Legitimacy of Foreign Language Learning and Identity Research: Structuralist and Constructivist Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper summarizes empirical studies the author and her associates have carried out in the past decade pertaining to English language learning and cultural identity changes in China, and related criticism. In response to challenges on the legitimacy of such research regarding unified definition, cause attribution and context relevance, the paper introduces an epistemological distinction between structuralism and constructivism, which helps to clarify the issues under debate and raises questions for future research. The structuralism-constructivism distinction has implications for cultural identity studies in particular, and intercultural communication studies in general.

Since the revival of academic research in the early 1980s, foreign language education research in the People's Republic of China pertaining to social psychological aspects has largely focused on "individual factors" influencing target language proficiency (e.g., motivation, personality, and cognitive styles), with implications for pedagogical solutions (e.g., Gui, 1986; Shi, 2000; Wang & Liu, 2002; Wen, 2001; Wen and Wang, 1996; Wu, Liu, & Jeffrey, 1996; Zhou, 1996; Zhu, 2006). Beginning in the late 1980s and increasing in the mid 1990s, intercultural communication issues have engaged the attention of many language teachers, especially those of English as a foreign language (EFL). There has emerged a considerable body of literature concerning Chinese linguistic and cultural characteristics, as explicitly or implicitly compared with those in English speaking countries. These characteristics include pragmatic conventions, behavioral patterns, and value orientations, mostly at a general level (e.g., '95 ICCC Proceedings Editing Board, 1997; Chen & Tan, 1993; Hu, 1988, 1994, 1999). Some of the works have appeared in *Intercultural Communication Studies* (e.g., Jia & Sun, 2002; Song & Liu, 2002). The membership of the China Association for Intercultural Communication, founded in 1995, is primarily composed of EFL teachers. It is commonly acknowledged that linguistic and cultural differences may lead to miscommunications in cross-cultural contact, and the learning/teaching of a language is bound to involve that of the target culture. However, learners' social psychological changes other than those classical "individual factors" directly influencing proficiency attracted little attention in the 1980s. Such studies began to appear in the 1990s, in which the author and her associates have engaged themselves. Recently, the legitimacy of their studies has been questioned (Qu, 2005).

In this paper, I will summarize these studies and related criticism concerning English learning and learners' identity changes in China, and then respond to the criticism. As a female Chinese scholar, I am aware that talking about one's own work is face-threatening, as such an act of "self-enhancement" is against a commonly held Chinese virtue of modesty,

especially important for females. Yet while acknowledging and endorsing my own need of self-enhancement, I believe the issue is of interest to international academic communities of intercultural communication studies, because it has general significance to language and culture education, and related research is still under-represented in the English-based research literature. In reviewing the studies and responding to challenges, I will introduce an epistemological distinction between structuralism and constructivism, and a related continuum that accommodates existing stances of theories, empirical reports, and criticisms. It is claimed that while the criticism was launched from a structuralist perspective, the studies critiqued demonstrated a constructivist orientation. Further discussion is given to different needs for knowledge, and conditions for employment of structuralist/constructivist perspectives in empirical research. I hope that such an effort will clarify confusions, and provide implications to the formulation and evaluation of intercultural studies of language and culture.

An Overview of Related Research
Productive Bilingualism Among "Best Foreign Language Learners"

In publications (Gao, 2001, 2002) from my doctoral dissertation completed in 1992, I proposed the concept "productive bilingualism," in contrast with the broadly adopted "subtractive bilingualism" and "additive bilingualism" (Lambert, 1974). With subtractive bilingualism, the native language and cultural identity (life styles, values, etc.) are replaced by target language and cultural identity. With additive bilingualism, the native language and cultural identity are maintained while the target language and cultural identity are acquired; the two co-exist and function in different communicative situations. With productive bilingualism, the competence in native and target languages/cultures enhance each other; the learner benefits from a general cognitive and affective growth and increased creativity. The theoretical basis of "productive bilingualism" parallels Erich Fromm's general concept "productive orientation"; the empirical basis was open interviews with 52 recognized "best foreign language learners" in China. These interviews on learning experiences revealed common qualities of openness and criticalness directed toward both target and native cultures, an integration of the two, and resulted general gains. Though "cultural identity" was not an explicit key concept in that study, the issue was nevertheless involved and explicitly touched upon by some interviewees. As the participants in this study were primarily limited to a small group of high-achieving scholars, some doubts were raised, mostly informally in classes and after-talk discussions, as to the applicability of the productive model among ordinary language learners.

