The influence of language learning on learners' identities: English language learners in Jeju

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Abstract

The special law for making Jeju a free international city was implemented in 2001 to develop Jeju an important hub for international tourism. Jeju has been changed into a free international city attracting many foreign tourists, so English has been an important communication tool in Jeju. Also, Jeju has provided top quality English education by attracting world-prestigious international schools to enhance English education competitiveness. However, little attention has been paid on non-linguistic outcomes including English learners' identities changes occurred in the English learning experiences. This study proves that it is important to consider the influence of language learning on learners' identities changes in the English learning process. The contradictory individual learner's identity shows that teachers and educational institutions should not only train students' language skills, but also be aware that L2 learning is closely connected to learners' identity construction.

Key words :
English learners' identities, non-linguistic outcomes, English learning experience, Jeju free international city, identity in Jeju society, Jeju global education city project

1. Introduction

Jeju becomes a significant hub for international tourism in the 21st century after it was designated as free international city in 2001 by the implementation of the special law. The Jeju Development Institute (2011) reported that the number of foreign tourists will be increased considerably since Jeju was nominated as one of the new seven wonders of the natural world in 2011. That means that the significance of English education for globalization will be strengthened enormously and English can be used in everyday life in Jeju because of the increased number of foreign tourists and international conferences held in Jeju.

As mentioned above, English is indispensable for globalization, English education has drawn a lot of public attention and a great effort and considerable investment for enhancing English education have been made to stimulate a successful free international city. For instance, the Jeju global education city project that aims to improve competitiveness of English education in Korea has been attracting Korean students who want to study abroad with affordable quality English education in several international schools including the U.K.'s North London Collegiate School Jeju and Canada's Branksome Hall Asia. Therefore, it is anticipated that Jeju will be an English education hub in Korea and also in northeast Asia since the Jeju global education city project has been successfully carried out.

However, English proficiency has been mostly emphasized in Jeju whereas there has been little attention to the nonlinguistic effects of learning English such as self-identity changes occurred in the learning process of English. Therefore, Jeju is a proper place for probing on the influence of language learning on non-linguistic outcomes such as learners' identities changes as well as English proficiency since it has been emphasizing the significance of English friendly environment due to rapid tourism expansion.

Drawing on social constructionism (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) and poststructuralist theory (Weedon, 1997; Butler, 2005), this paper postulates that language and identity have a mutually constitutive effect and that identity is shifting, varied, and subject to change. The identity construction of English learners in Jeju will be investigated in this study based on discourse theory (Fairclough, 2003; Lauclau and Mouffe, 1985; Connolly, 2002).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language learning and identity construction

The role of language is important in identity construction because using specific language leads to select a particular identity. Numerous studies (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Peirce, 1995) have reported that learners' identities are influenced by L2 learning. Block maintains that "prolonged contact with a L2 and a new and different cultural setting cause irreversible destabilization of the individual's sense of self" (Block, 2002, p. 4).

Ivanič defines the discourse system as "mediating mechanism in the social construction of identity" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 17) that leads people to choose a particular identity. Fairclough (1993) maintains that discourse is "way of signifying experiences from a particular perspective" (p.138). According to Fairclough, discourse is a significant form of social practice that "produces and changes knowledge, identities, and social relations including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures " (1992, p. 65).

According to the view of social constructivists of identity, identity is fluid and dynamic rather than coherent and fixed in various discourses and it is culturally and socially specific. Since identity is "a layer of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other"(Wenger, 2002, p. 151), a person's identity is socially constructed, changed, and reformed. Since an individual person is allowed or denied access to social networks that provide learners the opportunity to speak through language (Heller, 1987), he or she negotiates a sense of self, his or her identity, within and across different space and time through language. Luk and Lin (2007) have maintained that a person's identities are not fixed, and pre-decided but are "highly fluid, sometimes incoherent, fragmented, multiple, and conflicting" (p. 50). Peirce (1995) exemplifies how the women in her study changed their social identities over time. For example, Eva's social identity as an illegitimate speaker of English in the workplace changed to as a multicultural citizen and this indicates her diverse identity.

