

(In: Nunan, D., & Choi, J. (2010) (Eds.). *Language and culture: Reflective narratives and the emergence of identity* (pp. 118-124). London: Routledge)

English and Me: My Language Learning Journey

Angel Lin, University of Hong Kong

As far as my memory goes, the earliest scenario I can remember of English and me is a 4-year-old kindergarten girl learning the alphabet by heart--she rote-memorized the order of the letters by rehearsing aloud the letters in the alphabetic order again and again. Growing up in a very poor family in the 1970s of Hong Kong, she and her three elder brothers and one elder sister didn't have any toys. The first toy she got was a small red model car that her father gave her when she came first in her school exam.

English in the Kindergarten years wasn't too difficult for her--she spent time memorizing the spellings of words and the alphabet and could reproduce them in the exam. English was just one of the subjects she needed to do (and to do well) in school. She didn't particularly like it or dislike it--she held a similar attitude towards other school subjects. All these were just tasks to finish to get a good grade in the exam to report back to her parents to get their praise and rewards. She could do most of the school tasks well as she applied herself to them seriously and diligently both at school and at home--treating them as her duties and work. What she enjoyed most, as far as she can remember now, seemed to be the moment when she could look at her parents' approving and praising smiles when she got a good exam result to report to them.

I grew up in a home and community where few had the linguistic resources to use English at all, and even if anyone had, she/he would find it extremely socially inappropriate to speak English. My chances for learning and using English, thus, hinged entirely on the school. However, I lived in a poor government-subsidized apartment-building complex (called "public housing estate") in the rural area (the New Territories) in Hong Kong, where schools were mostly newly put up in the 1960s and they neither had adequate English resources (e.g., staff well-versed in English) nor a well-established English-speaking and English-teaching-and-learning tradition or school culture.

My parents were manual workers. In the 1960s-70s in Hong Kong, although they laboured long hours every day, their salaries were still so small that they had difficulties putting food on the table for their five children. For an extended period of time, we had to depend on the small amount of "relief rice" rationed out monthly from the government's social welfare department. My parents, therefore, put all their hopes and expectations in their children: illiterate in English as they were, they did not fail to be keenly aware of the fact that their children's future (e.g., a better-paying job) depends on doing well in school, and doing well in school depends on mastering the English language in the Hong Kong schooling system.

They have passed on the work ethic to their children. We were urged day and night to "study hard" and especially to study English hard though they themselves did not have the slightest idea as to how one could learn English well! I remember that when I was

in Primary 3 (Grade 3), I was very frustrated by my English "story book" which was full of difficult English words that I did not understand. My teacher then typically read the story once and I could not remember how to pronounce those words afterwards. The whole page was opaque and frustrating to me! I was very frightened then because small as I was (8 years old), I did not fail to realize that I was not going to do well in English. At that time, school teachers generally appeared to be rather formal and distant from students and I did not dare to bother them: for there were far too many difficult words (well, "difficult" to me), at least 3 or 4 of them in one line, and I felt too ashamed to ask. And even if they had told me how to pronounce the words, and what the words meant, I would have soon forgot about them as there were just far too many new things to memorize, especially the difficult sounds of the words.

At Primary 4 (Grade 4), there came a fresh graduate from the College of Education to our school, and he became our English teacher. His teaching methods were very different from our former teachers. He was friendly and approachable and talked to us explicitly about our need to increase our English vocabulary. He asked us to keep a "rough work book" where we put down all new words or new sentences exemplifying a new grammatical point. He gave us ample practice with word pronunciations and meanings. He explained everything clearly. He also taught us how to use an English dictionary. I have started to pick up some confidence and interest in learning English since then.

At Primary 6 (Grade 6), another recent College of Education graduate, Miss Law, came to our school and took up our English classes. She taught us those funny symbols that they use in the dictionaries to indicate the words' pronunciations. I learnt that these funny symbols were called "international phonetic symbols", and I took a strong interest in them. This interest was, however, not shared by most of my classmates. They found them difficult and boring to learn and did not quite learn any of them at all. It might have been luck on my part, as I seemed to have a special aptitude for these things. I listened carefully to everything the teacher said in lesson and wrote down all her examples in my notebook. At home, I started to play around with different combinations of these symbols and to try to pronounce new words in the dictionary by sounding out these symbols. I began to have a new tool to learn English on my own: the English dictionary can help me to learn new words (my parents had squeezed out some money to buy me an English dictionary as I had told them it would help my English learning). I started to go to the public library to borrow English story books and I conscientiously looked up all the new words and practiced pronouncing them. I kept a vocabulary book where I wrote down the meanings, pronunciations (recorded in phonetic symbols) and example sentences of the words (copied from the dictionary) and I read it whenever I had time. During that time, I wished my friends would do the same because I found myself very odd and lonely doing these things all by myself, but they found it too boring and too much work and jokingly said that I was a "jyu-syu-chuhng" (i.e., a "book-worm", a nerd). I often had to beg my best friend many times before she would go with me to the public library.

