The dynamic construction of identity in the ELF intercultural communication in an online English classroom: A positioning perspective

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Abstract

This research investigates the dynamic construction of identity in the ELF intercultural communication between a Filipino online English tutor and her Chinese student. The findings of the study indicate that the identities of the two ELF participants are not fixed, but vary in the different phases of the discourse. Both interlocutors tried to define and re-define the different positions of English language varieties, trying to associate their English varieties with those of native speakers, so as to gain a privileged or advantageous position over the other. Both ELF participants tried to establish alignment by constructing an in-group identity, but this has not been maintained all throughout the interaction as the Filipino tutor continued to impose native speaker norms on her student. The study ends by suggesting that an intercultural teaching approach could be used by the Filipino English tutor in the study, and the rest of online English tutors in general, when teaching their foreign students so as to help the latter secure understanding of the socio-cultural aspects of intercultural communication and become more effective ELF users in this era of globalization.

1. Introduction

A lot of Filipinos these days are turning to the home-based online teaching industry for both the convenience and the opportunity it gives. One can work from home and have the chance to communicate with English language learners from different countries, mostly from East Asia, whose common interest is to develop their English communication skills. Part of this growing industry, however, is the commercialization of Filipino online tutors as proficient in any of the standard Englishes spoken by those who belong in the "Inner Circle" countries (Kachru, 1992). With the increasing demand for teachers and the limited supply of Filipinos who belong to what Martin (2014) classifies as the "Inner Circle"[1] speakers of English in the Philippines, some of the Filipino English tutors hired to teach foreign students are still in the "Outer Circle" or those who consciously and unconsciously "use both standard and non-standard forms [of English]". Apparently, in this intercultural and English as Lingua Franca (ELF) communication between the Filipino online tutors and their foreign students, an active construction of identity happens as Filipino tutors assert their identities as reliable sources and bearers of Standard English and as foreign students assert their identities as learners of Standard English who can either accept and question the things taught to them.

While there may be a number of studies of international norms that facilitate ELF communication, research on the ways in which identities and local cultures and values are negotiated have not been thoroughly explored. Just as what Gu et. al (2014) have argued, there is a need to go beyond the content of ELF interactions and instead focus on the way ELF speakers construct and present their identities in order to develop cultural affinity with one another given the range of Englishes at their disposal.

Aiming to contribute to studies exploring English as lingua franca in Asian contexts (Kirkpatrick, 2010b), this paper investigates a single ELF intercultural communication between a

Filipino online English tutor and her Chinese student. The study aims to examine how the two interlocutors of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds actively construct their identities in an attempt to develop cultural affinity with one another. This research aims to contribute to the current literature by presenting how an intercultural teaching approach can help contribute to the sharing of cultural knowledge and to the construction of a multi-cultural identity among Filipino online English tutors and their foreign students.

2. Background of the Study

Intercultural Communication (IC) and English as Lingua Franca (ELF) (Siedlhofer, 2005) are both primarily interested in interactions among participants with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, as pointed out by Jenkins (2009 as cited in Hua, 2015), the two differentiate from each other in focus: IC often begins with *cultural differences* that may arise in intercultural encounters while ELF, on the other hand, emphasizes *linguistic sharedness* and refers to situations where all – or some – participants interact with one another in a common language of choice, in most cases English, other than their native languages. On the other hand, according to Hua (2015), though IC and ELF have developed from different traditions and research agendas, both converge on the role of negotiation. Both share the same interest as to how interlocutors negotiate meanings for specific purposes by making use of their similar lingua-cultural resources (Cogo, 2010).

Baker (2011) in another study argued that English in intercultural communication is not a culturally neutral language as has been suggested in some (House, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Holliday (2011) further developed this stance by pointing out that in any form of communication, there is always the embedding of social situations that involve speakers of different purposes and positions; none of which are culturally neutral. Furthermore, the way we conceive of and make use of culture is always an ideological process that changes depending on the here-and-now of interactions.

