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Language Choice and Identity Construction in Peer Interactions: Insights from a Multilingual University in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Informed by linguistic ecological theory and the notion of identity, this study investigates language uses and identity construction in interactions among students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a multilingual university. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with two groups of students: Hong Kong and mainland Chinese students. The findings indicate that, while different languages position their speakers in different symbolic spaces, language users employ a variety of languages for different identification purposes, and exercise symbolic power in various ways in order to be heard and respected. It is also found that language often plays a substantial role in achieving a sense of intimacy among group members and that the huge inherent differences between Hong Kong and mainland China, lead to a mutual non-identification between Hong Kong and mainland students. The study extends understandings of the interconnected relations of languages and context.

Keywords: linguistic ecology, identity construction, multilingualism, cross-border students, Hong Kong

Introduction

In recent years, universities in Hong Kong (HK) have attracted a large number of applicants from mainland China (Li and Bray 2007). Only those students who qualified for first-tier universities on the Chinese mainland meet the baseline for undergraduate programs in universities in HK. However, these students, who have the same ethnicity as the Chinese population in HK, still experience linguistic and cross-cultural obstacles to their socialization (Gu 2011).

The complex and fluid linguistic situation in HK has been dealt with in a large number of studies (e.g., Lai 2001; Li 2009; Tse, Lam, Loh and Lam 2007). These indicate that Cantonese is the dominant language in daily life and is favorably used on most political, social and cultural occasions among the indigenous Chinese people of HK. Although the universities in HK have a relatively high proportion of non-local staff and students, Cantonese is the most commonly used language in out-of-class activities and communication. Widely used in the business and professional sectors, English is also regarded as a critical symbol of HK's international image and as an important asset in respect of individuals' professional and social advancement. Since China resumed sovereignty over HK in 1997, the importance of Putonghua, the national language on the Chinese mainland, has been burgeoning. Putonghua is increasingly used, especially in business and official communication, and is becoming an important subject in most primary and secondary schools. Except for those from such neighboring provinces as Guangdong, mainland students speak Putonghua and little Cantonese.

The particular complexities of its past and present circumstances have rendered HK culturally different from mainland China. HK was isolated from mainland China from 1949 until the mid-1980s. While HK was being integrated into the rising global economy, the Chinese mainland was in a state of political and cultural turmoil. In HK, great emphasis is put on economic success, in strong contrast to the more traditional, Confucian Chinese value that cultural and scholarly achievements should stand as the true mark of intellectual and worldly achievement (Simpson 2007). In recent years, economic development on the Chinese mainland and frequent business transactions between HK and mainland have gradually reduced the differences. However, it is fair to say that the sociocultural differences between the two peoples, despite the same ethnicity, exist as barriers to the socialization process of mainland Chinese students in HK.

Recent studies investigating mainland Chinese students' learning experiences in universities in HK (e.g., Gu 2011; Gao and Trent 2009; Gao 2010) invariably focus on the viewpoints and experiences of the mainland students. HK students' perspective on how they position themselves and are positioned in cross-cultural interactions, and how they view the relationships with mainland counterparts has been little accounted for. A more holistic view of cross-cultural interaction will be presented here by exploring the voices of different student groups. This study, through a lens of linguistic ecology, investigates how Cantonese, English

and Putonghua are used and how the identities of the two groups of students are constructed in peer interactions in a multilingual university in HK. In the following sections, the notions of linguistic ecology and identity that guide the study are discussed. The methodology is then introduced before the findings are presented and discussed.

An ecological perspective on multilingualism

The key concept behind language ecology, according to Haugen (1972, 35), is "the study of interactions between any given language and its environment". In multilingual contexts, the study of language ecology is the "study of diversity within specific sociopolitical settings in which the processes of language use create, reflect and challenge particular hierarchies and hegemonies, however transient these might be" (Creese and Blackledge 2010, 104). An ecological approach permits one to pull apart perceived natural language orders rather than merely describe the relationships between situated speakers of different languages.