Before 1978, all children in Hong Kong were required to sit for a series of standardized tests on English, Chinese and Math at the end of their primary school career (i.e., at the

end of Grade 6). These tests together were called “the Secondary School Entrance Examination” (SSEE). It would determine whether a child could continue to study in a government-funded public secondary school as well as which secondary school she/he could enter (e.g., English-medium or Chinese-medium schools; well-established, prestigious schools in the urban area or new schools in the rural area). My eldest brother did not get good results in this public examination (especially in the subject of English) and our family was too poor to pay the expensive tuition fees of private secondary schools, and so, he had to go to the urban area to find work at the age of twelve. I could still remember the sadness he had on his face the day he got his examination results. For all I knew, he had always “studied hard” though he was often busy helping out with household chores and looking after us. Without any secondary school education, the kind of work he got was harsh and minimal-paying. However, he never gave up learning English. He went to work during the day and saved up money to go to a private evening school which specially taught English. When he came home on weekends, my parents would ask us to bring to him anything we did not understand at school and ask him to tutor us. To me, he was a superb brother and mentor.

During primary 5 and 6 (the last two years before SSEE), our school asked us to purchase thick supplementary exercise books for the three subjects examined in SSEE: Chinese, English and Math. We did a lot of drills/exercises in these books to prepare ourselves for the exam format and content of SSEE. I remember that every time before we did an exercise or a group of exercises on a grammatical topic/structure, Miss Law would first write on the blackboard the grammatical rule and explained the rule with several sentences as examples. Then she would ask us to do the exercise on this rule/structure in 270. Each time, I listened carefully to Miss Law's explanation and illustration of the rule and I understood her clear and systematic explanations (by the way, she explained in our mother tongue and I could fully understand her grammatical explanations). Then as I did the exercises in 270, I would think of the rule and applied it when I did the exercise (i.e., I didn't just mindlessly or blindly follow a pattern in order to finish an exercise, but I consciously thought of the rule as I was doing the exercise). Although these exercises must appear to be quite mechanical and non-communicative nowadays, I could benefit from them at that time because, I guess, I was a good deductive learner--I could start from rules and apply them in exercises and I didn't find them boring. Those drills in the basic grammar of English had laid in me a firm foundation in the grammar of English, which has been very important for the rest of my learning and teaching career.

When it came to my turn to take the SSEE, I got very good results. My class teacher had urged me to choose a well-established, prestigious English secondary school in the urban area and tried to contact my parents to persuade them about this. However, my parents decided that for a young girl of twelve to commute four hours daily between our home and the urban area in order attend one of those prestigious schools was too much of a worry to them, and they refused to come to school to talk to my class teacher. They decided to choose the best school available in our area.

I adapted to secondary school life quite smoothly. The first day in school with the school assembly addressed by the Principal in English in the big school hall was a bit

scary to me as I struggled to follow what the principal said. But in the classrooms, teachers readily used Cantonese and my reading and writing skills in English were good and I had no problems following the lessons and textbooks except the History textbook, which was full of difficult vocabulary. However, unlike when I was in Primary 3, I didn't despair and I would spend hours looking up all the new words in the dictionary and write down their pronunciations (in phonetic symbols), meanings and examples in a vocabulary notebook and read them whenever I had time. My history textbook had become a rich source of vocabulary learning and soon I could catch up with the history lessons and assignments. In particular, I enjoyed reading the history and civilization of the Greeks, the Spartans, the Romans and so on. I often wondered what life was like in those times in those places, and when I looked at the drawings of castles and soldiers in the history book, they seemed to have brought me to another land full of adventures and discoveries.

