

Chapter 19

Crossing the Borders of Four Countries: L2 Learning and Identity Negotiation Trajectories

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic study shares the author’s journey as a multilingual speaker in South Korea, Singapore, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) over a 15-year period. In each of these settings, she faced unique challenges and was afforded different allowances depending on her social power, which was mediated by her sociocultural background. These social dynamics also produced different patterns of identity negotiation depending on how she positioned herself and how others positioned her. The key findings suggest that language learning in an English as a second language (ESL) context is not only linked to linguistic challenges but also tied to ongoing identity negotiation. By sharing her autoethnographic critical reflections, she hopes to connect her personal accounts with larger social issues such as the marginalizing experiences that minoritized students may undergo. Ultimately, this chapter illustrates how she has developed as a multilingual language learner, academic student, and researcher, which she hopes will resonate with her fellow multilingual speakers.

INTRODUCTION

“The fortunate traveler” (Canagarajah, 2001, p. 23).

In my childhood, it never occurred to me that my life would unfold this way—an existence marked by frequent migrations; first from Asia to Europe and then to North America. Many would say that I have been *fortunate* to be able to travel, study, and live in various linguistic, social, and cultural communi-

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ties as my lived experiences have provided me with unique insights into multilingual language learning processes. However, this does not mean my life was always rosy; I have had to make certain sacrifices that others might not have. I have been a foreigner in every country in which I have been educated except for South Korea, which is my native country.

My status of being a foreigner might have triggered or foregrounded my identity negotiations or made my positioning processes more salient due to the fact that I was different from those around me. Choi (2016) illustrated how “the slightest deviation in the name...[could] provoke individuals to behave in certain ways” (p. xix). Whenever my linguistic, social, and cultural environments changed, I had to work out a way to position myself appropriately in the new society, which mostly involved assuming an “in-between position” (Choi, 2016, p. xvi). That is to say, I employed the strategy of creating the impression that I was capable of blending into the target society while acknowledging that I was also different. To illustrate the concept of an “in-between position,” while I was based in the UK, I endeavored to approximate some elements of the British accent when conversing with British friends or engage in small talk using weather-related topics (as British people often do). However, at the same time, I would not make an overstatement such as “I am technically or turning into a British person” to avoid crossing a line when, in truth, I do not feel like I am one. In this respect, my migrations did not simply involve physical or geographical movements of my body; I had to make a consistent, conscious effort to adjust myself socially, culturally, and even mentally to fit into the new community and reduce the number of occasions when I felt “out of place” (Choi, 2016, p. 1).

Each time I moved, it was an intentional (not accidental or arbitrary) choice. My priorities were clear—I always had a vision and a goal that I strived to achieve. The following sections of this chapter will illustrate what drove me to study abroad and what helped sustain me during my studies there, even as I experienced challenges in language learning and identity negotiation trajectories. To understand how my identities have been formed and transformed, it may be helpful to first examine the notion of identity theoretically, as presented in the next section.

BACKGROUND

Norton’s Theorization of Identity in Language Learning

Norton Peirce (1995) was one of the pioneers to first conceptualize the complex notion of *identity* in relation to the process of L2 learning, which is illustrated as:

“Identity [refers to] how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (Norton, 1997, p. 410).

Norton claimed that three distinct characteristics relate to language learners’ identity (Norton, 2013). Firstly, she suggests that one’s identity should not be interpreted as simple and unitary in nature, but rather multifaceted and complex. Given language learners’ diverse aspects in their sociocultural backgrounds (e.g., race, language, education, nationality), the way they view themselves (i.e., identity) is likely to be complicated with multiple facets.

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