An increasing body of research has been conducted on linguistic ecology in multilingual classroom contexts. Prolyn's (2008) study showed that classroom ecologies are embedded in local, national and global ecologies, and have implications for access and equity in education. Focusing on the talk around texts, Martin (2003) and Jaffe (2003) found that texts are used to position languages, teachers and learners. Exploring how different languages are positioned, Boyd (2003) investigated six high school classrooms in Sweden, and found that judgments of teachers' foreign-accented Swedish are generalized to judgments of their overall Swedish language proficiency and to their professional competence. Focusing on the moments in class when the bilingual assistants use the children's home or heritage language in somewhat open-ended exchanges with the children, Martin-Jones and Saxena's (2003) study showed that bilingual teachers contest the traditional positioning of native language and culture outside the classroom, and bring them in as resources for learning.

The previous studies in classroom contexts indicate that the multilingual practices, interactions and relationships among students in classroom contexts are closely related to local, national and even global linguistic ecologies, and that languages are positioned and utilized by their users to fashion their own identities. One may argue that school contexts, which are becoming more and more hybrid in the era of globalization, would present an even more complex scenario of linguistic ecology. Interesting findings are drawn from an in-depth case study of students' linguistic practices at a multiethnic Melbourne high school, in which Willoughby (2009) argues that the use of a language other than English is shaped by local conditions at school, and that detailed analysis of students' linguistic practices can help explain interethnic relations. Therefore, there is a need to deepen the understanding of the language choice in interactions between students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a multilingual school context. Given that language use is intrinsically related to identity (Barkhuizen and de Kelerk 2006), this study also aims to examine identity construction in

cross-cultural interactions.

Identity

As Weedon (1997, 21) points out, “language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed”. The status of different languages, discourse or registers is unequal in the linguistic marketplace (Pavlenko 2000). Language is viewed as a form of symbolic capital that can be later transformed into economic and social capital. This view makes it possible to “link the individual and the social in the L2 learning process, tracing ways in which particular linguistic varieties and practices become legitimized and imbued with values or stigmatized and devalued in the linguistic marketplace” (Pavlenko 2000, 88). Perhaps even more important, identities are found to be performed in situated episodes of talk. As Pennycook (2003, 528) points out, “it is not that people use language varieties because of who they are, but rather that we perform who we are by (among other things) using varieties of language”. Similarly, Davies and Harre (1999, 37) see identity as individuals’ constant positioning in interactions with others, where positioning is defined as “the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines”. Based on the notions of linguistic ecology and identity, the collection and analysis of data were guided by the following question:

> How are the linguistic practices and the identities of two groups of students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are mutually constituted in peer interactions in a multilingual university in HK?

Research context and methodology

Hong Kong Institute of Education (the Institute) is the only institution dedicated solely to professional teacher education in HK. Currently, around 80% of HK’s kindergarten teachers, 84% of primary school teachers and 30% of secondary school teachers are graduates of the Institute. There are now some 7,000 pre-service and serving teachers on campus. Among the students at the Institute, around 94% are from HK, slightly over 5% from mainland China and nearly 1% are internationals students.

In order to answer the research question, the article draws on individual interviews with ten students (five from HK and five from the mainland) and four focus group interviews with 20 students (ten from HK and ten from the mainland) conducted from February to April 2010. In the individual interviews, which lasted approximately 50 minutes each, the participants’ views on intra-group interactions, cross-group interactions and the use of languages on campus were elicited using a semi-structured interview guide. Four focus groups interviews, approximately 90 minutes each, were conducted to explore any unusual or interesting information emerging from the individual interviews and to identify and confirm the continually

emerging themes. A mixed code of Putonghua, Cantonese and English was used with HK students, while Putonghua and English were used with mainland students. Data extracts in Chinese in this article have been translated into English by the author. Unless otherwise indicated, all extracts are taken from individual interviews.

As most mainland Chinese students take part in English and Chinese language education programs, we may assume that there are more interactions between HK and mainland students in these two departments; therefore, all participants were recruited from these two departments. Year four students were selected in order to gain a better understanding of the developmental processes in peer interactions through participants' retrospective accounts of their experiences. All agreed to participate by responding to an invitation from the author. The following tables present a brief overview of the backgrounds of the participants mentioned by name in this paper. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1 Mainland Chinese participants

Name	Interview type	Gender	Place of Origin	Native language(s)	Department
Xu	Individual	F	Zhejiang	Putonghua	English
Zheng	Individual	F	Guangdong	Putonghua, Cantonese	English
Zhu	Individual	M	Hubei	Putonghua	English
Yuan	Individual	F	Zhejiang	Putonghua	English
Liang	Individual	M	Guangdong	Putonghua, Cantonese	Chinese
Wu	Focus group	F	Zhejiang	Putonghua	English
Yang	Focus group	F	Guangdong	Putonghua, Cantonese	English
Lee	Focus group	F	Yunnan	Putonghua	Chinese
Huang	Focus group	F	Fujian	Putonghua	Chinese
Cheng	Focus group	F	Hunan	Putonghua	Chinese