In a postmodern perspective, language both represents and creates one's social reality (Wood & Kroger, 2000). The positioning theory of van Langenhove and Harre (1999) reasserts this by examining how the "construction of social reality, identity, and power are accomplished through interactions". They outlined three forms of positioning: *self-positioning, forced self-positioning,* and *deliberate positioning of other* (Langenhove & Harre, 1999). Gu et al. (2014) defined these in their study by stating that self-positioning is something that "happens when one attempts to express one's agency to achieve a particular goal in their discursive practice". Forced self-positioning, on the other hand, is when "individuals position themselves as they believe they are required to by either the social discourse or their interlocutors". Deliberate positioning of others, meanwhile, involves the "intentional positioning of oneself in a manner calculated to impel someone else to adopt a particular position in response" (p.133).

Since ELF intercultural communication relies mainly on how the interlocutors negotiate meanings and create a social reality using a language that is not culturally neutral, how then can cultural affinity develop between two ELF speakers of different linguistic and cultural repertoires through self-positioning, forced self-positioning and deliberate positioning of others in an online class setting?

The way Filipino online English tutors adapt to their commercialization as speakers of "standard Englishes" (such as General American English (GAE) or Received Pronunciation (RP)/British English) and its effects to the tutors themselves and their foreign students remains unaddressed to this day. It is my hope that this study would help Filipino online English tutors

and the online English schools in the country to make a paradigm shift and instead embrace an intercultural teaching approach where tutors do not have to assert themselves as speakers of GAE or RP, but of a standard Philippine English so that it will lead to the sharing of cultural knowledge and construction of a multicultural identity between the tutors and their students who are both ELF speakers.

3. The Present Study

This study aims to understand the dynamic construction of identity in an ELF intercultural communication between a Filipino online English tutor and her Chinese student. For this study, a recording of their first class together was analyzed. Both the Filipino online English tutor and her Chinese student know that their class would be recorded for the school's monitoring purposes. For this paper, the Filipino tutor, the Chinese student, and representative of the school management were all approached in a neutral environment and given permission sheets asking their approval that the class recording would be used for this study. All parties were informed that their actual names, the company name, together with all the information that would trace to their identities would be changed or eliminated to protect their privacy and that if they decided to withdrew from participating in this study, of which they did not, the recording and records of their participation would be destroyed.

The corpus used was drawn mainly from the transcription of the class recording. The recording was transcribed in verbatim including the false starts, hesitations, and flawed grammar so as to accurately portray the speakers' true utterances. The study mainly intends to generate information as well as insights as to how the two ELF interlocutors of entirely different cultural and linguistic backgrounds actively construct their identities in an attempt to develop cultural affinity in the process of teaching and/or learning English.

Analysis of the corpus was done in a recursive, iterative manner, moving back and forth between the data and the framework used in this study which is the positioning theory as developed by van Langenhove and Harre (1999). The "indigenous concepts" (Patton, 2002, p. 454) employed by the two ELF interlocutors when negotiating their positions (e.g. standard English, American accent, British accent, educated abroad/in an international school) have been identified. The connection among these concepts was established together with the theoretical categories that help answer the research question raised in this study. These theoretical categories are "negotiation of institutional roles", "negotiation of identity", "shifting subject positions" and "establishing alignment". Data analysis anchoring on these four categories was informed by positioning theory so as to obtain information and insights as to how the two ELF interlocutors, the Filipino online English tutor and her Chinese student, positioned themselves, responded to being positioned, and deliberately positioned the other in an attempt to establish their identities as legitimate users of English

4. Findings

In the start of the conversation, the Filipino Tutor, or FT, makes a remark of the Chinese Student's, or CS, accent, saying that it sounds British. She tries to establish alignment with CS by referring to popular culture, saying that CS's accent is similar with Emma Watson, a known British actress. She sets a contrast with CS accent to that of the American accent by doing what she believes to be the American accent. In doing so, she attempts to establish a legitimate identity of an English tutor who can identify different varieties of English accents. However, this identity is challenged by CS as she questions the correctness of the words FT tries to speak in a