My classmates were generally school-oriented and the classroom learning atmosphere was generally good. I had made friends with some girls--they were keen learners and we would discuss our homework and also joined extra-curricular activities together, e.g., the photography club, the guitar class, the girl guides, and the bridge club. Some time in our first year of secondary school, the girls in my circle began to develop a hobby of writing to pen-pals both in Hong Kong and overseas. I had pen-pals from all over the world: England, Canada, U.S.A., Austria and Germany. In my circle of girl-friends, having pen-pals had become a topic and practice of common interest and we would talk about our pen-pals and shared our excitement about trading letters, postcards, photos, and small gifts with our pen-pals; we'd also show one another pictures of our pen-pals. We'll share things like different kinds of beautiful letter pads and envelopes, and about what to write to our pen-pals, etc. Although there wasn't a pen-pal club, we had in a way formed our own informal circle of pen-pal-interest group (without having such a name and formal structure, of course). It's a spontaneous "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that had emerged from our own activities and interests. One interesting feature about our practice, now that I'm thinking about it, is that we write in English to our pen-pals, even to those in Hong Kong (who were like us, Chinese students). We seemed to frown upon writing *in Chinese* to pen-pals in Hong Kong as that would make our activity less "high-level"--we didn't actually say or use those words but there seemed to be a kind of tacit understanding among us that writing to pen-pals in English was a healthy, good hobby that's acceptable to parents and teachers, that we would take pride in when talking about it, and that would improve our English proficiency while we're having excitement and fun getting to know new friends in different places.

I also started to write my own private diary in English every day about that time. I started this habit when a pen-pal sent me a diary book as my birthday present and suggested writing diary as a worthwhile activity to me. I chose to write my diary in English because someone had told me that finding a chance to use English daily would improve one's English. Although I had started off this habit with an instrumental motivation, later on I found that I could write my diary faster and more comfortably in English than in Chinese--for one thing, the Chinese characters are more complicated and

take longer to write; but more importantly, I felt that I could write my feelings more freely when I wrote in English--less inhibition and reservation--I seemed to have found a tool that gave me more freedom to express my innermost fears, worries, anger, conflicts or excitement, hopes, expectations, likes and dislikes (e.g., anger with parents or teachers, or a troubling quarrel with a friend at times) without constraint or inhibition--as if this foreign language had opened up a new, personal space (a "third space", so to speak), for me to more freely express all those difficult emotions and experiences (typical?) of an adolescent growing up, without feeling the sanctions of the adult world (in my analysis now: I guess these adult sanctions were very much intertwined with my first language, which was largely the language of my daily world at that time). I guess I was creating an expanded self in English, and English seemed to provide me with the additional resources I need to explore myself in a somewhat different manner, in a somewhat different value system, one that appeared to be less prohibiting than my native language in some areas, for instance, in the area of explicitly articulating one's emotions like anger.

At that time, I had also developed a very strong and close friendship with Gretchen, my pen-pal in Milwaukee, U.S.A. I would write and share with her most of my innermost feelings, troubles, worries, hopes and fears that I wouldn't tell even my best friend in school. She would do the same. We pledged that we would be true friends to each other "for ever". We pledged to each other that we would write a letter to each other every day.

English, it seems, had opened up a totally new space for me to express and entrust my secrets and innermost feelings--I felt safe to confide in Gretchen, and to my diary. I also felt that English had provided me with a tool to broaden myself, to reach out to new friends in new lands, to invent and recreate for myself a somewhat different self from the one my parents know. It gave me excitement when new and lasting (lasting it seemed at least at that time) friendships across cultural and geographical boundaries were formed, and it gave me satisfying feelings like those that an adventurer would have exploring into a new land and new culture.

Critical Reflection

However, when I think of all that had happened, I realize that my own chances for socioeconomic advancement seem to have hinged largely on a certain exceptional re-patterning of social and institutional arrangements. Although individual hard work is necessary, individual hard work and sacrifice alone do not count much. For all the hard work in the world, I would not have been able to develop my interest in and ability to learn English, had there not been some well-trained and English-conversant teachers who were willing to teach in a rural school, and provided me with access to some English linguistic capital. For all my hard work, I did not manage to attend one of those well-established, prestigious English-speaking schools in the urban area because of the extremely prohibitive distance constraint imposed by my rural residential location. My own personal history has led me to realize that certain social and institutional structures

impose strong constraints on a child's opportunities for bettering her/his life quite independent of her/his efforts and industry. For someone coming from a background like mine, the chances for socioeconomic advancement are slim even with lots of individual hard work. These social and institutional arrangements constrain the child's opportunities for socioeconomic advancement by denying or limiting their access to English linguistic and cultural resources.

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that success in learning and mastering English for a school child in Hong Kong impacts significantly on her/his academic success and social mobility, and very often the student's own self-worth directly or indirectly depends on it. We may be justified to call it the "language of self-worth". Notwithstanding its being the mother tongue of only a minority in Hong Kong, English is both the language of power and the language of educational and socioeconomic advancement. It constitutes the dominant symbolic resource in the symbolic market (Bourdieu, 1991) in Hong Kong.

