu, Sept. 3rd, 2004).

In comparison with Yu, Liu appears to be more flexible in her language use and ready to seize any opportunity to use English without necessarily undermining the social relationship that sustained such language exchanges. Most of these social exchanges took place outside of her regular time for academic studies while Yu's social opportunities to use English were largely restricted to the time she spent with her partner on architectural designs.

The happy picture portrayed in the above extract, however, does not mean that she always had a wonderful time socializing with local students in developing her multilingual competence. There were more than a few occasions when she found herself in serious conflict with local students, frustrating her efforts to learn languages through socialization. On one such occasion, a student proposal competition, she intended to make a group project proposal linking the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong, something that she felt that she could make meaningful contributions to, while her local counterparts wanted to focus on popular issues among themselves. In the voting process concerning whose proposals were to be adopted, she disappointingly found that all local students rejected her proposal. She suspected that the proposal was not treated seriously because it was about the Chinese mainland:

Extract 13:

I would like to talk about mainland [...]. It created problems for me because sometimes I had to be judged by a group of local students. They would think you odd, very odd, talk differently. When their culture and values are not there, they think that you are not one of them. [...] Maybe we have different concerns and cultural values. I feel that I am not one of them. (Liu, Nov. 15th, 2004)

The setback came as a shock to her as she then considered herself well integrated into the local students' community. The incident shows that it is sometimes hazardous for mainland Chinese students like Liu to share their resources with local students as their contributions are not always considered valuable. Immediately after this incident, she withdrew from her socialization with local students for some time and found herself using more Putonghua and less Cantonese and English:

Extract 14

I speak more and more Putonghua now. Now some people approached... Hong Kong people, I will say Putonghua to them sometimes. I will not say Cantonese to them. I do not know why (March, 9th, 2005).

Although the impact of the incident on her gradually diminished, Liu's attitude towards local students remained fluidly ambiguous as she continued socializing with them. Sometimes she felt that she had to prepare for ways out of Hong Kong upon graduation. Other times she was committed to being part of the local Chinese community in Hong Kong and remaining there upon graduation. Such ambiguous feelings characterized Liu as well as many other mainland Chinese students'

experiences of language learning and socialization.

Discussion

So far, this paper has examined the participants' efforts to improve their English competence as mediated by broad sociocultural and structural realities in a prestigious EM university in Hong Kong. The emerging findings from the inquiry problematizes any uncritical assumption of EM institutions as "natural" or "social" given networks with a shared pursuit of linguistic competence (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). In the inquiry, the University was found to have "complex and overlapping communities" and could not be considered a coherent and homogenous community facilitating the participants' efforts to learn and use English (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 312; also see Morgan, 2007). The participants were also found to have approached the task of learning English with various personal objectives, including linguistic improvement, academic aspirations, membership in local communities, and desired self-identities. As a result, even for these elite learners in a leading EM university, there were daunting micropolitical challenges undermining their pursuit of these linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes in learning English.

At the contextual level, these challenges were largely related to the linguistic and sociocultural differences in their socialization with local students (e.g. Bolton & Lim,

2000; Ma & Fung, 1999; Schack & Schack, 2005). These differences became barriers evident in the socialization process between mainland Chinese students and their local counterparts as particular cultural stereotypes of mainland Chinese were often resisted by these mainland students. For this reason, the participants in the inquiry felt that they were sometimes welcomed by local students and other times there was a “wall” between them and local students. At the institutional level, EM education as an incentive was not sufficient enough to create a homogenous social network for the participants to learn and use English due to the presence of different social groups and contradictory learning priorities. They experienced various contradictions in their language learning and academic studies as mediated by these contextual complexities. For instance, the English medium instruction of the University compelled the participants to improve their English while the dominant use of Cantonese in socialization obliged them to acquire Cantonese in order to integrate themselves into the community of local students.

In accordance with Bourdieu (1986), the fragmented nature of the University required the participants to reconstruct the site through negotiating and exchanging valuable resources and expertise so that they could sustain their access to opportunities for learning and using English (also see Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Palfreyman, 2003). By reconstructing the site to support their language

learning efforts, they could then “[combine] personal transformation with the evolution of social structures” through their participation in it (Wenger, 2000, p. 227).