British accent. The following extract shows how the two interlocutors try to construct their identities as speakers of English: (in this scenario, FT still does not know that CS studied for two years in a university in London)

1   FT: Can you hear me?
2   CS: Yes, much much better @@@ Finally (1)
3   FT: Oh, yeah, (1) yeah (.) you're accent is British now (2) Bet-tuh, (1) right? @@@ Yeah
4   CS: Bet-tuh @@@@
5   FT: Yeah, because if you will speak it the American way, you will say bet-ter (:) </CS @@>, right? Bet-ter (:) (1) Yeah, but in your case (.), it seems this sounds bet-tuh (:) @@@
6   CS: </FT @@> You're so funny @@@
7   FT: Yeah, okay. (.) Your accent is very cute (:) (1) Yeah (.) Your accent is really cute (1) like I can hear Emma Watson (1) You know Emma Watson, right?
8   CS: Yeah, I know, know. @@@ Yeah, I've watched Harry Potter before.
9   FT: Yeah, you have the same accent. (1)
10 CS: @@@ Thank you, thank you.
11 FT: Right, yeah, my pleasure (.) Plea-zhur? @@@ All right
12 CS: @@@ Pleazhur?
13 FT: Yeah @@ Plea-zhur @@ Okay. (2) Toh-dai (today). @@
14 CS: Toh-dai?

As can be seen from these lines, FT self-positions herself as a legitimate teacher of English by showing her knowledge of different English accents to CS. However, in turns 11 and 13 where FT tries to imitate the British accent by pronouncing the words "pleasure" and "today", CS seems to question their accuracy as can be seen in turns 12 and 14. From here, it can be construed that CS makes an attempt to challenge FT's constructed identity as an English tutor knowledgeable of different English accents. Within this process, we see CS's deliberate positioning of FT by questioning FT's teachings, thus, challenging FT's dominant role. In the following extract, in turn 1, FT has to forced position herself as she admits that though she likes the British accent, she is "more used to speaking the American accent".

1   FT: I like the British accent (1) but I'm used to speaking the American accent (.) so, (1) yeah
2   CS: Where do you come from?
3   FT: Yeah, I come from the PH, the Philippines, but (2) but yeah, (1) but my accent is way different from the Filipinos @@ Yeah, so I guess I'm trying to adopt the (:) American accent, (1) uh-hum
4   CS: I think, uh, it's not very (1) Americano @@
5   FT: Oh, really? Thank you @@ (.) Okay, yes @@ so this time we will be having (.) Okay, I can also do the British </CS @@> but it's just that I'm not used to using it (2) bet-tuh (1) I like it @@@ okay? </CS @@> So this time, we'll be having the mock exam

In the second extract, after FT self-positions herself as having a native-like (American) accent, CS questions where FT comes from. FT replies by saying that she is from the Philippines. She tries to reassert her identity as a legitimate teacher of English by telling CS that though she is a Filipino, "her accent is way different from Filipinos", and that she "tries to adopt

the American accent". CS comments that FT does not sound "Americano". In this she positions FT as someone who should not present herself as native-like speaker of English.

FT has to forced position herself as someone who positively takes CS comment by thanking her for it, but she also resists CS deliberate positioning of her by telling that "[she] can also do the British accent", it's just that "she is not used to using it". She imitates CS's way of pronouncing the word "better" for the second time and through this, she positions herself as someone who can also learn from CS.