Research on Ordinary Language Learners

Upon gaining a national research fund for social sciences in 2000, the research on language learning and identity changes was expanded to ordinary learners, university students in particular. A series of studies were conducted (Gao, et al, 2004), including for instance a large-scale quantitative study on undergraduates, its replication on post-graduates, case studies on English majors and non-English majors respectively, field investigation on participation in conventional English classroom, English Speaking Corner[1] and the Crazy English program, a descriptive study on the use of English names, a discourse-focused study on personal statements for studying abroad, and a matched-guise study on language attitudes toward British English, American English, and the standard Chinese language. Later studies

along a similar line included discourse studies of student compositions (Bian and Gao, 2006a, 2006b); analysis of a learner's autobiography (Li, 2005), and the change as well as reproduction of Chinese cultural *habitus* related to EFL at a social historical level (Gao, 2005).

Example: Quantitative Research

The results in general revealed evident changes in identity or perception of self among ordinary language learners. The study on undergraduates conducted on a stratified sample of 2,278 undergraduates from 30 universities in 29 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities, using a Likert-Scale questionnaire, revealed identity changes associated with English learning (Gao, Cheng, Zhao and Zhou, 2004, 2005). Out of the 6 pre-defined categories of identity changes, "self-confidence" change, a change assumedly independent of cultural identities, ranked the highest. The next highest was a contrastive category "nil change"; its ranking did suggest features of a foreign language context. Nevertheless, ratings of productive and additive changes were above the critical level, showing perceived cultural identity changes. Two replications of this study, one with 1,017 graduate students (Li, Gao & Qian, 2004) and the other with 706 trainees from a private English teaching organization the New Oriental School (Huang, Zhou & Gao, 2004), showed similar results.

Example: Qualitative Research

While quantitative studies portrayed an overall picture of learners' perceptions of identity changes, qualitative studies provided some detailed accounts. In a case study on English majors (Gao, Li & Li, 2002), an informant experienced an identity split or crisis particularly associated with the learning of English writing style. This female student Aiwen was fond of reading Chinese literature and writing Chinese prose before entering college. After several years of strict training in the "linear" style of English essay writing, she was shocked to find her own prosaic Chinese writing style changed toward the linear direction: "My god, how could that be written by myself?!" First she felt sorry about the change and suffered an identity struggle: "I feel a bit sorry…. I enjoyed the leisurely loose and roundabout style. Now I am afraid I can never find that look of mine anymore… the style of a free man of letters." Yet rather than rejecting her emerging writer identity, she decided to "let it be," and "look at the baby after it's born." As time went on, she developed a productive orientation which enabled her to explain the beauty of Chinese literature previously of sheer enjoyment, and to perceive Shakespeare beyond a representative "English writer" or "foreign writer": "I've had a 'blind worship' for literature since I was a child. I am a 'victim' of literature. Yet I used to judge other cultures from the standpoint of Chinese culture, imposing labels on them. In the past I viewed Shakespeare as 'the best English writer' and read him to get a taste of what 'foreign literature' was like, from a Chinese reader's perspective. I'm no longer like that. Now I take Shakespeare as MY writer. I'm keenly interested in this person writing from a rich, genuine, and enthusiastic heart. It's direct communication between two persons."

Other qualitative studies had similar findings. The study on "personal statements" regarding application for admission in some English speaking countries showed that while going through revisions of the statements, the applicants negotiated their self-presentation strategies and academic identities among various alternatives, including a target-culture oriented competent and confident identity, and a native-culture oriented "modest" identity (Li, Gao & Li, 2004). In the study on communication styles and identities in the English Corner,

some participants said they became more open and aggressive, very different from the expectation of traditional Chinese communication conventions (Li, 2004). In a study of attendants of Crazy English, an unconventional commercialized English learning program characterized by shouting English sounds and sentences, it was found that many students discovered or constructed an outspoken, individualistic emotion discharging or "crazy" identity that was in neither traditional Chinese culture nor the conventions of daily communication in English speaking cultures (Shen & Gao, 2004). On the whole, results of qualitative studies revealed identity changes characterized by dynamic process, multiple dimensions and unintended shifts, which are best conceived in a conceptual frame of constructivism (Gao, 2006), as will be explained later.