A number of studies in this area adopt the poststructuralist approach to indicate the concept of identity in L2 learning. Weedon (1997), a feminist poststructuralist, places emphasis on the mutually constitutive effect between language and identity. She maintains that "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" (p. 21).

Changes in the learners' identities during language learning processes have become a significant research topic in second language acquisition and bilingualism (Hall, 2002; Peirce, 2000; Schumann, 1978). Bourne (1988) asserts that "using language in a linguistically diverse society involves making choices, each speech act becomes an 'act of identity'" (p. 93). Gardner (1985) asserts that there is a set of "non-linguistic outcomes" where self-identity changes occur after learning a new language. There have been several attempts to expand Gardner's classical model (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995) since the 1990s. However, most of the attempts were related to the influencing factors of language learning rather than the outcome of language learning. A few studies on learners' identity changes have been conducted (Peirce, 1995).

As viewed in the above, language is not regarded as a neutral medium of communication but a set of cultural values and behavioral norms, which construct one's self-identity. Heller (1987) highlights the poststructuralist conception of social identity to support the findings from her study and maintains that current conceptions of the individual in second language acquisition (SLA) theory need to be conceptualized again. In general, many SLA theorists have distinguished the language learner from the language learning context. The individual variables such as his or her motivation were emphasized in language learning. The social, which refers to group difference between the language learner group and the target language groups (Schumann, 1976), was more emphasized than individual variable in learning a second language. Many SLA theorists did not regard the individual and social variable as closely connected.

English is regarded as a significant instrument for globalization, so linguistic outcomes of learning regarding English proficiency have been mostly emphasized in Jeju to stimulate a successful free international city. The nonlinguistic effects of English learning such as the social contextual influences on self-identity changes and the mediating role of language in identity construction in English learning process have not received sufficient attention in Jeju. Therefore, the social and contextual influences on identity development during their English learning experiences and the discursive construction of EFL learners' identity in Jeju will be investigated in this study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Question
This study explores the social and contextual influences on identity development during English learning experiences and investigates the discursive construction of EFL learners' identity in Jeju. Based on the literature so far, this study formulates the following research question: How do the social and contextual influence on identity development and how do learners in Jeju discursively construct their identities during their English learning experiences?

3.2 Participants
Sunmi and Mijung (all pseudonyms) are two participants in this study. They were first and second year undergraduate students in the Department of Tourism English in Jeju province. Their English proficiency levels, cultural exposure of English-spoken countries and opportunities of interacting with English native speakers vary because of their different life experiences. For example, Sunmui, 27 years old and a sophomore at the university, exposed to Canadian culture as well as English constantly because of her Canadian boyfriend. She was a high achieving English learner. On the other hand, Mijung, 20 years old and a freshman, had fewer opportunities to contact with western culture in spite of her high interests in western culture and English. I contacted these two students for this study because they were able to write English comfortably comparing to other students in the Department of Tourism English. Especially, Mijung's manuscript for the English speech contest held by the Department of Tourism English in November, 2011 drew my attention because she indicated how her identity was reconstructed depending on different social contexts.

3.3. Data collection
3.3.1 Essay
The participants were provided three weeks to finish writing several essays in English that differed in the amount outside of the classroom. They were asked to write about their reflections upon what they thought, felt, and did in English-related activities during their English learning process.

3.3.2 Interview
Interview is an useful tool in comprehending participants' beliefs, attitudes, and English learning history related to English learning experiences based on their past and present English practices. Instead of using structured interview questions,

the participants were asked about their own story as English learners in order to understand how they managed conflicts and problems and how they adopted measures in the process of developing their English proficiency. I tried to comprehend how they understood their English learning experiences and how they viewed themselves as English learners throughout their narratives in this interview.

4. Data Analysis

Lauclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory, Fairclough's (1992, 2003) critical discourse analysis and Connolly's (2002) ideas on identity and difference are used to analyze the discursive strategies that L2 learners may employ to construct their identities in different context in this study.

