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To Be Or Not To Be "Part Of Them": Micropolitical Challenges in Mainland Chinese Students' Strategic Language Learning in an English Medium University

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Background

The global spread of English and its rising socioeconomic importance has made it crucial for individuals to access English medium (EM) education in pursuit of social mobility in many contexts. The appeal of EM education has also been sustained by a widespread belief in its role in helping language learners acquire a better command of the language. With language learning increasingly viewed as being contextually mediated, an EM institution could be considered a "community of practice" for learning English (Wenger, 1998, 2000), which provides learners with opportunities to use English in their academic studies. Such access to English facilitates students' strategic learning, involving the use of language learning strategies, or "language learning behaviours learners actually engage in to learn and regulate the learning of a second language" (Wenden, 1987, p. 6), often associated with learners' success in learning languages. However, the belief that successful language learning is connected to EM education has been now considered simplistic as the use of English in EM educational settings is often undermined by contextual realities.

Research Questions

This presentation reports on an inquiry that examined the contextual mediation of mainland Chinese students' strategic learning efforts in a leading EM university (hereafter called the University) in multilingual Hong Kong. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theorization of capital, the inquiry problematizes the notion of the use of English as one of the "shared" group norms in the University. It examined micropolitical challenges related to mainland Chinese students' access to social learning networks in their socialization outside language classrooms. The inquiry adopted as its methodological approach a longitudinal ethnographic study and addressed the question:

How do contextual conditions mediate mainland Chinese students' strategic language learning in Hong Kong?

Methods

The inquiry was undertaken in three research stages over a period of twenty months (two academic years). In the first stage, I interviewed 22 mainland Chinese students in either Chinese or English about their language learning experiences on the Chinese mainland and their perceptions of Hong Kong upon their arrival in Hong Kong. In the second stage, I followed six students for two academic years with a focus on their experiences of strategic learning, using a variety of means to collect data, including regular conversations, observation, field notes, and email correspondence. In the third stage, 15 out of the 22 participants who had been interviewed two years previously, including the longitudinal participants, were interviewed in Chinese or English about their language learning experiences in Hong Kong. Most of the data in this presentation came from the second research stage while data from the third research stage will be also included.

As the inquiry was to examine the participants' experiences of strategic language learning, narratives emerging from the interviews, conversations, and meetings became the focus of analysis. The data were analyzed paradigmatically to "produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). In the analysis, themes related to their struggle for better English in academic studies and socialization soon became apparent as the data made frequent references to them.

Frame

In this inquiry, I see learners' strategic language learning as a process involving not only cognitive activities taking place within the brain but also their efforts to access and sustain their access to "the possibilities their various communities offered them" (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 312). Strategic language learning efforts not only help improve their linguistic competence but also achieve non-linguistic objectives such as membership in a community or desired self-identities, making language learning "both a kind of action and a form of belonging" for learners (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). Language learners' access to these "possibilities" are established and sustained by a micropolitical process of individual and collective investments through social exchanges in accordance with Bourdieu's (1986) theorization of social capital. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes social capital as the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources" that are related to "a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, or in other words, to membership in a group" (p. 247). Bourdieu (1986) further theorizes that a social network is not a "natural" or "social given" and it is "the product of investment strategies", sustained by continuous exchanges of valuable resources (p. 249). However, such exchanges in the language learning process are often related to a process of contest and power play, determining whether or not particular resources are valuable and how these resources can be exchanged.

Research findings

The data from the inquiry indicate that a variety of socialization experiences had profoundly mediated the participants' strategic learning efforts to improve their linguistic competence. Some of them found their strategic language learning constrained by the contextual realities while others adopted ingenious ways to utilize emerging language learning opportunities. Drawing on the participants' accounts of strategic language learning, the inquiry also generated insights as to how these contextual complexities could be transformed into resources by and for them in the strategic language learning process. However, even for these elite mainland Chinese students in the inquiry, by theorizing the University as a "community of practice" for learning English, one may risk "exaggerating the internal cohesion and cooperation of collectivities and [...] understating the operation of discourse and power through the communication of group norms" (Morgan, 2007, p. 1046). Consequently one might argue that these mainland Chinese students had entered a setting with "complex and overlapping communities in which variously positioned participants learn specific, local, historically constructed, and changing practices" (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 312), when they came to Hong Kong in pursuit of better academic credentials and English competence. These findings suggest that EM institutions in multilingual contexts need to empower language learners like the participants in the inquiry with the capacity to take appropriate actions in sustaining their access to social networks in the strategic language learning process. By doing so, they could then help these language learners "claim the right to speak outside the classroom" and access language learning opportunities (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 26).