Table 2 HK participants

Name	Interview type	Gender	Place of Origin	Native language	Department
Winnie	Individual	F	HK	Cantonese	English
Wanzhen	Individual	F	HK	Cantonese	English
Angela	Individual	F	HK	Cantonese	English
Puiling	Individual	F	HK	Cantonese	Chinese
Waifei	Individual	F	HK	Cantonese	Chinese
Carol	focus group	F	HK	Cantonese	Chinese
Lisa	focus group	F	HK	Cantonese	English
David	focus group	M	HK	Cantonese	English
Cecily	focus group	F	HK	Cantonese	English

The process of data analysis was ongoing, recursive and iterative, and operated in tandem with the data collection (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The qualitative research software NVivo1 was used for the first stage of this study as an analytical tool for categorizing and coding data, while allowing for a range of possibilities in terms of alternative approaches to handle the data. A "selected reading approach" (van Manen 1990, 93) was adopted to uncover themes related to the research question. This means that, when reading the data, the statements, phrases and words the participants used were examined to reveal their peer relationships and attitudes towards language use. Once this provisional hypothesis emerged, "cross-case analysis" was conducted to test data collected from other participants to see whether this hypothesis could be confirmed, modified or discarded.

Findings

1. Cross-group interaction in a multilingual university

Both HK and mainland students admitted that there was not enough contact between the two groups and attributed this phenomenon to their counterparts' tendency to stick within their respective first language (L1) peer groups. Below are typical responses:

> Winnie (HK): We have few chances to make friends with mainland students. They all like to have fun within their own group and it is not easy to really get to know them. Sometimes our Putonghua is not good enough to completely follow what they are saying.
>
> Huang (mainland): we would like to try various new things. That's why most mainland students start learning Cantonese right after arriving here. We also try to find chances to interact with international students in English. Maybe they need a sense of security by staying within Cantonese-speaking groups.

Winnie and Huang both assign agency to the counterpart group for the decision to form L1 groups. L1 choice in the respective groups emerges as an important element that makes the others feel excluded. Huang establishes a difference between mainland and local students by pointing out that 'we' are ready to accept new things while 'they' need a sense of security by adhering to Cantonese-speaking students.

A developmental process of some mainland students' participation in host community can be found in some comments:

> Zhu (mainland): They are only interested in where you are from, why you come to HK, and whether you want to work here after graduation. It seems that they are doing research on you. In the first year, I really wanted to become a member of their group, but they kept saying: "you are different from us". Then I gave up. The two groups don't have much contact now.
>
> Xu (mainland): I still feel marginalised even after studying here for nearly four years. Now I don't care much about that. I just try to work harder and learn more.

Zhu depicts a three-stage process that goes from initial enthusiasm for getting involved, to feeling excluded from the local Cantonese group, to sticking within the Putonghua group. It seems that Xu's marginal status for an extended period has become an impetus for her

non-participation in the local community and for her and other mainland students to work even harder.

The separation is also partly an artifact of their different cultural and interactional norms that can make interaction difficult and hard to develop, as a HK student comments:

> Puiling (HK): We would like to stay and have fun within our group. It is like you have already got a circle, and you don't want to go into another one. We like Karaoke, going shopping, but mainland students don't like to. They spend more time studying.

Puiling's comments that mainland students feel bored with HK students' enthusiasm for shopping, hanging out at Karaoke bars and spending time studying not only reveal the different habits and living styles of the two groups, but also demonstrate that simple things can symbolize one's group identity.

Likewise, similar concerns about the divergences in values and attitudes are expressed by some mainland students:

> Lee (mainland): I find I have very different values, attitudes from them. Local students never start working on the project until the deadline is right ahead. They know little about Chinese history and geography. I don't want to work with them and talk to them much because we have so little in common.

Mainland and HK students have different study habits and HK students' lack of knowledge of Chinese history and geography is also a major barrier to effective communication. This weakens Lee's willingness to engage in team work with HK students and leads to her voluntary withdrawal from the local group.

