



Shifting Paradigms of Language and Identities: My Personal Journey of English Learning, Teaching and Researching

By Huan Wang

hwang45@student.gsu.edu

Department of Middle and Secondary Education
Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia

A person's identities are constantly changing in response to varied contexts where one is playing the role as an English learner, an English instructor, and a language researcher. With English being her non-native language, the author has experienced numerous challenges while being a learner attempting to explore her language identities, an English instructor trying to implement effective language teaching pedagogies, and a language investigator intending to conduct rigorous research to benefit next generations of English language learners. This article depicts the academic journey of an English language learner and how she has transformed from an English learner to an English instructor, and then a researcher and language variationist. The author also addresses how her language paradigms and identities have shifted during her years of experience.

Keywords: English language learner, identities, language paradigms, language varieties, language variationists

Introduction

My perspectives about language have been constantly changing through many years of learning, teaching and researching. Chambers (2013) argues that "Language cannot exist without societies; language is quintessentially social"

(p. 1). Due to the social aspects of language, English teaching, learning and researching are inevitably impacted by the social and political dynamics of the local context. Given this, my English learning and teaching experience in my home country where English is taught as a foreign language is very different from my experience of learning, studying English at a university in the United States where English is utilized as the primary language of teaching and communicating. In this paper, I share my previous experience of learning and teaching English in China, my home country, and my current experience of studying and doing research in English as my second language in the U.S. I will also address how my language paradigms and identities have shifted during these years of experience.

Being an English Language Learner

I started learning English in my middle school at the age of 14 before China's Department of Education enacted the *Full-time Compulsory Education Standard English Curriculum (Experimental Version)* with coastal cities and a few developed areas offering English as one of the elementary school courses from first grade (Wang, 2012). Grammar translation method was one of the dominant English teaching methods back then. We learned English grammatical rules and practiced to translate phrases and sentences from Chinese to English. I had a difficult time

learning English at the beginning and would have quitted if it was not tested or the assessment result had not the power to decide whether or not I could go to a reputable high school. Honestly, I did not enjoy learning English for the first year but found the reward one year later because I received high grades and was labeled as “successful English language learner”. This label brought me priority and prestige, and boosted my confidence in the study of other content areas. I am aware of the political and power dynamics of English and its impact on my middle and high school life today since I have been putting on multiple lenses to perceive English and its social, cultural and political impact on various contexts.

In college, the power dynamics between English and me have shifted. I used to be a slave of English since it controlled my life and I had to spend so much time and energy to master it. However, in my college, I was eager to learn English since I was aware that successfully learning English would make a difference to my life. I believe that was an important reason I chose English as my major. Later I found what it brought to me was what we called opportunity – something excluded me from others but in a good way. I was selected as the only candidate to represent my university to compete in a provincial English speaking contest. Before I went to the contest, I had the opportunity to stay with foreign faculty and was given full-time intensive training by two excellent native English speakers

for two weeks. I was treated so special that it made me uneasy and even stressful. Even though I did not win the opportunity to proceed to the national competition, this experience brought me enough recognition and prestige in my department and even in the whole university.

Being an English Instructor

Three years later, my role transitioned from being an English learner to an English teacher who obtained the power of teaching the language. Therefore, I had to treat English differently. When I was preparing each lesson, I was precise in grammar and spelling because my identity of being an English language teacher pushed me to be accurate about the information I delivered to my students. At that time, every English teacher was required to teach “Standard English”. My understanding of “Standard” was “Standard” grammar and “Standard” pronunciation since these areas were constantly tested by the university as well as by the Board of Higher Education. I thought I would never achieve this political expectation because I could stick to the grammar book but I could not force my students to speak English the same way to make their English “Standard”.

As a teacher, I care about speaking because I believe that an important reason of learning a language is to freely talk to people who speak the language.

Although speaking naturally occurs to native speakers of the language, it is a challenge to speakers who are learning English as a second or foreign language. For this reason, I encouraged my students to participate in classroom discussions as well as in after-school English Corner where English was practiced orally. I was tolerable about students' different pronunciations, intonations and dialect-intermingled *Englishes* (some students speak their local Chinese dialects and this affects their English pronunciation). I would only correct them when their pronunciation and word stress caused misunderstanding. The philosophy underpinning my language paradigm was that I intended to allow "linguistic and social differences in communication" (Florio-Ruane & Morrell, 2011, p. 88) among students of diverse linguistic and social backgrounds (students from different areas bring their local culture and speak a distinctive local dialect). Jim Cummins (1981) asserts that "if the teacher consistently uses the standard form while accepting student utterances" in the non-standard, then "students will gradually shift to using the standard in the school context" (p. 35). The "Standard" Dr. Cummins mentions here sounds political and brings me questions such as "Whose Standard is it?" "What is the purpose of making one dialect Standard and others non-Standard?" "Shouldn't variety of dialects be valued and treated equally?" As a non-native speaker of English, even after many years of learning, being

immersed in the English speaking environment and even being recognized in the English speaking contest, still, my English has an accent. Do I speak Standard English? Does that make a difference to my life and career if I do not?