Lauclau and Mouffe (1985) regard the discourse as significant for constructing the meaning of the social; it is temporary and formed and transformed through interaction with other discourses.

Fairclough's concept of identity is employed in this research to understand the role discourse plays in the processes of learners' identity construction when analyzing the data. I employ Fairclough's discourse theory (1992, 2003), which puts emphasis on the interaction between the individual and the social and provides analytical tools for discourse.

Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework such as modality, tense, hedges, and subjunctive mood was employed for a main analytical tool to analyze the construction of the social in language. I explored the formation of identities through the participants' modality that is significant during identity construction. Epistemic modality is often expressed through tense and hedges in English. In case of tense, it is a device for expressing a various degree of affinity. For instance, the categorical assertion 'is' indicates a higher degree of affinity with the truth of a claim while hypothetical statement 'would be' or 'might be' can expresses lower degree of affinity than categorical assertion. Writers can withhold their full commitment to proposition by using hedges. Deontic modality, expressing obligation, necessity, and permission, is often indicated through model adverbs such as 'probably', 'obviously', and 'definitely', and modal adjectives such as 'possible' and 'probable', as well as auxiliary verbs such as 'must', 'should', 'can', and 'may.' First- and third-person pronouns can also express different modality effects. In English, a higher degree of affinity is expressed through first-person pronouns such as 'I', 'we' and 'us'.

On the other hand, third-person pronouns such as 'they', 'them', 'him' and 'her' produce a lower degree of affinity. First and third-person pronouns are examined in this study for investigating how the participants demonstrate their positions by establishing differences between others.

In addition to Lauclau and Moffe's and Fairclough's discourse theory, Lauclau and Mouffe's (1985) logic of equivalence is investigated in this study to look at identities since it "consists in the dissolution of the particular identities of subjects within a discourse by the creation of a purely negative identity that is seen to threaten them" (Howarth, 2000, p. 107). Clarke (2008) claims that the logic of equivalence in which 'chains of difference' are created is always operationalized through the establishment of negative opposing meanings due to the diffuse nature of meaning and identity.

Furthermore, Connolly's (2002) idea on identity and difference theory is investigated in this study since it highlights the idea that identities are established through difference. Connolly (2002) maintains that "identity and difference are bound together" (p. 44) and further explains that "it may be impossible to reconstitute the relation to the second without confounding the experiences of the first. Danielewicz (2001) also maintains that "some identities will be created through dissimilarity and differences in opposition to persons and positions" (p. 120).

To summarize the current data analysis procedures, Lauclau and Mouffe's logic of equivalence (1985), Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (1992, 2003), and Connolly's ideas on identity and difference (2002) are employed to understand the role discourse plays in the process of learners' identity construction. Discursive strategies such as the use of pronouns for indexing self and positioning the other are also utilized in the following data analysis section.

Investigating research on the writer's strategies, narratives, and experiences shows two major themes in the establishment of writer identity. The major theme relating to the English learners' construction of identity was identified: (a) identity in Jeju society.

5. Findings

5.1. Identity in Jeju society

The findings showed that the participants were at odds with the predominant discourses of Jeju society. Mijung and Sunmi were found to adopt

discursive strategies to position themselves in Jeju society by constructing differences. Differences were constructed in the different attitudes towards English learning between them and people in Jeju.

I want to stress that we should be able to speak English in real life. Jeju where we are living has been fostered as a sightseeing and resort city, and was recently selected as one of new seven wonders of nature and also UNESCO cultural heritage. We know that a lot of foreigners will visit our island and we know that we need the workforce that has a good command of foreign languages. Especially, the importance of the English speaking competence is growing bigger and bigger. However, English educational system in Jeju still focuses on grammar and reading to prepare for the national college entrance exam or TOEIC for getting jobs. Therefore, I want adults who lead Jeju to endeavor to make various programs enhancing students' speaking competence such as providing various English debate contests on issues happening all across the world. By doing this, young people in Jeju can gain competence in their speaking and also understand important issues around the world. (Original in English)