After initial enthusiasm for interacting with counterpart groups fades because of linguistic and cultural barriers, most members of both groups choose to stick within their respective L1 group. An 'otherization' discourse can be found in the above excerpts. HK and mainland students hold different explanations for the division of the two groups. The HK group imply that mainland students choose to stick within their own group, have little interest in what HK students like to do and give them no chance to interact, whereas mainland students state that, in spite of their efforts to fit into the local community, they experience being marginalized, and consequently decide to revert back to their own group.

2. HK students' identity in cross-group interaction

When asked what language is most used in communication with mainland students and why, HK students provide the following representative answer:

> Wanzhen (HK): We usually use Putonghua. I am not sure whether they can understand Cantonese very well. Even if they can understand, I want to show my respect for their language. I think we are like hosting the guests from the mainland.

The choice of Putonghua in communication with mainland students does not mean that

Wanzhen identifies with Putonghua. Rather, a clear separation between HK and the mainland is established by referring to Putonghua as “their language”.

Further exploring the underlying reasons for the choice of language, we may find from the following extract that HK students’ use of Putonghua creates a certain distance rather than intimacy:

> Cecily: I asked them, “Hong Kong is like this. Can you understand our culture? What is your culture like?”
> Lisa: One reason why I don’t feel comfortable communicating with them is that I have always to be very careful in choosing topics.
> Author: Why?
> Lisa: I am afraid if I talk about something like fashion, movie stars, they know little and will feel embarrassed. They are so different from us.
> Author: Do you use Putonghua?
> Lisa: Yes, because I feel Cantonese should be used only when talking with Hong Kong students. (focus group, HK)

A strong sense of division from mainland China is reflected when Cecily asks the mainland students “can you understand our culture?” and Lisa states “they are so different from us”. A sense of superiority can be detected in Lisa’s carefully chosen topics and her desire not to embarrass mainland students by raising topics with which they might not be familiar, because her concern is based on the assumption that mainland students do not know much about fashion and entertainment. The use of Putonghua does not establish solidarity but signals difference, as reflected in “Cantonese should be used when talking with HK students”.

The majority of HK students admit that they have little sense of belonging to China. Exploring the underlying reasons, we get the following representative answer:

> Ruby: HK is cleaner, safer and richer. We have a mixture of Western and Chinese cultures. China is not so developed and many don’t queue… I always tell the international students that I am a Hongkongese. (focus group, HK)

HK students indicate that they perceive negative meanings associated with the identity of Chinese, so they always emphasize that they are from HK when communicating with international students. They regard HK as a culturally and economically advanced place, in strong contrast to mainland China, which they view as underdeveloped and uncivilized.

Behind their strong self-identification as Hongkongese, HK students present an ambivalent relationship with Putonghua and China:

> Waifai (HK): Geographically we are connected, but from what I felt and what others told me, we are not the same. I can only say HK is getting closer to China, but still needs more time to be integrated.

> Winnie (HK): Cantonese is our language. English, well, if you can speak very good English, it means you are from a good family, well-educated and you will be respected by others. I know Putonghua is important. But we are emotionally far away from it.

The students create a distance from China and Putonghua. The status of the three languages on campus and even in HK society is well described in Winnie’s account: Cantonese is

important for HK students' primary identity; English proficiency represents one's education level and sometimes family background; Putonghua is otherized as "we are emotionally far away from it".

3. Mainland students' identities in cross-group interaction

Most mainland students report that they tend to use a mixed code of Putonghua, Cantonese and English when communicating with HK students:

> Wu: They like using Putonghua to communicate with us. We also want to practice Cantonese, but I am not confident and I cannot express myself very well in Cantonese. Sometimes our inaccurate Cantonese pronunciation was laughed at.
> Zhou: We often use a mixed code of Putonghua, English and Cantonese.
> (focus group, mainland)

A similar division was established by the mainland students who repeatedly refer to HK students as "they" and mainland students as "we" or "us". In contrast to HK students, who more often tend to use Putonghua, mainland students rely on a mixed code of three languages. They point out that their lack of confidence in Cantonese is one reason for them to avoid using Cantonese much in communication.

In contrast to most HK students' strong identification as Hongkongese, mainland students construct shifting identities in interactions with different groups of students on campus. The following comment is representative:

> Xu (mainland): I think we are all Chinese. But they think mainland China is very underdeveloped and we are very different. At first I was uncomfortable with that, but gradually I have become used to that and don't care much… The international students don't care about whether you are from HK or the mainland. I usually just say I am Chinese. But when we communicate inside our mainland group, we distinguish our hometowns.

