SherrieLee FinalPaper MinorityELL extract

Data · January 2017

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Me and those English-speaking elites: Uncovering the identity of one minority ELL in Singapore

Sherrie Lee

Temasek Polytechnic

Paper presented at *Joint '7th SELF Biennial International Conference' and 'ERAS Conference'*, 9-11 September 2013, Singapore

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EXTRACT FROM PAPER - INTRODUCTION

English language learners (ELLs) in Singapore often refer to foreign students who learn English as their second language. For local students, on the other hand, English is their first language, while their mother tongue, the official language associated with their ethnicity, is relegated as a second language studied in school (Lim, Pakir & Wee, 2013, p. 4). The notion of English as a first language, that is, English as a dominant and frequently used language, however, is not a reality experienced by local students whose mother tongue is actually the dominant language used at home and in their everyday interactions. Furthermore, discussions about identity of students learning English tend to focus on their use of standard and colloquial forms of Singapore English (Alsagoff, 2010; Stroud & Wee, 2005, 2007; Vaish & Roslan, 2011), and less on local learners with non-English speaking backgrounds who face challenges in acquiring English in the first place. Thus, this paper examines the identity of one such student, Rachel (pseudonym), a Singaporean Chinese student, through an analysis of her English language learning experience throughout her school life.

I consider Rachel a minority ELL to differentiate her from the foreign student population of English learners, as well as to reflect how her language preference goes against the trend of English being used as a dominant language at home and at school. ELLs in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature have traditionally referred to foreign-born students residing in monolingual contexts, thus the term ELL seems inappropriate for locally born ESL (English as a second language) learners. The concept of the ELL, however, evolves as the linguistic demographics of a country changes. In the United States, ELLs now include Generation 1.5, that is, those who were born and educated in the US and who are "[e]quipped with social skills in English, …[but] are usually less skilled in the academic language

associated with school achievement" (Harklau, 2003, p. 1). Using the term ELL as a concept dependent on its context, I use the term *minority* ELL to refer to a locally-born student (as opposed to a foreign-born student) who does not have English as a home language nor considers English as one's first language even though Singapore's education system and virtually every aspect of civic life uses and promotes English as a first and official language. As evidenced in the Census of Population 2010 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011), the usage of English as a dominant home language has become more prevalent over a span of 10 years, particularly so among younger age groups and those who have higher educational qualifications.

In understanding Rachel's identity as an English language learner, I consider how her primary Discourse – a Mandarin-speaking working class family background – influences the acquisition of the secondary Discourse of school and English as a first and academic language (Gee, 2012). I also show how her identity is shaped by how inequitable social relationships influence language learning, and how investment in learning English is driven by both real and metaphorical capital to be gained (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000). I then suggest that Rachel's apparent contradictory attitudes of desire and reluctance toward language learning opportunities can be resolved by Gee's (2012) notion of a mushfaking learner.

Background of study

The site of this study is a polytechnic, a post-secondary vocational institution with a focus on technical and professional skills (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2013a). Rachel was my student in a Business Communications class in 2011. At the time of the research in 2012, Rachel was in her second year of a three-year Diploma course in Business. As a Chinese, Rachel belongs to the majority race but in terms of language use, her preference for using the Chinese language and relatively lower English proficiency compared to her peers places her

in the minority.   Furthermore, Rachel's educational track was earmarked for technical-vocational studies where she spent three years at the Institution of Technical Education (ITE) straight after secondary school, thus reinforcing her minority status as a student at the polytechnic where the majority of students come directly from secondary school.

By examining Rachel's journey of English language learning from primary school to the polytechnic, I ask the following research questions: i) How have Discourses and social relationships influenced Rachel's English language learning experience? ii) What has motivated Rachel's investment in learning English and how has it changed over time? iii) What identity positions have been useful in helping Rachel learn English? It is hoped that teachers can better appreciate the cumulative challenges faced by similar minority ELLs and consider how to address those challenges in the light of Rachel's failures and successes.

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