Negotiating Participation in Second Language (L2) Academic Community: Asian Female Students' (Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese) Identities and Investments in a TEFL Post- Graduate Program

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Abstract

This study reports on a qualitative multiple case study that explored academic discourse socialisation of female Asian L2 learners in a British university. Grounded in the stereotype of "the shy Asian girls" (Bremer et al., 1996; Day, 2002; Lippi Green, 1997; Miller, 2003; Norton, 2000, 2001; Pon et al., 2003; Toohey, 2000; Yoon, 2007) that the Asian female students tend to be quiet, passive, timid, or indirect, the study examined how the female Asian L2 students negotiated their participation which related to their identity and investment construction in a new L2 academic communities, particularly in open-ended class discussions. The participants included 3 females graduate students from Asian countries (Indonesia, Japan, and Chinese) who have different language learning experiences and backgrounds. Interviews and classroom observations were collected over the entire 1st semester (3 months) to provide an in-depth analysis of the students' perspectives about their class participation in three different course and instructors. Three case studies illustrate that the students faced major challenges in negotiating language competence, identities development, and investment achievement. It was also implied that the stereotype of 'the shy Asian girl' is not a culture-based generalisation but was rather caused by situation specific. Feeling marginalised, inferior, less competent and the issue of racism was the situation which disadvantaged the Asian students to develop identity and achieve the investment in L2 classroom. This study has implications for pedagogy on how to stimulate international students' participation in L2 and how to promote equal opportunity in the classroom.

Keywords: Identity, Investment, Class participation, Asian learners, Silence, Academic community

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Introduction

In an attempt to critically conceptualise the relationship between language learning and culture, Norton and Toohey (2011) propose that learning is a social process in which culturally and historically situated participants engage in culturally valued activities, using cultural tools.   In this relationship, target language (TL) or Second Language (L2) is one of the cultural tools which functions as for communication and/or medium of instructions when engaging in a new academic community as well as the social community.   In a multicultural classroom, such as TEFL class that the author currently takes (the cultures from 3 Asian countries and 1 European; Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese and Slovak), L2 discourse acquisition by the culturally diverse classroom members seemed to be quite problematic. This insignificant linguistic or cultural learning may lead learners to discourse disengagement that result in silence and lack of participation. This notion may have grounded on newcomers to language communities may find that their participation is limited and that they are not embraced in the manner they had anticipated (Norton, 2000 as cited in Kinginger, 2009). Furthermore, the issue of L2 participation and socialisation is closely related to important issues such as identity, competence, power, access, and agency (Duff, 2002; Norton & Toohey, 2002). Concerning this, through the author observation in three classes of TEFL program in one of the Universities in Birmingham, United Kingdom, it was discovered that the students who tended to be less participating, silent and reticent, were the Asian. Compared to Pakistani, African, Arabian students in bigger classroom that involved more complex nationalities, the stereotype such as the "shy Asian girl" (Bremer et al., 1996; Day, 2002; Lippi Green, 1997; Miller, 2003; Norton, 2000, 2001; Pon et al., 2003; Toohey, 2000; Yoon, 2007 cited in Dooley, 2009) was relatively strengthened. However, in a more culturally homogenous class, in which consist of 90% Asian female students, the class seemed to be actively engaged in oral presentations, posing and answering questions. Indeed, a commonly held stereotype that Asians in general, and Asian women particularly, tend to be quiet, passive, timid, or indirect, did not always apply to the focal women, (Cheng, 2000; Takano, 2000 as cited in Morita, 2004). In relation to this, the connections are clear, Granger (2013) argues that it is between culture, ethnicity, and gender on one hand, and a classroom silence or verbosity on the other hand.   Based on the author's personal experience as well as relevant research elaborated above, this mini-research will give the author a deeper insight into her initial hunches about the Asian women's participation related to their L2 identity and investment in new academic communities.

