BEING A LANGUAGE LEARNER—IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

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Abstract

Asian migrants are inevitably categorised as language learners. At times, it is the migrant's own definition and can be used as a support. At others, it is an imposition in two senses: it can be imposed by others and by institutions; and also acts as a hindrance to resettlement in the new country. Language learning raises issues of a sense of belonging and a sense of self-value.

A narrative inquiry study of six Asian migrant women follows their experience as language learners over a twelve-month period, focusing on the different concepts above, as the women negotiate their identities, to finally divesting the label language learner. The findings suggest that there is a close link between a sense of belonging and a sense of self-value which influences the participants' identity trajectories—towards valuable members of the mainstream society. The discussion poses two questions to education providers, ESL educators and policy makers: What does the image of language learner migrant do to the perception that others have of newcomers? How long is a newcomer a migrant?

Introduction and background

Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa NZ) has become a multicultural country, attracting many people from diverse cultures and languages. Among those, there is an increase in the number of migrants who identify with at least one Asian ethnicity (Statistics New Zealand, 2015a, 2015b). Many Asian migrants are likely to have become language learners once they make the decision to move to Aotearoa NZ. Asian migrants are expected to learn English, and they themselves expect that language learning can lead to successful integration in the new home (Barkhuizen & de Klerk, 2006; Hamberger, 2009; Pio, 2005; Statistics New Zealand, 2015a). However, to adult migrants, learning and gaining confidence in communicating in English is often described as a challenge which is extremely difficult to overcome. Thus, in this paper, I investigate how Asian migrant women experience their language learner identity in order to gain a sense of belonging in their new home. I also look at how the process influences the way they themselves view their sense of self.

This paper 1) reports on part of the findings from the original study which investigated Asian migrant women's identity negotiation processes as language learners, and 2) reinterprets the findings to consider questions that arise from extending the implications of the study.

Framework: The construct of identity

Identities are constructed, maintained, and de-stabilised in interaction with others indicating that they are socially constructed (Kinginger, 2004; Norton, 1995; 2000). Social identity changes when people move geographically or socially: for example, an Asian woman becomes recognised as a migrant and an English language learner when she migrates to a country in which English is the lingua franca. Furthermore, there can be changes to the way people view

themselves and the ways they are viewed by others. The concept of identity is used by many researchers (Barkhuizen & de Klerk, 2006; Kinginger, 2004; Kim, 2011; Norton, 2000) to better understand migrants' experiences.

Identity as a language learner influences how Asian migrants feel about their belonging in the mainstream society. A study of migrant ESL students accessing four-year college education (Varghese & Kanno, 2010) revealed that most participants were well aware of their non-native speaker status. It also showed that language learner identity is a structurally imposed challenge for the participants. The institutional constraints that apply only to ESL students gave the students a sense of unfairness compared to non-ESL students and the stigma of "remedial student" status (Varghese & Kanno, 2010, p. 319). Troyna and Siraj-Blatchford (1993) similarly argue that there is a prevailing assumption that people tend to link lack of English language skills with learning difficulties. Such common assumptions of language learners serve to highlight the points examined here.

Firstly, the language learner identity can be socially assigned without belonging in a group of people or organisation. Some Asian migrants may not actively engage in learning English let alone take language learning classes, yet they are seen socially as language learners. A case in point is Martina, a migrant woman, (Norton, 2000), relying on her children when she needed to communicate with the landlord and the bank teller. Martina was a language learner.

To gain access to the mainstream society, Asian migrants are expected to have legitimate language skills. Two studies illustrate the point. In a study of one migrant's language learning experiences in re-settlement in Canada, Han (2012) revealed that fluency in the dominant language is critical for migrants to enter a new society, and that language is "primarily an issue of access and legitimacy" (p. 147) for Chinese migrants in Canada. Colic-Peisker's (2002) study of Croatians in Western Australia established a close link between the participants' sense of belonging and their English language use. The findings show how language learner identity should be broadly defined: early settlers with a lack of language proficiency struggle to belong in mainstream society due to language barriers, and later settlers with high language proficiency still express a lack of sense of belonging in the Australian community because of their accents. Hence Asian migrants become classified as language learners even though they may not participate in formal learning classes.