1 FT: So are you ready, Yu***? (2) Oh, how to pronounce correctly your name? Yo-*** (:)?
2 CS: Yurr-***
3 FT: Oh, Yurr-***, like the Chinese yurr (:)
4 CS: Yes, yes @@ the Chinese way
5 FT: I like speaking Chinese too, like my dad is a republican Chinese (1) My surname in my QQ is my real surname (1) [name]

In the third extract, for FT to further save herself from a critical face-threatening moment, she tries to establish congruence/alignment with CS by letting her know that she is also knowledgeable of Chinese accent. She tells her that she is also of Chinese descent. She tries to construct an in-group identity with CS in order to develop cultural affinity with her. In the process, she establishes alignment with CS who is also multilingual and multicultural like her.

After having an IELTS mock exam with where FT acts as an IELTS examiner and CS an examinee, FT gives her comment about CS's performance.

1 FT: […] avoid pauses and delays (:) I noticed that sometimes if you're thinking you will have noticeable pauses and delays
2 CS: (2) Okay
3 FT: So if you've noticed those native speakers (1) or British professional speakers (:) they will not pause silently for a very long time (1) You can pause silently, but you can only do it in 1 to 2 seconds (.) But if it is very long (:) longer than 2 seconds it is not good already because probably the examiner will think that you are nervous, right? </CS: yes>
4 CS: (1) Yes
5 FT: […] so do you have some questions?
6 CS: No (:)
7 FT: No questions?
8 CS: Uh (1) no (.) your suggestions are helpful

FT repositions herself as someone knowledgeable of the IELTS Scoring System. After getting deliberately positioned by CS in the earlier part of the conversation, FT reasserts her identity as someone who is a legitimate teacher of IELTS by undermining CS's way of delivering her answers and saying that it is not the same with "British professional speakers". FT draws on the language ideology that values British and American English as standard Englishes and that one has to learn either one of these two in order to be accepted to a native English-speaking community. What more is that she emphasizes the importance of speaking in a professional manner which she is unable to clearly define. She comes up with rigorous standards that one must adhere to in order to get a good IELTS score. She emphasizes that one must "not pause for more than two seconds" and one "must not speak in a gloomy tone of voice". Though

she knows that the reasons for having to pause when speaking can be caused by nervousness, she still stresses that CS cannot depend on this consideration. She deliberately positions CS in a situation where she has to adhere to rigorous standards as being unable to do so would mean she will be considered as "[a person] having problems speaking [English]".

By downplaying CS's way of delivering her answers, FT marginalizes CS English in her attempt to reposition herself as an expert in English language. Unable to come up with a counter-discourse, CS can only tell FT that her "suggestions are helpful".

1   FT: […] in your case, since you've been in UK for two, (.) two years so it's somewhat like improved you a lot </CS: yes> But if you're staying in China, only, so sometime (1) probably (.) you'll have difficulties in expressing your thoughts
2   CS: […] Yeah, I'm actually applying for master in interpreting </FT: oh> Yeah, that's why I need to redo my IELTS exam </CS: I see> actually I'm already an under graduate in UK (1) so if I apply for any other subjects like management or finance, I no longer do not need to give them my IELTS score again (.), but for interpreting I have to do it and they said I have to reach 7 in speaking so I think that's a huge task for me (2) yeah […]
3   FT: Uh-hum yeah (1) So anyway our time is up. Good luck and I hope that you'll get a 7. Jia you! @@
4   CS: Bye @@

Realizing that she has already put CS in a disadvantageous position, FT tries to ameliorate this by saying that she did not notice any grammatical errors in CS's responses. She equates this to CS getting educated in a university in UK for two years which puts her at an advantage over other Chinese English learners who have only stayed in China. CS agrees to this and tells FT that it is really difficult for Chinese students to learn grammar for their common L1, Chinese, is different from other languages. CS also repositions herself to that of a British language user instead of learner by reiterating to FT that she has already passed IELTS before, it is just that she has to redo it for her application in the Master of Interpreting program.

FT tries to establish alignment with CS by recognizing the difficulties CS has to overcome in order to be proficient in English. She tries to develop cultural affinity with her by saying that she understands CS's struggles to achieve her desired score and that it will be possible for her to achieve it only if she will pay attention to the things she has told her. FT then ends their conversation by using the Chinese greeting "Jia you!" or the Chinese for goodbye in order to establish a multicultural and in-group identity with CS.