Related Criticism

The above studies on Chinese students of English have evoked criticism. QU Weiguo (2005), dean of the English Department at Fudan University in Shanghai, made the following arguments.

(1) The definitions of "identity" and "cultural identities" are not clear. "Identity is not a self-evident notion as has been assumed in the research" (Qu, 2005: 93). "Because identity is an ambiguous notion, research on related issues has to come up with a clear operational definition first or the rigor of the work will suffer." Similarly, "when identity change involves a second language, it signifies confrontations between two cultures, or two set of values derived from the two cultures" (ibid: 113). "Before we set up unequivocally a set of traits that can be considered as characteristically Chinese in the identity set, research on identity change is impossible" (ibid: 110).

(2) A linear cause-effect relationship between language learning and identity changes is not established. "Language-related change in identity should be attributable to the language in question." (ibid: 113) It is unclear whether identity changes among the students can be exclusively attributed to English language learning, as other sources are not ruled out.

(3) Cultural identity change associated with language learning presupposes a second language environment in its narrow sense, which is absent in China. "The discussion of a second language's contribution to identity change presupposes at least a bilingual community, and a speaker's proficiency of that language. In a context where English is a foreign language, and it is mainly learnt and used in educational contexts, we need to exercise caution with regards the role of English in such process." (ibid: 93)

Qu's views on the legitimacy of language learning and identity research have raised important questions, and can be well contextualized in a broader discourse of academic and social concern. Theoretically, they touch upon not only the ontological issue of what identity is, but also, perhaps more crucially, the epistemological paradigms concerning how the knowledge of identity is obtained or developed. At a practical level, Qu's views are probably shared by many who perceive English education as essentially instrumental. As the number of people speaking English has reached about three billion or half the world's population, and the status of English as a foreign language or as a second language (ESL) has increasingly changed into an international auxiliary language, there has consequently emerged the rhetoric of English as a "post-identity language," where English is no longer culturally attached to any country of origin, but merely a "basic skill" (Lo Bianco, 2005). Therefore, it is worthwhile to address the criticism and clarify in what sense language and identity research makes sense in an apparently EFL context.

Response and Reflection

To clarify the issue, an epistemological distinction between structuralist and constructivist perspectives of culture and identity will be postulated. Such a distinction will lead to differences in definitions of key concepts, assumptions about the relations among various factors involved, and preference of research methodologies.

Structuralism and Constructivism

"Structuralism" is a term with varied meanings in different academic disciplines. In this article, its definition follows a sociological and social psychological tradition. Structuralism tackles the target concept—culture or identity in particular for our studies—by perceiving it as entity with an inherent and enduring structure. The structural elements, often in a hierarchical framework, are definite and real, and can be unpacked and singled out for discrete quantitative measurement.

A number of related terms are often used for such an orientation, with varied emphasis. Thus "structuralism" is related to other terms. To the extent that emphasis is on structural elements as objective facts or a reality independent of human subjectivity, structuralism is associated with "objectivism" or "realism." To the extent that emphasis is on the existence of essential nature shared by all members in a conceptual category, it is associated with "essentialism," a term currently with a derogatory connotation. To the extent that emphasis is on the requirement of observable, especially quantifiable evidence to access structural elements and their relations, it is associated with "positivism."

In contrast, "constructivism" questions and rejects the objectivity of structures. Radical constructivism focuses more on the importance of human agency, whereas social constructivism stresses interaction (e.g., Berger & Luckman, 1967). In this article "constructivism" means the latter. Constructivism perceives alleged structural entities as a process of construction, in the interaction between the agent and the external environment. As quantitative measurement of discrete structural elements is not adequate to capture the complicated interaction between the "internal" and "external," quantitative methods are often preferred.

The above structuralism-constructivism distinction is a theoretical one. In actual practice structuralism and constructivism orientations form a continuum, where the positions of researchers or particular studies are located. The disagreement between our research group and our critic is largely due to such a difference in stance, i.e., the critique is launched from a structuralist-essentialist position, whereas our studies are oriented toward the constructivist end.