Secondly, the unsettling language learner identity of an Asian migrant adult is related to a sense of access to mainstream society. Many scholars (Bauman, 1999; Delanty, 2003; Mercer, 1990) link identity with a sense of belonging. They argue that identity becomes an issue for individuals when they experience the feeling of not belonging. In his second language identity study, Block (2007) links identity questions to a lack of sense of belonging for many language learners. Similarly, as noted earlier, Han (2012) concludes that the "immigrants' language problem is primarily an issue of access and legitimacy, both of which are not under immigrants' control" (p. 147). She further points out the embedded power issues which lead to many difficulties in identity negotiation. Power issues, presented in the interactions between Yang, a participant in Han's (2012) study, and the lease company representatives, have also been identified in studies of language learners, such as Troyna and Siraj-Blatchford (1993) and Varghese and Kanno (2010).

To migrants, learning English is linked to the hope of gaining a sense of belonging, defined by one account as "the experience of fitting in or being congruent with other people, groups, or environments through shared or complementary characteristics" (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996, p. 236). Others go further than "fitting in". Anant (1966) suggests a link between sense of belonging and self and a sense of value, claiming that a sense of belonging is developed when a person feels valuable and indispensable in a social system. More recently, Jones and Krzyzanowski (2008) hold that the sense of belonging is developed through rejecting negative information that may distort or undermine positive self-image.

Sense of self amplifies the concept of belonging. In an examination of 40 articles relating to belonging, Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart (2013) refer to belonging as "a subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs or personal characteristics" (p. 1031). In that context, a limited language learner identity is likely to influence the sense of self of Asian migrants learning English. Research on Japanese women in the USA (Kawakami, 2009) indicates that many Japanese stay-at-home women in the USA had imagined identities as professionals, yet they were reluctant even to apply for a job because they felt that their English was not sufficient for the application process. The participants viewed themselves as "just another Asian immigrant" (Kawakami, 2009, p. 22) because they were language learners. (For similar cases, see Colic-Peisker, 2002; Li, 2011; Pailliotet, 1997; Pio, 2005.) For migrants, being a language learner constructs a limited identity, which needs to be overcome to gain a sense of belonging in the mainstream society.

This paper holds that social identity is closely connected to a sense of belonging and sense of self. The case here is that the identity of Asian migrants learning English is related to their hopes of belonging in the mainstream society and of counterbalancing the lack of perceived self-value. Within this frame, I investigate 1) the ways language learner identities of Asian migrant women in Aotearoa NZ influence their sense of belonging in the mainstream society, 2) the ways their sense of self-value plays in the participants' identity negotiation, and 3) the ways they negotiate their identities.

The present study

Participants

Six Asian migrant women participated in the research: two participants (Holly and Emily) are from China, two (Mia and Jessica) from South Korea, one (Simi) from India, and one (Lucy) from Japan. All names are pseudonyms. Core identities that the participants identified with included Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers (Simi and Mia), tertiary students (Jessica and Mia), ethnic community volunteers (Mia, Simi, Lucy, and Holly), and a Sunday school teacher (Emily). The participants also saw themselves both as mothers and migrants, thereby influencing their identity trajectori[illegible] In this paper, I use only a few selected stories of the participants.

Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry was used to collect stories from the six Asian migrant women. The approach has some features that helped to capture the complexity of the participants' experience in Aotearoa NZ. In the first place, narrative inquiry helped me to understand the participants

holistically. Relevant studies (Moen, 2006; Phinney, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007) note that narratives can capture the complexity of social phenomena. Narratives include what and how social structures influence people's daily lives, how they react to different influences and what the outcomes are.

Narratives are not only about representing the complexity of reality that people live in but also what is important to the participants. Hence, in the second place, narrative inquiry helped to discern critical points out of the complexity that is important to the most current situation of the participants. People tell stories which are relevant and important in a particular context, which Labov (1997) refers to as reportability. Their stories are relevant to the present experience. Scholars (e.g. Bell, 2002; Moen, 2006; Sandelowski, 1991) note that telling stories includes not only past events but also the present and future.

Thirdly, narrative inquiry helped me to understand the identity negotiation process, through dyadic ways of communication. Narrative inquiry is a collaborative inquiry process (Gergen, 2001, 2009; Gergen & Gergen, 2014; Talmy, 2010a): the participants tell their stories and the researcher/interviewer responds to the stories. Recent literature in applied linguistics points out the collaborative aspect of qualitative interviews (Mann, 2011; Richards, 2010; Talmy, 2010b). The collaborative and dyadic process is helpful to understand the process of identity negotiation, which helped in designing the research methods as follows.