Literature Review

(Female) Asian students' participation in L2 Academic Community

Learners for some cultures and educations systems are viewed as performing reticent, passive and silent. Recent ESL literature has often reported that Asian L2 learners (especially East Asian such as China, Japan and Korea) are non-participating and silent. They are viewed as learners who hesitate to respond, never ask questions, shy and over-dependent on the teacher (Braddock et al., 1995; Jones et al., 1993; Tsui, 1996; Cortazzi and Jin, 1996 as cited in Cheng, 2003). Cheng (2000) reported the conclusion from Flowerdew and Miller (1995), Turner and Hiraga (1996), that reticent and passive behaviour results from certain cultural attributes of Asian

societies. This claim seems to be factual for a simple reason that the expectations on Asian students are to be "respectful and silent recipient[s] of the teacher's knowledge" (Jones, 1999). By the same token, it has been suggested that Asian students may regard asking questions as time-wasting and lacking consideration for other students (Milner & Quilty, 1996). However, Cheng (2000) is in opposition to these accusations and argues that "many Asian students do have a strong desire to participate in L2 classroom activities and are indeed observed to be quieter than expected in certain circumstances which caused by situation-specific rather than culturally pre-set" (p.435). This is to say that cultural attribute is not the only predictor of passive behaviour and reticent of learners, particularly for the Asian. In addition to this, gender has been also mentioned as one of the factors of silence, it is rather related to ethnicity, race or both as female students are often observed to participate orally much less than males (Morita, 2004; Jule, 2005). Nevertheless, the lack of confidence of female students due partly to the lack of opportunity engendered by teacher attitudes, as has been reported by Ellwood and Nakane (2009) that Australian teachers' reluctance to call on Japanese students because they were seen as silent when other students engaged in discussion, was rooted in stereotype.

Identity

Norton (2000) has theorised identity as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change. This theory examined the relationship between an L2 learner and the social world which establish across time and space, and how the learner understands the future possibilities. By the same token, it is the engagement of identity and negotiation when a language learner interacts in the L2, either orally or in written mode. Furthermore, Norton (2000) claims that the idea of identity should focus on the power relation of the language learner and the second/target language (TL/L2) speakers. To better able understand the relationship between identity and power, it is mentioned that power is not a fixed, pre-determined quantity, but can be mutually generated in interpersonal and intergroup relations (Norton, 2000). In other words, the power relation can oblige the various range of identities that the L2 learners can negotiate in their academic communities.

Motivation to Investment

In the field of Second Language Learning (SLL), the concept of motivation has been a complex phenomenon. One of the most influential concepts introduced into Second Language (SLA) is the instrumental and integrative motivation concepts by Gardner and Lambert (1972). According to these notable researchers, the instrumental motivation is a desire to learn target language for immediate or practical goals such as money, praise from teacher etc. Whereas the integrative motivation has been defined as personal growth and cultural enrichment through successful integration with the target language community, for instance, someone does the homework with awareness that the knowledge could be useful for his/her future career.

On the contrary, the concept of motivation proposed by Gardner and lambert (1972) was not in line with findings of Norton's research (Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2000). She found out that the concept was not reliable to describe the complex relationship between identities and language learning in her research with immigrant women in Canada. Provided that, she proposed the conception of 'investment', which

has been informed by her reading primarily in social theory. Norton's conception of investment that is inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1977), signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of the learners to the target language and their sometimes-ambivalent desire to learn and practice it (Norton Pierce, 1995). She took the position that if learners invest in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will, in turn, increase the value of their cultural capital—economic analogy.

Methodology

Research Questions

The data analysis and interpretation were guided by the sets of questions as follow:
1. How do the female Asian students from 3 different cultures (Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese) negotiate identities and investment in new L2 academic communities?
2. To what extent do these negotiations confirm or dispel the stereotype of 'The Shy Asian Girl'? in other words, what voices lie behind the stereotype?

Methods

This study was grounded in an interpretive tradition to look at perceptions, feelings, ideas, thoughts, actions as heard or observed (Oakley, 2000 as loosely adapted in Thomas, 2013) where the researcher aimed to be an insider, interacting with participants. It employed an ethnographic case study approach to seek depth rather than breadth in its scope and analysis which its goal is not to universalize but to particularise and then yield insights of potentially wider relevance and theoretical significance (Duff, 2012). Furthermore, the study documented the participants' thoughts, feelings and efforts which were altering, revealing their attempts and struggles towards their social world.