Definitions of Identities and Cultures

From a structuralist-essentialist perspective, identity refers to clear-cut external group categories such as nationality, gender, socioeconomic class, or subjective classifications based on such categories, when "subjective" classifications are taken as objective and fixed entities. Thus "Chinese"/"American," "male"/"female," "working class"/"middle class" are treated as "sets" with common traits shared by all the members in each group; precise "operational definitions" are required for empirical work so as to achieve research "rigor."

From a constructivist perspective, identity concerning "who a person is" is (1) a constellations of constructs rather than monolithic ones, (2) situated in specific

communicative events, (3) neither a product given by the external environment nor pure imagination of the individual, but a process of negotiation between the individual and the social environment, and (4) entails use of language or "discursive work" (de Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006: 2). From this perspective "identity" is an ambiguous notion without a unified definition. For one thing, researchers of identity studies take different stances along the structuralist-constructivist continuum; for another, the constructivist view of identity itself is a supple one, which may look fussy and apparently lacking the kind of "operational" devices or "rigor" from a structuralist-positivist perspective.

Likewise, from a structuralist point of view, a cultural identity such as "Chinese identity" or "American identity" is based on a clear "set" of cultural traits. Before the trait list of the set is explicitly and exhaustively delineated, there is no talk of "culture" or "cultural identity." There are hard boundaries between cultures to be crossed. Yet from a constructivist perspective, cultures may have clear cores but the boundaries are fussy. Each linguistic act is a situated "act of identity" (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985), and might involve multiple identity dimensions.

Relationship between Language Learning and Identity Change

The structuralist-positivist approach assumes a linear cause-effect relationship among language learning, its influencing factors and results. It is essential to have quantifiable "operational definitions" of each variable, and keep out influence from sources other than the selected independent variable(s). It cannot be proved that certain "identity changes" are exclusively attributable to language learning, the discussion of language learning and identity changes is illegitimate. On the other hand, a constructivist view would perceive the relationships as multiple and complex, sometimes reciprocal. It is only natural that identity change is associated with not only language learning but also a number of other factors; it is not a surprise that identity change and foreign language learning influence each other. The absence or impossibility of showing an exclusive cause-effect relationship does not rule out the necessity to explore such a complex phenomena. On the contrary, it makes the exploration all the more interesting.

Bilingual Speech Communities, Intercultural Communication Situations, and Language Proficiency

A structuralist-essentialist approach assumes clear-cut distinctions between "bilingual" vs. "monolingual" speech communities, "genuine" (ESL) vs. "fake" (EFL) intercultural communication situations, and "high" vs. "low" target language proficiencies pertaining to the possibilities of cultural identity change. From a constructivist perspective, such black-or-white distinctions may not offer much insight for understanding the related phenomena. While it is commonly assumed that the ESL-EFL distinction determines the dose of target language and culture input to learners, it should not be forgotten that in an ESL situation, learners' "affective filter" may prevent them from changing the "input" to "intake," whereas in an EFL situation, learners' high motivation or "investment" (Norton Peirce, 1995) in "imagined communities" (Norton, 2006) may prompt them to construct micro-level learning environments characterized by high doses of the (perceived) target culture. Much of our previous empirical studies mentioned above have shown the effects of learners' subjective efforts in their learning environment construction. In the information age, high technology available to the public has enabled learners to construct their own target language

environment to a great extent, so the dose of input has become increasingly dependent on the learning agents' motivation. Consequently, the boundary between ESL and EFL contexts has become more and more blurred.

As many have already pointed out, the conventional ESL-EFL distinction is replaced by EIL—English as an International Language, used in its "inner circle," "outer circle" and "expanding circle" (Kachru, 1992). It is increasingly true that "English is no longer a foreign language" (Lo Bianco, 2005). Yet this does not really make English a "post-identity language." If identity is constructed through symbolic interaction, there is no identity construction without language; the learning and use of a language other than the mother tongue is bound to have impact on the change of identities. Even as a "basic skill," English may affect learners' identity as competitive job hunters, competent professionals, intercultural communicators, and so on. Precisely because English has increasingly become an international auxiliary language, the multiplicity and dynamism of possible associations between its learning and identity change grows.