Methods

Iterative in-depth interviews were used to gather stories from the participants who were residing in Aotearoa NZ. The interviews consisted of three stages: one initial interview, six individual in-depth interviews, and one reflective interview. The initial interview and the in-depth interviews were focused on the stories of the participants. The interviews were conducted roughly once a month. The participants shared recent or salient experiences that related to their sense of belonging as language learners. The reflective interview was conducted at the end of each participant's participation in the research and focused on sharing the researcher's interpretation of the participant's shared stories, which were confirmed, changed or augmented by the participant. The collected stories were analysed thematically. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process and Bernard and Ryan's (2003) techniques to identify themes were helpful to analyse the data. Significant quotes and expressions were identified, grouped and sorted into categories under headings relevant to the research questions, enabling close analysis of data for the original study. The current paper draws on a restricted selection of themes that addresses the theoretically drawn questions for this paper as listed in section 2.

Findings

Language learner identities and sense of belonging

The participants reported that language learner identities were of limited use in trying to gain access to mainstream society, which become apparent largely in two ways. First, the participants found that they needed to provide evidence of their English proficiency when they hoped to enter a certain community such as a degree programme. Such cases were explicitly seen in the stories of Jessica and Mia. Mia was once a registered ECE teacher, but the regulations changed, and she needed to provide a specified English language proficiency result to regain her registration. Mia reported that she was a confident ECE teacher with many years of experience both in South

Korea and Aotearoa NZ. However, she was denied status as a registered teacher due to English language proficiency. Similarly, Jessica wanted to enrol in an ECE degree programme after completing a post-graduate TESOL diploma at the same institute. However, she could not enrol unless she provided the required English language proficiency result.

The second limiting feature of language learner identity related to the participants' sense of belonging in daily social interactions. The first day at Simi's practicum at an Early Childhood Education (ECE) centre illustrates this clearly.

> I arrived there, saw my associate teacher in the kitchen to do morning tea. So I thought I would help her. "Are you preparing the morning tea? Is there anything I can help you with? Do you want me to cut the fruit or anything like that?" . . . She said it is not *fruits*; it is *fruit*. She was pretty rude, the way she said it. So I didn't understand. It was my first day, and I was nervous. I said I did say *fruit*. Anyway, I kept quiet because I didn't want to upset her, I didn't argue with her. I quietly did what I was told. . . . Then, she wrote in the reflection; I had used the word plural *fruit*. She had an Indian teacher who worked for her before, and she used to say *fruits* all the time, and she wrote on the board and then, and she said Indians used English in a very archaic manner and everything. So I was quite put off. . . . She had her concern about teachers coming from overseas with no English background, and they were trying to come here and work like that, pretty nasty stuff. . . . (Interview 2)

As seen in the excerpt above, the associate teacher seemed to deny Simi and more broadly, migrant teachers, as suitable ECE instructors, since they did not have "proper" English language skills. To the associate teacher, it seems that language skills were fundamental to gaining access to the ECE teacher identity, and she appears to have assumed that all migrant teachers from a particular background cause great concern.

Another example is from Mia's interpretation of many negative experiences at work. Mia often claimed that her lack of sense of belonging at work was due to her lack of English proficiency. She expressed it as such:

> I feel that I belong here, but there is a bit of frustration that I feel. It does not have the same feeling as I feel in Korea. I feel that I am two percent short, probably more than two percent. So, not completed. . . . Yes, that is right. It is the language. (Interview 2)

She perceived that she was a confident ECE teacher with experience and skills. However, she did not feel that she belonged to the group of teachers at work, even though she felt that she was a competent ECE teacher when she was with children. She explained the difference by the fact that she was a language learner.

wing herself as a language learner influenced how Mia interpreted a negative experience with other Koreans as well. Mia was principal at a Korean language school, where a group of teachers and parents accused her of incompetency as head of school. She highlighted that the people who were challenging her were those with competent English language skills and professional jobs. Overall, it seems that language learner identity not only limits the access to a certain identity but also negatively influences daily social interactions for Asian migrant women learning English.

Sense of self-value

Statements about the sense of self appeared when the participants narrated their stories. A strong sense of self-value emerged in many of Simi's stories while reporting an insistent sense of belonging as an ECE teacher. After an initial struggle (as described in Section 4.1), Simi became established as a registered ECE teacher, and worked at an ECE centre for many years as a reliable and trustworthy employee. Among many incidents, the highlight seemed to be the story that Simi was one of few employees with whom the manager shared a confidential matter.