Context and Participants

This study was undertaken at one of Top-Leading Universities in the United Kingdom which located in Birmingham. Drawing on Friedman (2012) that the site and participants are selected in accordance with specified criteria, or a sample of convenience, in which they are selected because they are accessible to the researcher, therefore, the author selected the participants who were the author's females' classmates in TEFL program. They are of Indonesian, Japanese and Chinese origin respectively. In this case, the author initially did select her classmates from three different cultures because they simply represent Asian cultures that embody three different traditions, backgrounds and thoughts which are related to the topic of this study. Table 1 provides a more detailed overview of the 3 students.

Table 1. Overview of Case Study Participants

	DEWI	MAKI	LING LING
Program	MA in TEFL	MA in TEFL	MA in TEFL
Age	23	42	22
Gender	Female	Female	Female
First Language	Bahasa Indonesia	Japanese	Mandarin Chinese
Previous degrees	BA in English Education	BA in English Education	BA in English Literature
Professional experience	High school teacher of EFL in Indonesia (8 months)	High school teacher of EFL in Japan (15 years)	None
Previous experience in the UK	None	Joined student exchange program in Epsom, London, the UK in 1996 (4 weeks)	None
Plan after graduating	Study at doctoral level at the same University or at any other University in the UK	Go back to current teaching job in Japan	Look for a teaching job or any kinds of job in the UK that can possibly improve her English language learning

Data Collection

The data were collected from the participants' participation in the L2 academic community which constituted TEFL program classroom. Multiple data collection was obtained from open-ended discussion session as a whole class as well as smaller scope discussion such as group discussion. My goal is to view this case from several points which are better than viewing from one so that it required triangulation where more than one method is used to collect the data (Denzin, 1978 as cited in Thomas, 2013). First, the observational field notes were taken from unstructured observation since the author immerse herself in the situation in to understand what is going on there. The observation was taken from some of the courses on a weekly basis almost for the entire 1st semester (24 lectures in 3 courses; 3 hours per lecture, 216 hours of observation in total). Second, to complete the data collection in this study, a semi-structured interview was conducted personally to the participants in one to one basis (3 interviews; approximately 50 minutes each). The interview had a list of issues in the form of questions which the author wanted to cover, however, those issues are flexible, rather a reminder of what the author intended to cover. The hallmark of the semi-structure interview is that the author can ask and prolong the discussion on a point if she/he wish to know more (Thomas, 2013).

Data Analysis

In following a tradition in qualitative research, the research used inductive analysis of data from a small set of participants. The semi-structured interviews of these three participants were analysed to address their participation incorporating identity and investment in the TEFL program. In addition to the coding of these interviews, the field notes of classroom observation and the researcher's diary were also reviewed multiple times and coded inductively with focus on identity and investment through classroom participation.

Result and Discussion

Asian Females' Identities and Investment Negotiation in the Classroom

In analysing the data, it became clear that the major challenge for the Asian female students in this research was negotiating competence, identities and power relation so that they could participate as a member of the classroom in each course in TEFL program. The participants experienced various ways of negotiations depend on the classroom situation of the course they were attending as well as on their personal history, goals and values. In this research, I focus on the negotiation of competence, identity and investment which seemed to be the dominant issue to the students' experiences in these three different courses in TEFL program.

It was found out that all participants negotiated participation differently in each course during the 1st semester (3 months). However, they had confessed that their participation was insignificant. The reason for this inconsiderable participation related with the shifted identity of each participant that influenced by investment in each course in this TEFL program. In the course A, for instance, the composition of students was culturally nearly homogenous. Composed of 90% Asian female students which constituted a smaller size of class (30 students), the participants in this course feel more comfortable to participate and successfully gained their identity as 'equally competent' with the others, rather than in heterogeneous class which involved native speaking students. In addition to this, the instructor pedagogical teaching in course A who was viewed as thoughtful and considerate also became a major investment for the participants to gain confidence in participating. The identity is given by the instructor course A by addressing students with their names, apparently stimulated confidence, that the students felt truly appreciated and accepted as part of the classroom community.