6. Discussion

This study tried to determine the dynamic construction of identity in a single ELF intercultural communication between a Filipino tutor and Chinese student. Positioning theory was the framework used in this study to examine the subject positions the Filipino tutor and the Chinese student adopted in order to reach cultural affinity with each other.

Results of the study showed that the identities of the ELF participants were not fixed but rather actively constructed in the different phases of the discourse and were culturally determined. The ELF interlocutors' linguistic knowledge and cultural repertoire contributed to how they positioned themselves in different phases of the discourse. Both macro- and micro-linguistic context play a role in constructing identity and negotiating power relations as can be shown on the interlocutors' self-positioning, forced positioning, and deliberate positioning of each other. To gain an advantageous position in their interaction, both the interlocutors display

different language ideologies at different phases of the discourse. A dynamic interplay between legitimacy and illegitimacy, marginality and authority of language varieties, and rigid views of language learning and usage (Anderson, 2009) are at work this interaction. The Filipino tutor's self-positioning of herself as a user and teacher of a 'standard English' and her intentional and unintentional positioning of her student in both positive and negative ways influenced the student's self-positioning. Instead of seeing the student's non-standard English as deficient, she could have adopted an intercultural teaching approach in which she may allow her student "space to negotiate, analyze, and reflect on the socio-cultural aspects of intercultural communication (Gu et al., 2014). Instead of continually emphasizing how the sound can sound like a 'native speaker', the Filipino tutor in the study could have helped her student become a more empowered English language user by adopting an intercultural teaching approach where she can focus on what the student already has, the linguistic and cultural resources she brings with her in the interaction, and build on it to help the student become more invested in learning the English language (Norton, 2000). Part of this intercultural teaching approach is to help learners to be critically aware of the roles that different languages play in their lives and to value the communicative competence that one has acquired in one's home language in learning the target language. This way both the tutor and the student can become empowered as they can both position themselves as legitimate speakers of whatever English they have and it is more about understanding the language and behavior of the target community, without having to 'downplay' their own home culture and home language.

7. Conclusion

This study about the construction of identities in the ELF intercultural communication between a Filipino tutor and her Chinese student reveals that the identities of the ELF participants were not fixed but rather were actively constructed in the different phases of the discourse. Both their identities were also culturally determined. The ELF interlocutors' linguistic, knowledge, and cultural repertoire contribute to how they position themselves in different phases of the discourse.

In order to develop cultural affinity with one another, both tried to establish alignment based on their being multilingual and multicultural. However, this was not maintained all throughout the interaction as the Filipino tutor focused on setting "the British professional speaker standards" to her student that would be too ambiguous to follow.

This study thus suggests that Filipino online English tutors can adopt an intercultural teaching approach wherein the linguistic and cultural resources that they and their students bring with them in the interaction will be valued and build upon so that both parties can become more empowered English language users in this era of globalization.

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Appendix
Transcription Conventions adapted from the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE)
FT, speaker ID for the Filipino online English tutor
CS, speaker ID for the Chinese student
(.) indicates a brief pause for up to half a second in duration; longer pauses are timed to the nearest second and marked with the number of seconds in parenthesis (e.g., (1)=1 second)
Laughter and laughter-like sounds are identified using the symbol @, and the number of syllables approximated (e.g.ha-ha=@@)
When two or more utterances are simultaneous, the overlaps are marked with tags for each speaker: </FT: __>, </CS:__>
Sounds that have been lengthened or emphasized are marked with a (:)
Names of the speakers, places, cities etc. are omitted so as to protect the speakers' identities and are replaced by [name 1] and *** (if only a certain number of characters have to be eliminated)
Utterances spoken in a particular mode (fast, slow, read, etc.) that are notably different from the speaker's normal speaking style are marked accordingly (e.g. <fast>, <slow>, etc.)