Perhaps paradoxically, sense of self was also apparent in participants' stories of lacking a sense of belonging. As briefly described in Section 4.1, Jessica successfully finished a Level 7 tertiary course. However, when she applied unsuccessfully for an ECE programme, she was referred to a Level 4 course (Foundation Studies). She did not feel that she belonged there:

> I have been using APA referencing over a year [at the TESOL course] . . . I have done it for a year, and I know what to do. That's why my essay I finished it . . . she [a tutor] used my essay for an example to my classmates . . . I don't mind studying easier things, but it is a waste of money and time. And like this class, treating me like that, I hate this. (Interview, 3)

Jessica knew the course material, and her work became a standard for other students. While she was a model student, she did not feel that she belonged in the course.

Meanwhile, lack of sense of self-value appeared in stories in which belonging was challenged. Emily told how she had to rely on her peers because she could not comprehend the Sunday school teacher training class in English. She was also silenced by her own children when she did the school run: her children did not want her to speak either Chinese or English, due to the oddness of Chinese language and the different English accent that Emily had. Similarly, Holly illustrated her frustration when she had to buy an intercity bus ticket at the beginning of her settlement in Aotearoa NZ. She had to rely on her friends. She felt she was belittled, losing a sense of self-value as a grown-up and independent person.

Conversely, as described above, a strong sense of self-value could present even while reporting a lack of sense of belonging as a language learner. Mia's comments about her ECE teacher identity are a case in point. She spoke about the difficulty at work due to the lack of English competency. However, she often added comments like "I could not speak, but I was creative and . . . I was the only one who could play the piano . . . and I am the senior there." (Mia, Interview 1). Mia validated her ECE teacher identity by providing evidence to increase her self-value, to reinforce a sense of belonging at work.

Enhancing belonging and self-value

Mia became an ECE teacher without registration due to the lack of the English language requirement. She reported that she was frustrated that her salary scale differed significantly from registered employees, even though she was a qualified teacher with many years of experience. She was an ECE teacher, yet she felt that she was less valued compared to other teachers at the same institute, a situation which seemed to affect her sense of belonging, as seen in the section above. She changed from full-time work to part-time to take an English language course. Mia became an active language learner.

Similarly, when Holly experienced a lack of sense of belonging, she shifted her identity from a tertiary student to a language learner. In the mainstream course, a business course at a tertiary institute, Holly realised that she could not follow the class. She reported that she could not even understand simple instructions in English. She asked for the transfer and reported that she was a lot happier. She could relate to her classmates and could follow the lesson: her sense of belonging increased.

> When I came, I realised that my English was so bad. In the class [Business course] I could not understand well. Even I did not understand what they asked me to do. Totally I got lost. I said I had to change to the English class. . . . I felt better. There were lots of Chinese, so I could ask [in Chinese when she did not follow any instruction]. I was happier in [the] general English class. (Interview 1)

As described in the section above, Holly gained a sense of belonging in the language course rather than the business course. She mentioned that she was indeed a language learner and her identity trajectory of being a Chinese interpreter indicates that the changes increased her sense of belonging and her sense of self-value. After many years, she reported that she often voluntarily helped people in the Chinese community. Her availability, mobility and, most of all, her English skills were the reasons why people asked for help, she reported. Being a good English language user increased her sense of self-value as someone who could contribute to her ethnic communities and more widely, to the mainstream society. She became a valuable member of the society, which increased her sense of self and increased the sense of belonging.

The participants hoped to belong in the mainstream society, and the negotiation is on-going. In Jessica's case, she wanted to enter a degree programme hoping for a career. As previously mentioned, she failed to enter an ECE programme and took a Level 4 course due to the social benefit her family relied on. After six months, she entered an applied linguistics degree programme at a different tertiary institute. Her journey to becoming a valuable member of society in a new home continues.

Discussion, implications and conclusion

From the findings, I discuss two main points with corresponding implications: 1) what is the relationship between a sense of belonging and a sense of self-value? 2) Where does the language learning process take a newcomer? Next, I reinterpret the discussion and address critical points to ponder as education providers, ESL educators, and policy makers. Then, I conclude the paper with my view on the use of migrants' stories.