> "I think it's because she knows everybody's name, she gives identity to us in this class like you feel you belong to this class. So I can express myself. (Lingling, December 15^{th,} 2016 from interview)

Unlike in course A, the most of the participants in course B felt more pressure which led to the lack of participation and silence. One of the reasons was caused by the composition of the classroom members. In course B, the students were more culturally heterogeneous. The course involved 60 students which constituted larger size of the classroom with mixed nationalities. Apart from the Asian, British, American, Canadian, Indian, Pakistani, and Arabian students also attended the course. With this more complex nationality involved in the L2 classroom, these Asian students who perceived their L2 as imperfect, cannot achieve the return on their investment. Given that, they hesitated to participate because they were afraid of being judged by their L2 native speaking classmates who looked them down and seemed unfriendly

> "There is a Canadian girl because she looked not very friendly of course they did try to speak to me and, I try to and we talked but the conversation didn't go very well. Yeah in course A I don't mind (participating), but depends on the people that is sitting there and maybe it's because of those people speaking English and very proficient maybe I will I be a bit hesitate

to speak English because I don't want them, because my English not perfect sometimes I feel very afraid to even if I like talking with people you know very well"   (Maki, December 15th, 2016 from interview)

"sometimes into other classes you have a lot of Native speakers they can understand lesson in one second and then they can absorb in one second and then the teacher goes to another topic even when you cannot understand the last questions they will move to another question it's very stressful"   (Lingling, December 15th, 2016 from interview)

The students from English speaking countries who were assumed as L2 highly proficient, were to blame as the obstructers to their identity acquisition because they think that the instructor practised discrimination and marginalised the Asian. Lingling confessed that the instructor also chose which group of students to be taught to and left the others who are non-English speaker behind.

"I think the lecturers just make contact with them and I think like me, I have language barrier student, where we are left by the teachers and also by the classroom we cannot get something useful from this classroom, yes because I found one teacher but I don't what want to tell you who, she sometimes only focus on the native speakers students maybe the English native speakers students are smarter but I think teachers have to teach everyone"   (Lingling, December 15th, 2016 from interview)

Therefore, even if the students were highly motivated to learn, they did not seem to get the return of what they have invested in this course, then they were likely to see the course as useless. Their identities as "the forgotten" ones are strengthened in this typical classroom where the instructor consciously or unconsciously marginalise some group who were viewed as "hard to teach" or "the silent when the others engaged". Furthermore, this course was taught by several different instructors who had different personalities and diverse pedagogical teaching in its weekly meeting. This might be caused by the curricular requirements that were imposed by the University as one of the institutional policies. However, this set of different lecturers disadvantaged the students with imperfect English in terms of adapting to a certain instructor pedagogical teaching. Different instructors in this course implied different teaching method, English accent, personalities, assessment and further the investment which cause the Asian student's identity shifted from time to time.

However, in course C, although the classroom was big in size, all participants from this study confessed that they felt less pressure and more comfortable. The composition of classroom members was culturally mixed likewise in course B. They were more eager to participate in the group discussion rather than in whole class discussion because of the assistance of the instructor who would supervise to each table when the discussion was in progress.   In addition to this, the course content was regarded as not too demanding since it was related to the daily topics such as stress, time management, assertiveness and others which reflected the students' daily experiences. Furthermore, the instructor teaching method was also acknowledged as total and well prepared that made them more serious in learning.   They explained that it is important to be comfortable and feel secure, one of the ways is by sitting with

people that they know well, friendly and unlikely to judge them. It is then told that when the people on the table were not familiar, they were unlikely to participate.

Voices lie behind the stereotype 'The Shy Asian Girl'

Dewi was 23 years old and came to UK funded by the Ministry of Education of her country to pursue the MA degree. She was graduated cum laude from English educational program and had 8 months teaching experience. She came to the UK with a strong motivation to learn about language education and improve her English accent. Prior to her arrival, she was expecting to speak English a lot in university as well as during TEFL program that she attended. The fact that in course A all the students were from Asian countries, did not meet her initial expectation in communication. She was disappointed and thought that the return for her investment in this course would not be achieved as she found out that the other Asian students in course A also faced the same L2 difficulties like she did. The reason why she did not participate and became silent in course A, B and C were not merely because of the fear of judgement as "not competent" from instructors or her classmates, but because she thought that it was not that necessary to ask when she could still find the answer from the handbook or simply just asked to her friends. She asked or answered questions when it was really needed. She mentioned that this was her learning method she found convenient. Rather than maintaining participation in the courses in TEFL program, Dewi invested a lot outside the classroom-based community by joining debate club, becoming a student representative, volunteering teaching student grade A level and so on.