However, as revealed in the inquiry, it was never easy for them to establish and sustain social networks in the process of learning English. This finding draws attention to the efforts that the participants undertook to cope with these micropolitical challenges in their language learning process.

In light of their language learning objectives, Zhixuan and Liu assessed the contextual conditions to identify potential allies among different members in the learning setting. They were aware at what cost they might be able to access their allies’ linguistic resources and endured losses such as isolation and feelings of rejection resulting from their investment efforts. For instance, Liu manipulated the relationships between Cantonese, English, and Putonghua to have an ongoing access to language learning opportunities. Zhixuan did not try to socialize with his hall mates for learning and using English partly because he knew that his academic knowledge was of little use in enabling him to impose the use of English when with his Cantonese-speaking hall mates. In contrast, although Mengshi and Yu made efforts to improve their English through social use, they failed to create sustainable social networks supporting their efforts to learn and use English. Their apparent lack of diplomacy and ingenuity in social exchanges might help explain their failure but time

constraints, study pressure and conflicting life priorities could also be attributed causes. In addition, it is also noteworthy in the inquiry that Zhixuan and Liu's relative success in socialization often appear to be one-sided. In particular, Zhixuan could be seen as simply appropriating cultural values of his American interlocutors to have opportunities for learning and using English. Meanwhile, Liu's failed attempt to make a bi-directional cultural exchange in the project proposal incident revealed how fragile and artificial her supportive social networks were. Participating in these social networks, the participants might have to dissociate themselves from their mainland Chinese origin temporarily in the process or see their supportive networks disintegrating before them at any moment (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995). Therefore, it remains a perpetual question for mainland Chinese students like the participants in the inquiry as to how investments should be made and whether or not they are willing to make such investments.

Conclusion

This inquiry has explored the challenges that mainland Chinese students had in their efforts to learn and use English in an English medium (EM) university in Hong Kong. The findings from this inquiry challenge any taken-for-granted assumption of language learners' English improvement in EM universities in multilingual contexts.

The findings also suggest that successful learning of English emerges from an interactive process of these learners' critical understanding of the context and their efforts in extending social networks, such as investing in social exchanges.

Drawing on the findings from the inquiry, EM universities in multilingual contexts may undertake various efforts to support their migrating students' efforts to learn and use English. To name a few, they can provide courses to help these learners acquire contextually important languages or help create cross-cultural dialogue opportunities between local and non-local students for mutual understanding. They may help migrating students become aware of the social networks desired by these students as English language learners and show them ways to access these social networks. They may also help them identify elements in a context for reconstruction so that they could "open up access within power structures and cultural alternatives" in the process of learning English (Oxford, 2003, p. 79). Whatever these efforts may be, EM institutions in multilingual contexts need to empower these English language learners with the capacity to cope with these micropolitical challenges and take appropriate actions in sustaining their access to social networks. By doing so, they could then help these learners make calculated decisions concerning their language learning efforts so that they could "claim the right to speak outside the classroom" and access opportunities for learning and using English (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 26).

In comparison with EM universities in Great Britain or North America, an EM university in Hong Kong does not have the prevalent use of English as the medium for socialization. However, the relative linguistic homogeneity does not negate the multilingual and multicultural realities in a given EM university in contexts other than Hong Kong due to the existence of different social groups, each having their own sociocultural and linguistic resources. Like the participants in this inquiry, migrating students to EM universities in other contexts are also likely to be faced with the questions as to how social networks can be established and sustained to support their pursuit of English competence as well as whether or not they are willing to undertake such efforts. These students are also likely to make varying decisions concerning these critical questions in their efforts to learn and use English, revealing what matters most to them and what their short and long-term language learning goals are. As English competence is crucial for the migrating students to survive and succeed in EM universities, further research is needed to examine how these multilingual and multicultural complexities are being transformed into language learning resources by and for these students and what more could be done by and for them in the process of learning English.

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Table 1: The Inquiry

Research Stages	Data Collection	Number of Participants	Remarks
1st Stage (August-September, 2004)	Biographical interviews	22	21 interviews transcribed
2 nd Stage (August, 2004-July, 2006)	Longitudinal ethnographic methods, including regular conversations, observation, field notes, and email correspondence	6	2 dropped out after one year's participation. Only 4 participants' narratives are included in this paper.
3 rd Stage (April-July, 2006)	Interviews	15	Including 6 participants in the 2 nd stage