Holly's and Mia's cases in the findings sections indicate the complexity of sense of belonging and sense of self-value, which is in line with relevant literature (Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart, 2013; Kawakami, 2009). The complexity is closely connected to migrants' identity trajectories as seen in Pio's (2005) study on Indian women migrants in New Zealand and Norton's (2000) study on women migrants in Canada. The participants in this study as well sought a sense of belonging, as seen in Holly's change of courses, which had the effect she wanted. A similar interpretation can be drawn from Mia's and Jessica's language learning stories. Mia hoped to gain a sense of belonging as an ECE teacher and Jessica as a tertiary student. The increased sense of belonging in language courses grew out of their lack of sense of self-value. Their sense of self was negatively influenced by the fact that they were language learners, and they often used their

language learner identity to account for any negative experience.

The identity trajectories of the participants built a base for becoming valuable members of Aotearoa NZ society. Holly, for instance, learned the language and became an interpreter. In this way, she gained a sense of self-value and belonging, as she moved into an existence that went beyond language learning. Such a development implies that language learning is not just limited to linguistic skills but can helpfully orient to diverse identity possibilities, a frame that EAL education and policies can promote and enhance.

Considerations such as these have some timely reminders for ESOL courses. They suggest that EAL educators, programme facilitators, and institutes should be mindful that Asian migrants have aspirations and identities that go beyond language learning; that their current state of being in a language course may be strongly conflicted and perhaps contradictory; that migrants see language learning as stepping stones in a trajectory to other activities and lives.

The discussion above suggests that the perceptions and stereotypes of mainstream society further isolate migrants from successful belonging in Aotearoa NZ society. Simi's story from the practicum illustrates the point. The associate teacher assumed from previous experience that Indian migrants lacked legitimate language skills, which stopped her from listening to what Simi was saying: Simi had intended to help the associate teacher. The story reminds us to look critically at ourselves—at how we view migrants and adult language learners, especially to note that focusing narrowly on linguistic skills may keep us from identifying qualities and skills that EAL Asian migrants possess. This very reasonable realisation has useful support in relevant literature on EAL. Reports from González, Moll, & Amanti (2013); Kelly, Daiwo, & Malasa (2011); and Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez (2992) argue against focusing only on target language skills. Instead, they call for shifting to a wider approach that can address social, cultural and linguistic resources of EAL students. Here, the teacher becomes a knowledge seeker rather than a knowledge bearer, with the understanding that the learners have diverse knowledge which can offer a useful resource for learning the target language. Recognition of the fact that EAL learners themselves have resources can help to redesign the ways lessons are designed and managed.

The participants in the study had lived in Aotearoa NZ for a considerable number of years at the time of interviews. For example, Holly and Mia settled in Aotearoa NZ in 1996 and 1997 respectively. After more than a decade, Mia still identified herself as a language learner and a migrant. Such identities raise a question about when Mia will be just an ECE teacher rather than a hyphened identity—an ECE teacher who is a language learner and migrant. Mia reported that she lacked a sense of belonging as an ECE teacher. She was "two percent short" which is in line with other studies that access to mainstream society requires legitimate language skills (Colic-Peisker, 2002; Hvn, 2012). Even though Mia was a language learner and migrant, she considered herself a relatively successful migrant who had obtained the same career as the one back home, just as Simi also mentioned. In this regard, Holly's case is similar because she was a successful migrant who helped other new settlers from China. The fact that they still considered themselves migrants seems unsettling. It may be due to differing perceptions: first that they do not feel the belongingness they hoped for; and second that society still views them differently, namely as Asian and as migrants. Looking at the issue broadly, many of us were once migrants, moving

from one city to another and one country to another. Many young Aotearoan NZers have been migrants for shorter or longer periods while engaged in activities like teaching English in Asian countries. Such overseas experiences should prompt us to be reflective and reflexive when viewing certain groups of people as migrants.

In a study of three stories of English language learners, Early and Norton (2012) argue that sharing stories of each other would increase not only their personal value but also the ability to learn from each other, leading to increased learning opportunities and greater possible identity options. Learning from sharing stories is also identified in Lee et al. (2014). It does not mean that the story sharing should focus on an either-or view of the identity construction of EAL Asian migrant, for example as either a hero or victim, which is far from the reality of people's daily lives (see Hunter, 2015, for an analysis of the need to rethink the dichotomy). For policy makers and education providers, such outcomes provide insights into what kinds of policies and programmes are more likely to increase the construction of desirable identities for EAL Asian migrants, and also how those policies and programmes should be delivered.

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