The symbolic market is embodied and enacted in the many key situations (e.g., educational settings, job settings) in which symbolic resources (e.g., certain types of linguistic skills, cultural knowledge, specialized knowledge and skills, etc.) are demanded of social actors if they want to gain access to valuable social, educational and eventually material resources (Bourdieu, 1991). For instance, a Hong Kong student must have adequate English resources, in addition to subject matter knowledge and skills, to enter and succeed in the English-medium professional training programmes of medicine, architecture, legal studies, etc. in order to earn the English-accredited credentials to enter these high-income professions. The symbolic market is therefore not a metaphor, but one with transactions that have material and social consequences for individuals.

Where do I stand now? A lot has happened. From 1991-1996 I got the Commonwealth scholarship to study for a PhD. in education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. Living and studying in Canada had broadened my horizons and I had made friends with people from different places. Everything had become "real"--I was really there, making friends in English with people, crossing cultural and national boundaries, and I felt good about this--it's, in a sense, a material realization of my pen-pal paper world I built and created for myself in my adolescence--all with the help of, and in, English. I felt that I was not just an "Asian", a "Chinese" or a "Hongkongese" (though people in general will still identify and classify me with such labels). I felt that I had been able to develop an identity that's broader than just being Hongkongese or Chinese, but as a human being reaching out to other fellow human beings, forming friendships above and across cultural and ethnic lines; different, yet not an OTHER. I also began to love reading poems and literature in English (and even ventured to write some poems in English). Yes, I speak English with an accent, but I promise myself that I'll resist it when occasions arise where some people might try to make me feel ashamed of my accent, to feel that I'm an OTHER. And I'll say to them: I am like you, but I'm not really you, or: No, I'm not you, but I am like you (Trinh T. Min-ha, 1990). Like what Trinh Min-ha says: there's an OTHER within every I; and

perhaps I can also say this too: there's an English OTHER within a Chinese I, or equally true, a Chinese OTHER within an English I.

Coda

Now back in Hong Kong as a university teacher, I have lived a hectic life of work--not much time left for the use and enjoyment of English in leisure. But whenever I hear my students express worries about their English proficiency, I also notice that they have had a very different relationship with English than that I have developed with English over the years. I am still trying to find ways to help them stop seeing English as only a subject and a barrier, but as a friend who would open up new spaces, new challenges and new lands for them, both socioculturally and intellectually. Yet I know I had been privileged with some good teachers in my primary and secondary schools, and fortunate to have joined in a circle of friends where the practice of writing in English to pen-pals emerged during my adolescent years. Yet, today, I'm agonized, seeing that many students have such an unpleasant experience with English. Perhaps it's like how I felt when I was frustrated by the difficult English vocabulary in my textbook in Primary 3. Perhaps they need some skills and strategies to break it through. But perhaps, more importantly, they need to develop a new relationship with English, and find new identities for themselves that are more than just "Hong Kong Chinese who need English for exams". English, as I have known it for years, is not and should not be seen as the language of only those people living in or coming from "English-speaking countries". English, in its diverse accents, should be accessible to anyone who wants to use it. English should also allow itself to be enriched, hybridized, and inter-penetrated and inter-illuminated by people living in different parts of the world.

How do I help my students to turn English from an enemy to a friend, to make use of this medium to express, expand and, possibly, enrich their lives, to transform or hybridize their current identities, to enter into a new world of possibilities as well as relationships with other cultures and peoples in the world? To me, this is a life-long research and practice question to embark on. English, it seems, has to become a friend first, to become a friend to think with, a friend to feel with, and a life-long friend, or else it'll become an insurmountable barrier and enemy in life, because like it or not, we're living in a world where the socioeconomic and political forces have made English important to our life chances, and where our relationship with English to a great extent influences our position and place in this world. We have to be fully aware of the power of English and its gate-keeping functions, fully aware of *how* it gets its power over us, and yet re-appropriating it, hybridizing it, with our own accents, and ultimately to own it. Perhaps the cyber age in the new millennium presents new spaces, new media, and new possibilities for experimenting with new forms of English, new hybridized identities, and new hybridized communities; and perhaps we can work towards helping ourselves to develop and engage in new practices whereby learning and speaking another language is not a continuation of the processes of OTHERING, so much of which we have already witnessed in this world.

References:

- Bourdieu, P. (1991). Language and symbolic power. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.