Mainland students report that HK students perceive them as a totally different group of people who come from underdeveloped and less civilized areas, from which perception mainland students sense discrimination, and find this contradicts the inclusive view they initially held that HK and mainland students are both Chinese. While they identify themselves as, and are positioned as, Chinese in interactions with international students who do not "care about whether [one is] from HK or the mainland", they emphasize their regional identity with other mainland peers. The shifting identities of mainland students may be reflected in Lee's statement: "The feelings are complicated after I studied in HK from mainland China. My identities are always changing based on what people I am talking to and what contexts I am in."

According to mainland students, HK students' "rigid and fixed view" on mainland China prevents them from having a comprehensive understanding of modern China. For example,

> Xu (mainland): Some of them have been to very few places in China and just imagined all places as very poor and underdeveloped. How can they ignore the fast development in China in the past years? For them, Hongkonese and Chinese are two different concepts.

Xu argues that HK students' limited knowledge of mainland China and their lack of a developmental view make them keep their distance from mainland China and feel reluctant to be considered Chinese.

The above findings indicate that, as cross-border students who are neither good at the local language nor familiar with local culture, gaining legitimacy is not an easy thing. Mainland students seem to turn to a multilingual identity:

> Zhu (mainland): We cherish the chance of studying here. Their identity of Hongkongese gives them a strong sense of security, but we cannot rely on our mainland background to work here. Maybe that is why we are keener to participate in extra-curricular activities and to join in the internship overseas programs. We are more motivated to learn languages and different cultures. We are more open to new things and tolerant about diverse ideas. But they judge everything according to HK values and habits.

The above extract constructs mainland students' multicultural and multilingual identity as that of one who has living and studying experiences in both mainland China and HK, who has wide exposure to different cultures, and who is more open-minded. Lacking local experiences and realizing that the symbolic resources associated with the mainland background are hardly recognized here, mainland students indicate that they need to work harder than HK peers, whose HK identity can largely ensure their study and work.

We may find an antagonistic obstacle emerging between HK identity and mainland Chinese identity. However, it would be beneficial if students from both groups could maintain an awareness that contingency and ambiguity is inevitable in any identity and develop "the agonistic appreciation of difference" (Connolly 2002, 167).

4. Group crossers

Unlike most mainland participants, who report non-participation from the local community (Norton 2001), students from Guangdong province claim to cross between the two groups. For instance, Zheng says,

> Zheng (mainland): In Guangzhou, we speak Cantonese and we can receive TV channels from HK and I grew up watching HK programs. I identify with HK culture and share some core values with HK students. With some familiarity with both mainland and HK cultures, I can communicate with mainland students in Putonghua as a mainlander and with HK students in Cantonese freely as one with native Cantonese proficiency and knowledge of local culture.

Zheng's advantage in respect of languages permits her to get involved in both groups. Besides her mainland identity, she has constructed an identity as a Cantonese speaker who has core values similar to those of HK students. She tends to shift her identity between that of a mainlander and that of a Cantonese speaker when interacting with both groups. Liang has similar experiences:

> Liang (mainland): The HK students now see me as part of them. When I was communicating with them, I just thought I was a Hongkonese. If they didn't ask me, I would not tell them I am actually

> from the mainland. At first I spent quite some time to get familiar with the topics they were interested in. Although Cantonese is my mother tongue, HK students and I have different growing up experiences. I also noted down any 'terms' they used in daily communication that were new to me. I think I work quite hard on acquiring the popular terms among HK young people.
> Author: Do you also communicate well with other mainland students?
> Liang: Sure, I can handle the relationship with them well.