Maki, a 42-year-old, came to the UK for the second time. 20 years ago, she joined a student exchange program in Epsom, London for 4 weeks. However, when she came back to the UK for Master degree, she was unconfident with her English competent and feel afraid to speak openly in course B and C. She claimed that it was her introverted personality which made her feel extremely nervous if she had to speak in front of people she did not know very well. She bluntly confessed that it was difficult to follow the fast-paced discussion on topics in course B and C since the instructors themselves speak English fast, whereas she needed time to digest some words that she might not be familiar with. However, even though in some courses she did not achieve the return on the investment, socially, she tried a lot to be accepted as a part of a community

Lingling is a 22-year-old Chinese girl and freshly graduated from English Literature program in China. The same case with Dewi, Lingling was also disappointed finding out that her classmates mostly came from the same country as hers. She regretted that her Chinese classmates used to speak Chinese in the discussion and questioned why they came to the UK if they still spoke L1 in L2 classroom. She did not participate in course B and C as much as she did in course A. She mentioned that she was afraid of being judged by those "unfriendly" native speakers that seemed not having interest in anything about her. She thought that she was not a fool or unintelligent when she was unable to speak English L2 well, she was just unfamiliar with the language. This unfriendliness and unfamiliarity contributed to her silence so that she could not participate and express what she was thinking comfortably. In fact, in these courses she was complete silence in an open-ended discussion session, yet, still tried to convey her opinion in group discussion. However, her disappointment in course A of

not having native speakers' classmates turned out to be an advantage because she apparently 'felt like home' being in a class filled with the Asian students. She reasoned that people from Asia had the same way of thinking and lifestyle although they speak different languages.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

In this study, I have explored the participants' participation negotiation in relation to their identity and investment. It was concluded that the participants developed various identities in different courses. In a course which was culturally homogenous, with the instructor who actively encouraged the students to get engaged with the classroom discourse such as course A, the participants developed identities as the real learners so that they could participate in a less pressure situation. Meanwhile, in the courses which were more heterogeneous with some native speakers involved such as course B and C, they completely silent in open discussion, yet still tried to participate in group discussion. In these courses, they developed an identity as less competent and marginalised member of the classroom. Moreover, the marginalisation practised by the instructors in course B made participating even more difficult for them. Given these points, the returns of their investments in different courses were achieved variously. Ling-ling and Maki could get the return of their investment in course A because the instructor was favourable and the classroom situation was less stressed than course B and C. However, Dewi thought that the homogenous class was not a good investment for her language learning since she was not forced to speak L2 in a culturally Asian classroom. Therefore, she invested outside the classes by actively joining clubs and becoming a student representative. It was also implied that the stereotype of 'the shy Asian girl' is not a culture-based generalisation but it was rather caused by situation specific. Feeling marginalised, inferior, less competent and the issue of racism was the situation which disadvantaged the Asian students to develop identity and achieve the investment in L2 classroom of TEFL program.

This study has implications for pedagogy on how to stimulate international students' participation in L2 and how to develop equal opportunity in the classroom. Instructors/teachers/lecturers/educators should be aware of the L2 classroom situation and indicate the students with difficulties in following the lesson or understanding the content. The classroom community should give the L2 learners opportunities to express themselves as the member of the community by creating friendly and less pressure classroom discourse so that they will be able to get the return on their investment and develop their identity as the real learners who participate and engaged in classroom activities. This is to say that native speaking students or even instructors are not simply the dominant group, target, or norm but groups of peripheral participants who also need to be socialised into increasingly heterogeneous communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991, as cited in Morita, 2004). This study suggests the instructor to be more active in encouraging students in the L2 classroom by ignoring their cultural/personal preferences, but to perceptively identify how the students shaped or being shaped by classroom interaction.

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