Paradigm Shift: From Structuralism to Constructivism

In the past half a century, language and identity has changed from an implicit and peripheral issue to a prominent research area in language and culture studies. There has also been a gradual shift from structuralist to constructivist theoretical approaches. As perhaps the most important social science theory that has influenced language and identity studies so far, Tajfel's social identity theory stressed binary distinction between "in-group" and "outgroup." Later development within the tradition has maintained this tendency but gradually switched attention to the complexities, multiplicities and dynamism in cross-group communication (For review, see Capozza & Brown, 2000.) Likewise, the structuralist tendency was prominent in classical sociolinguistic studies, including Labov's variation analysis, Bernstein's concepts of restricted code vs. elaborated code, the communication accommodation theory and ethnolinguistic identity theory by Giles and associates, and others. These models are largely based on one-to-one correspondence between linguistic varieties and large social categories, where social factors are deterministic.

Emerging shift from structuralism to constructivism is witnessed in Gumperz's *Language and Social Identity* (1982), and le Page and Tabouret-Keller's acts of identity theory (1985). The one-to-one correspondence between language use and social identities and the deterministic orientations were weakened; more attention was given to interactions and individual acts. Each of them further developed the constructivist orientation later. Important influence also came from sociologist Bourdieu, who labeled himself a constructivist structuralist and structuralist constructivist (1990). His concepts of linguistic/cultural "*habitus*," and language as a "cultural capital," provided some room for individuals' identity negotiation in the society (1991), and inspired constructivist empirical studies on identity and second language learning, typically those by Bonny Norton (e.g., Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 1997, 2000, 2006). In the recent decade, more constructivist frameworks such as those of Giddens have been gaining influence in language and identity studies (de Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006; Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004; Leander 2002; Thesen 1997). For more detailed reviews, see Gao, Li & Bian, in press, and Joseph, 2004.

With its increasing prominence in theoretical and empirical research, constructivism has encountered criticisms in fields of social sciences, mostly from a structuralist-positivist stance. Some criticized it for "lack of a theory of agency" (Checkel, 1998); some challenged

its "methodological weakness" (Kaufmann, 2005), "empirical ad hocism" (Checkel, 1998) or "disregard for empiricism" (Leach, 1996), and claimed that its "opposition to behavior instruction and intervention" might hinder testing and effective practice (Leach, 1996). Others have called for eclecticism, based in part on further exploration of potential contributions from various epistemologies, including structuralism (Hjorland, 2005).

Underlying Reasons for Paradigm Shifts

The unresolved debate, paradigm shift or pendulum swing between structuralism and constructivism is partially attributable to varied characteristics of social phenomena, i.e., universality/simplicity and particularities/complexities coexist, as can be easily understood. In addition, it can be accounted for by the varied human needs for knowledge. On the one hand, we need to reduce complex phenomena in the world to a small number of categories, traits or rules in order to comprehend them and keep them in control within limited human cognitive and behavioral capacity. On the other, we need to break through confining frames to achieve more freedom in perception and action. As Popper (1970) comments, regarding paradigm shift in sciences, we are constantly trying to get out of the existing house or frame of reference, and when a more spacious one is found, we will feel more comfortable but will soon start looking for larger space again.

Related to the different needs is a time frame; at various stages of development in an academic disciplines or human cognition, prevalent needs for knowledge will differ, and so will preferred approaches. The structuralist-positivist approach is often adopted when the paradigm has already emerged and needs to be testified and further established; the constructivist approach seems to be more appropriate when a new territory is explored, or a breakthrough is expected.

The preferred stance on the structuralist-constructivist continuum is also related to the identities of individual researchers, situated in an academic community. How we define ourselves—as theoreticians, logicians, behavior-regulators, trainers, instrument designers, practitioners, or developers, in an explicit or implicit manner—will also influence, and be influenced by, the particular epistemological stance we choose.

Perspectives Taken in Our Studies

In a retrospective of the research my associates and I have conducted, it can be said that the early work on "productive bilingualism" had a structuralist tint, for taking additive and subtractive bilingualism as the reference point; the concept of "bilingualism" and the embedded "biculturalism" did imply categories or "sets" of native culture and target culture. Nevertheless, the very idea of "productiveness" broke away from target and native cultural "sets"; the idea of the whole is more than the sum total of the parts, or increased cognitive, affective and behavioral capacities accommodated the multiplicities of identities other than rigid notions of "Chinese" vs. "non-Chinese." The term "bilingualism" served as a convenient and necessary linkage to existing knowledge and academic tradition, yet the actual meaning of "productive bilingualism" exceeded "bilingualism" (competence in two languages), "biculturalism" (competence in two cultures), or even "multiculturalism" (competence in several cultures) in their narrow senses. In later studies of university students, the constructivist tendency was more evident, as new identities other than the rigid "Chinese" or "non-Chinese" were found in a number of qualitative studies (Li, 2004; Shen & Gao, 2004; Li et al., 2004). Although preset categories were adopted in our large-scale quantitative study