Mijung strategically positioned herself in the social setting in Jeju where speaking competence is important because of Jeju becoming a tourism hub by the nomination of seven wonders of nature and UNESCO cultural heritage in the above excerpt. However, she felt disharmony between her own goals that focused on improving communicative competence and what was socially prevalent English instruction in Jeju society. She established her own identity at a distance from the prevalent English instruction which emphasized grammar and reading rather than communicative competence and experienced conflicts with these social norms in Jeju society. In fact, school English education in Jeju has been criticized for various problems including teaching methods focusing on grammar and translation and impracticability (Kim, 2004). She used deontic modality, "should" to indicate necessity and obligation of people in Jeju doing their best to improve their English communicative competence in order to be members of Jeju society, the hub for international tourism, as in the following example, "we should be able to speak English in real life."

Many people study English for many different reasons. It seems like though most of people learn English to go to a famous university or to get a nice job that pays a lot…They are eager to study English

for the scores. There are many exams to test our English such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and TEPS. People go to private English schools to get a high score for those exams. They learn skills and techniques for grammar and reading there. What about speaking? I've seen many people who have a high score are not good at speaking English especially in front of a native speaker. I think this is the problem of English education in Jeju. It should focus on giving people more chances to speak English. Also, companies in Jeju must consider not only TOEIC, TOEFL or TEPS scores but also speaking skills when they select their employees. (Original in English)

Sunmi discovered a conflict between the values of English education she had held and those prevalent in Jeju as in the following example, "They learn skills and techniques for listening and reading there. What about speaking? I've seen many people who have a high score are not good at speaking English especially in front of a native speaker." Her own beliefs and values of English education in Jeju were constructed through difference when she discursively constructed the contrasting definition of successful English education held by herself and by Jeju society. She claimed that many people studied English hard mainly to go to a famous university or to get a nice job, but she contrasted this with "the most meaningful aspect" of studying English, that is, becoming able to communicate well with others. Sunmi established her own beliefs which were different from those of many people in Jeju by indicating her negative attitudes toward English education system in Jeju society. The repetitive third-pronoun "they" in the above text constructed an identity that was in opposition to that of herself. This conflict in values of English education led Sunmi to criticize the current English education system in Jeju society and emphasized the importance of communicative competence rather than learning English by rote. She used deontic modality, "should" and "must" to indicate obligation of Jeju society stressing on the significance of communicative competence in English education as in the following example, "It should focus on giving people more chances to speak English. Also, companies in Jeju must consider not only TOEIC, TOEFL or TEPS scores but also speaking skills when they select their employees."

As I have a boyfriend who is a native English speaker, of course I got the benefit from him. I get more chance to speak English than other Korean people. My listening and speaking have got better. However, I don't like to tell people that I have a

Canadian boyfriend. Many people think I speak English because of my boyfriend. It's not true though. I've tried hard to learn English for years even before I met him, but many people misunderstand me and don't even think of my effort for English. What I want to say about this is that having a native English speaking boyfriend is not important but having a lot of chance to actually speak English. Korean English education should focus on giving people more chances to speak English. I know it's hard having a chance to use English in Korea but there can be alternatives like Korean broadcastings put English subtitles on all the programs so that we can get used to English by reading them all the time or Korean public schools make more free English camps so that all the students can participate in those and enjoy speaking English. (Original in English)

In the above excerpt, Sunmi comments on bias in Jeju society against her. Many people thought that she could speak English fluently because of her Canadian boyfriend without considering her efforts to improve English. This reflected Sunmi's inner conflicts impinging on her identity construction. In "I don't like to tell people that I have a Canadian boyfriend" and "What I want to say about this is that having a native English speaking boyfriend is not important", Sunmi's opposition to the dominant 'prejudicial' Jeju society and her confusion regarding her hard work in learning English were reflected. In Sunmi's discursive comments, she constructed her identities that were contradictory to prevalent bias in Jeju society. She used the epistemic modality, "is", to express a higher degree of affinity with the truth of her claim instead of "would" or "might" which express a lower degree of affinity as in the following example, "Many people think I speak English because of my boyfriend. It's not true though." She used deontic modality, "should" and "must" to indicate obligation of Jeju society stressing on the significance of communicative competence in English education as in the following example, "Korean English education should focus on giving people more chances to speak English. In an interview, she reveals that she is not satisfied with the current English education in Jeju and urges the Jeju Board of Education to make efforts to develop various English programs to enhance students' communicative competence. Further, she is afraid that those who are poor at English speaking skills may be alienated in society when English is commonly used in Jeju.