In the second year of my teaching, I was nominated to be the coach of the University English Speech Team. My role shifted again from only teaching to the dual role of both teaching and coaching. There was more pressure and obligation; however, I felt I had more control over English to win honor for my students as well as for myself. During the intensive training two weeks before students participated in the competition, accurate pronunciation and fluent speaking were my norms of coaching. Even though it was hard to achieve the “Standard”, I guided my students toward this direction because from my experience of being a contestant, I was clear about what was expected: judges prefer fluent English either 100% British accent or 100% American accent with professional performance. Finally, we achieved success. Two of my students won the provincial English speaking contest and one was selected to compete in the national contest. When my students and I were awarded and had our photos taken by the media, I felt for the first time that I was the master of English and I had conquered it.

Being an English Researcher and Language Variationist

Many years have passed; my language paradigms have shifted both consciously and unconsciously. After I became a doctoral student in the language and literacy program in a U.S. university, I realized that people speak English very differently and I sometimes had problems understanding different varieties of English. Gradually, I could understand much better than the time I first came. This is partly due to the language insights and knowledge I have gained from my language classes and partly because my attitude towards the varieties of English has changed. Now I call myself a *language variationist* because I am holding tightly to the perspective that there are varieties of languages and each variety should be equally perceived and treated because each language has a value and serves as a communication tool for a certain group of people.

Even though the debate about “Standard English” is no longer a prominent topic in the current era, the “Standard” to me is like an invisible person who still holds the power and controls the society. This person is smart that he/she does not say anything such as “Your English is not standard but mine is”; instead, he/she only judges, fails or marginalizes people who do not speak like him or her. Thomas (1999) claims that “The development of a standard form of a language is

tied up with the development of a national and cultural identity” (p. 155). To apply it to English, which English or English varieties people speak could represent the national and cultural identities of people from a particular society. However, it is almost impossible to have one single English or English variety that identifies every person in a country or society because each individual uses English differently; their purposes of using it vary, and “how they perceive themselves, and what identity they want to project” (Wareing, 1999, p. 10) are different as well. In this regard, it seems that the identity of language is actually the identity of the people who speak that language. Wareing (1999) claims that “Who speaks which language (or which variety of a particular language) and the attitudes of people towards that language (or language variety), are further issues inherently connected to the concepts of power and society” (p. 10). In other words, some speakers are powerful enough to empower their language or language varieties; however, some speakers are not in a powerful position to authorize a prestigious identity to their language.

As a critical language and literacy teacher, teacher educator, and researcher, I constantly remind myself to be neutral when perceiving language and its varieties since the attitude to certain languages is closely related to attitudes towards people who speak that language. In this sense, there is no

problem with the language because some languages have been passed from previous generations and are still alive even though they are only used by a small population. However, there is a problem of those who judge people by the way they speak their languages. Often times, their judgments are biased. Some language varieties may be difficult to be understood; however, if we have enough patience and make adequate efforts, we can do so successfully. This reminds me of the experience in the second year of my college, we requested that our oral English teacher from Australia to be replaced by another teacher from the United States. Unexpectedly, we had problems with the new teacher's accent again. It was until one year later that I realized it took time to get used to people's accents since everyone spoke differently even though they were all native English speakers. We as non-native speakers, should not only learn how to speak one language variety, but more importantly, taking English as an example, need to learn the differences among multiple English varieties and be prepared to understand and communicate with speakers of these different English varieties.

Final Words

As a language researcher of English, I perceive language as a system—a system of sounds, grammar and meaning (Wareing, 1999). When language is

used, variations occur since there is “scope for creativity and invention” (Wareing, 1999, p. 10). While I am teaching English, one of my focuses is on how to encourage free language expression without judgment. We need to work on providing the space “where Standard English could be acquired while at the same time respecting and reinforcing the children’s pride in their own variety” (Van Lier & Corson, 1997, p. 237). In addition, we need to be aware that language is not isolated from the society; it is interdependent to the social, political and cultural aspects of the world. Moreover, judging people by the way they speak is dangerous since often times our judgments are biased due to the language concept we receive from the popular culture and media. Finally, a language researcher of English needs to be free from bias when exploring and studying the varieties of English in the language world.

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