(Gao, Cheng, Zhao, & Zhou, 2004), the "cultures" were subjectively perceived prototypes or stereotypes rather than objective realities; the results concerning identity changes should be interpreted as tendencies of self-perception rather than behavioral facts; they point to issues to be further investigated in thoughts, feelings, and behavior of individuals in the learning process, which we are now tracing in an on-going longitudinal study. At present, research on EFL learning and learners' identities are still at an explorative stage, and will benefit most from a constructivist approach.

The orientation toward constructivism, and a "loose," "ambiguous" or "supple" way of defining identity and culture is related to another identity of mine. In addition to "Chinese," "female," and "researcher" mentioned earlier, I am also an educator in general and a language educator in particular. This educator identity is also shared by most of my associates. As educators we want to know what is happening in our students (and ourselves as language learners), before we get to know what we can do to help them (and ourselves) grow. Specification of definitions is important for theoretical discussions and debates (Ivanič, 1998), but it is the person as learner that is our focal concern. A very constructive gain we have obtained from Qu's criticism is a reconsideration of the concept "identity change." Indeed, "change" is not very exact if taken as sudden substitution of essence, and from a practical perspective of reception, may sound too threatening to those with a strong or rigid ego. A better choice seems to be "development," which suggests a gradual growth and has a more positive connotation. Language education, like all other kinds of education, is devoted to enhancing the development, or growth, of the learner as a whole person. For this reason, we cannot afford not to care who she or he is and is becoming, call it "(cultural) identity" or not.

Conclusion

Views of the legitimacy of foreign language learning and cultural identity research largely depend on epistemological stances. While from a structuralist viewpoint such research is irrelevant, from a constructivist perspective this is worth pursuing and calls for more attention. As identity is not simply given but built through symbolic interaction, the use of language is entailed in the process of identity construction; the learning and use of a language other than the mother tongue is bound to have impact on the person as a whole. At an individual level, identity development may be part of the unexpressed "practical consciousness" and "unintended consequences of action," to be transformed into "discursive consciousness" of the reflective agent (Giddens, 1984, 1991). In an ideal situation, the learner becomes increasingly reflexive and culturally/interculturally aware. Studies of this process to a great extent correspond to those on the development of intercultural communication competence (e.g., Chen, 1992). At a sociocultural level, English learning in China is not merely a "barometer of modernization" external to that process, but a part of that very process (Gao, 2005). This process characterized by duality of structure (Giddens, 1984) also makes an interesting topic for research, and can be compared with conventional studies on language policy and national identity construction. Thus research of English learning and identity development in the late modern era needs to adopt a broader vision. On the one hand, we need to go beyond the narrow view of "English as a foreign language" and adopt perception of "English as an international language," and, on the other hand, we need to transcend rigid oppositions such as "Eastern" vs. "Western" or "Chinese-speaking" vs. "English-speaking." In these ways we can discover richly emerging identities.

The epistemological distinction between structuralism and constructivism may have implications for intercultural communication studies in general. As "intercultural communication" tends to presuppose categories of "culture," how to capture general patterns without falling into the trap of rigid structuralism-essentialism, or how to accommodate complexities without losing sight of the general are common and important issues to be continuously reflected upon. Efforts have already been made in this direction at least a decade ago, as in Kim (1994)'s theoretical essay, which calls for going "beyond cultural identity." Yet empirical studies and related criticism of such studies are easily confined to a narrow and fixed view of structuralism-essentialism. Empirical researchers and their critics need to be fully aware of their needs, purposes, and identities, and based on that, select and acknowledge their stance from available alternatives. Such informed choices will make our academic communication more *effective,* to use a term favored by intercultural communication competence trainers, or more *dialogical* (in the Bakhtinian sense), hence *growth enhancing*.

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[1] English Corner is a regular event of informal oral English communication popular in China, with voluntary participants typically meeting once or twice a week in an open space, to have free conversations in English. The original intention for organizing such events is to improve Chinese learners' oral English proficiency.