Liang's successful socializing experience reconfirms that Cantonese proficiency alone cannot guarantee a smooth transition, and that effective communication is determined by a familiarity with the values, norms and popular terms deeply embedded in HK local culture and lying behind the language. Different from Zheng, who establishes a regional identity as a student from Guangdong within the HK group, Liang identifies himself as Hongkongese when interacting with HK students and tends to conceal his mainland background before HK students. In the following extract, another Guangdong student explains why she tries to conceal her mainland identity:

> Yang: I would like to communicate with HK students. I am very interested in HK culture. Sometimes I would rather they didn't know I am from the mainland. If they didn't know, they won't think I am different from them and I can survive here more easily. (focus group, mainland)

Concealing her mainland identity allows Yang to "survive" in HK more easily. This indicates that the differences or oppositions constructed between HK and mainland students may push the cross-border mainland students into an unfavorably marginal place. Echoing Liang's comments, it seems that familiarity with HK students' styles and attitudes is a key element for assimilation. However, the seemingly tranquil socialization experience of Guangdong students implies an ambiguous identity, as exemplified in the following extract:

> Zheng (mainland): I identify with the utilitarian attitudes advocated in HK, which may be regarded as being superficial and too practical by traditional Chinese culture. But I was also influenced by national education and the prevalent Confucius philosophy of mainland China. Although I could communicate with both groups well, I felt I am in an awkward position.

The fact that these participants identify themselves as neither fully mainland Chinese nor Hongkongese places them in an 'in-between' position.

These experiences reflect that Guangdong students may play a key role of linking the two groups. However, some Guangdong students who successfully socialize with HK groups attempt to conceal their mainland identity to avoid being stereotyped. The ambivalent attitudes they hold towards HK and mainland values as well as cultures somewhat impede their potential role in forming a bridge between the two groups. This complicates the issues related to interaction between HK and mainland student groups.

Discussion

The emergent findings of this study problematize any uncritical assumption that a multilingual education setting provides equal speaking rights and language learning opportunities to the students (e.g., Blommaert 2005). In this inquiry, the Institute is found to have complex and

sometimes overlapping groupings and cannot be considered a coherent community that consistently facilitates language learning and cultural exchanges (Norton and Toohey 2001).

Consistent with previous studies on linguistic ecology (e.g., Jaffe 2003; Prolyn 2008), the findings of this study show that different languages position their speakers in different symbolic spaces (e.g., Weedon 1997). The participants take up subjective positions regarding the symbolic power and social value of this language versus that language. For example, mainland students strategically use a mixed code of Putonghua, Cantonese and English in interactions with HK students to symbolize their multicultural exposure. Paradoxically perhaps, some HK students' preference for Putonghua when interacting with mainland students is not intended to establish solidarity but to differentiate these communications from those within the HK group.

In multilingual settings, language users use a variety of different languages and dialects for different identification purposes, and exercise symbolic power in various ways in order to be heard and respected (Rampton 1999). For example, shifting and multiple identities are found among mainland students, who manipulate the relationships between Cantonese, English and Putonghua to find legitimacy in different interactions. They retain their mainland Chinese identity and regional identity within their own L1 group, the former inviting solidarity with other mainland students and the latter maintaining diversity and permitting more exchanges across cultures. When communicating with local students, they exercise agency to resist or counter cultural stereotypes associated with a mainland Chinese identity and thus gradually construct a multilingual identity, using their cultural exposure and proficiency in three languages to find a legitimate position in HK, where trilingual proficiency is promoted, as part of the educational policy. When interacting with international students, who do not normally distinguish between HK and mainland students, they establish a Chinese identity. This means that language users have to construct multiple identities to deal with complex interactions among "interlocutors with different language capacities and cultural imaginations, who have different social and political memories" (Kramsch and Whiteside 2008, 646). Some mainland students dream of studying abroad or going back to the mainland after obtaining permanent HK residence, from which they aspire to create a global identity (Gu 2010). The co-existence of multiple possible identities constructed by mainland students which include a Chinese identity, a HK identity (as a permanent resident), and a global identity reflects the overlapping, diffuse and contradictory nature of identity formation (Dörnyei 2005, 2009).

In contrast to mainland students' multiple identities, local students seem to stick to their HK identity and most of them prefer to stay and work in HK. The findings also show that HK participants have a rather parochial attitude to the mainland students and mainland China. It is important to note that all the HK participants were recruited from English and Chinese Department, and the dataset (n=15) is small. More exploration of a larger population across more disciplines may unearth some positive vibes. Despite the limited number of participants,

the reasons underlying the rather defined polarity in the identity of HK students are worth exploring. The status of HK as a cosmopolitan centre of international commerce and an increasingly urban society has reinforced the feeling of HK people that HK is more advanced than the rest of China. The sense of nation, which has been traditionally fostered in mainland Chinese education, was missing in HK before 1997 and has not been much emphasized in HK education since then when the 'one country, two systems' policy started to be implemented. As a result, HK students think of HK as politically part of, but literally superior to, mainland China and construct a particular HK identity rather than identify with a national identity.