6. Interpretation and Discussion

This study reconfirms the view of social constructivists of identity that identity is socially and culturally specific, and it is fluid and dynamic in various discourses. Wenger (2002, p.151) defines identity as "a layer of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other" because a person's identity is socially constructed, changed, and reformed (Block, 2002; Peirce, 2000).

Diverse discursive strategies to gain a legitimate position in Jeju society are used by the English learners in this study. At the level of Jeju society, the participants' English learning was restricted due to their construction of identity in opposition to the predominant social values in Jeju. Their identities were constructed through their discursive comments: they used 'difference' to differentiate their own beliefs and values from those of Jeju society. This proves Connolly's (2002) argument regarding the dependency of identity on difference, "identity is always connected to a series of differences that help it to be what it is" (p. 14–15) and reaffirms Clarke's (2008) 'chains of difference' which are created in the logic of equivalence as the latter strives to surmount difference. For example, Sunmi emphasized the importance of communicative competence in learning English to distinguish her own belief from that of Jeju society as in her statement, "There are many exams to test our English such as TOEIC, TOEFL and TEPS. People go to private English schools to get high scores for those exams. They learn skills and techniques for grammar and reading there. What about speaking?... Korean English education should focus on giving people more chances to speak English." She strongly opposed to English education in Jeju society and, by extension, in Korea by constructing two opposing English education values between "grammar and reading" and "speaking" regarding English competence and selected one chain of equivalence over another. She made complaints about the current English education and urged an English education reform in Jeju society. According to Kim (2004), Jeju school English education has been criticized for various problems of English teaching methods such as mainly focusing on grammar and translation and its impracticability. Considerable investment and enormous efforts for reforming English education system have been made in Jeju to enhance the competitive power of English for a successful free international city.

Further, Sunmi commented on bias in Jeju society

against her. Many people thought that she spoke English fluently because of her Canadian boyfriend without considering her efforts on improving English. This reflected her inner conflicts impinging on her identity construction. Her opposition to the dominant 'prejudicial' Jeju society and her confusion regarding her hard work in learning English were reflected. In her discursive comments, she constructed her identities that were contradictory to prevalent bias in Jeju society.

7. Conclusion

This study reveals that it is significant to consider the influence of language learning on learners' identities as well as language in EFL contexts. The contradictory individual learners' identities demonstrate that teachers and educational institutions should not only train students' language skills, but also be aware that L2 learning is closely connected to learners' identity construction. The changes of learners' identities are related to transformations of the national or regional identity.

The learners' common linguistic and cultural background in Jeju society does not lead to a similar L2 identity construction. The findings of the study bring researchers, teachers, and educational institutions in EFL contexts to conduct more profound case studies by searching for identity development of L2 learner over a prolonged period.

The results of this study provide some useful pedagogical implications for teaching. First, researchers and educators need to pay attention to the nonlinguistic outcomes of English learning beyond teaching of language skill since identity changes can occur through language learning. Second, productive bilingualism can serve as an educational objective. Teachers may simultaneously cultivate learners' intrinsic interest, and positive attitudes and beliefs associated with the target language and culture on the one hand, and the native language and culture on the other.

The insight afforded by this study can serve as a basis for future study into Korean EFL learners' identity development, but some limitations are placed on the generalizability of results achieved in this study. One limitation is that small number of students (2) involved in this research. The results cannot be generalized to populations of EFL learners in university, so adding data and observations from more students is necessary. Further researches of identity construction need to consider carefully contextualized, longitudinal, and triangulate research designs.

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