While the experiences of mainland students suggest that studying in HK offers the opportunity for constructing a global identity, local students in this study do not seem to aspire to a global identity. On the contrary, HK students utilize their Hongkongese identity as an important symbolic resource when communicating with mainland and international students. Although many people in HK turned to the English-related culture for inspiration and influence when it was isolated from mainland China from 1949 until the mid-1980s (Simpson 2007), HK's former identity as a colony seems to make it difficult for its inhabitants to identity with English unequivocally. Hence, there is some linguistic schizophrenia in HK students' negotiation of linguistic and cultural identity. Also, probably for this reason the HK participants have developed a strong identification with the symbolic resources a HK identity embeds rather than associate them closely with a global identity which implies an identification with English as a lingua franca. These findings can serve as an empirical attempt to settle some of the arguments relating to the debate on the role of English in the process of colonization and globalization. Looking at the histories of Scotland, Ireland and Wales, Joseph (2001) argues that although English has become the main medium of communication in these countries, their national identities have survived for hundreds of years; moreover, English can even stimulate the awakening of national identity if its use is imposed too harshly. In this study, however, due to the historical and linguistic complexities of HK, HK students are found to identify primarily with a regional identity as Hongkongese. Education settings in other multilingual post-colonial/diasporic contexts are also likely to be faced with the issues regarding the conflict and negotiation of regional, national and even global identity construction of the students (Dörnyei 2005; Joseph 2004), and the establishment of social networks to ensure the linguistic and cultural resources can be utilized for and by the students. This study suggests the existence and operation of interesting phenomena that merit the attention of researchers interested in linguistic ecology in other multilingual settings worldwide.

Different language users do not necessarily share a common understanding of the social reality in which they are living (Blommaert 2005). This could explain why both parties attribute the lack of contact between groups to their counterparts' failure to provide more than limited opportunities for interaction, rather than ascertaining whether the stereotypes they hold of their counterparts hamper their own agency to create actively communicative opportunities or to

reconstruct the environment. Therefore, more “relationships of possibilities” (van Lier 2004,, 105) could be created if the individuals in a multilingual setting could see themselves, not only through their own embodied history and subject positions, but also through that of others (Kramsch and Whiteside 2008).

The boundary between groups becomes permeable (Creese and Blackledge 2010) as the students from Guangdong participate in two communities. The resemblance between Guangdong and HK values, and their Cantonese and Putonghua proficiency, enable them to develop close relationships in the two groups. Guangdong students’ transgrouping indicates that the division of groups is sometimes fluid and changing and indexes the possibilities of gaining dual legitimacy in the two communities in spite of existing disparities between the communities. Their potential for promoting more effective communication between groups needs to be further developed.

The multiple, contradictory and situationally contingent identities of the participants in this study, who are all pre-service teachers, pose further questions to explore after they start working in local schools. Bearing in mind that “teachers’ or students’ identities and beliefs related to gender roles, nationality, ethnicity, teaching methods, and language use [may] conflict with those of colleagues, students, professional publications, popular media, or local cultures” (Duff and Uchida 1997, 452), we may need to investigate how mainland teachers, and local HK teachers negotiate their own sense of identity with their own cultural and social stereotypes, and others’ linguistic and cultural values, and how they negotiate the cultural content of the curriculum.

Conclusion

This inquiry has explored peer interactions between HK and mainland Chinese students in a multilingual university in HK. The divisions between HK and mainland student groups are politically, culturally and linguistically constructed. However, as each group of students possesses great linguistic and cultural resources for their counterparts, it would be desirable if the participants were able to reconstruct the site through negotiating and exchanging valuable resources in order to access opportunities for learning and using different languages (Gao 2010). As in the multilingual setting of this study, educational settings elsewhere wherein local and migrating students from different backgrounds interact are also likely to face questions of how social networks can be established and sustained to facilitate language learning and knowledge sharing among students. Further research is needed to investigate how multicultural and multilingual complexities could be transformed into resources for the students, to explore more effective ways to maintain cultural variety in university, echoing studies conducted by researchers who advocate cultural and linguistic diversity in the era of globalization (Kirkpatrick 2007), and, in the meanwhile, to promote more effective interaction among students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

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