Perceiving Identity through Accent Lenses: A Case Study of a Chinese English Speaker’s Perceptions of Her Pronunciation and Perceived Social Identity

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Abstract

Despite globalization making English a lingua franca, little is known how accent relates to learners’ identity. In this case study, I focus on a second language (L2) English user’s perspective. Specifically, I examine a Chinese speaker’s of English perceptions of the relationship between identity and pronunciation (accent). Drawing on Norton’s (2000) notion of identity, I applied a 6-point Likert scale questionnaire and conducted an in-depth semi-structured interview. My findings indicate that accent and identity are closely linked, but my participant was not willing to sacrifice intelligible speech to identify with the American society. For this participant, speaking comprehensibly was more important than developing a new L2 identity. I delineate possible pedagogical implication and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Accent, Identity, English as a lingua franca (ELF)

Introduction

Globalization has seen English increasingly becoming a lingua franca (ELF). To be intelligible, speakers with different first language (L1) backgrounds use a variety of communicative strategies to ensure a mutual understanding. As a result, ELF has become a very complex medium of intercultural communication and at the same time a rapidly growing field of study (e.g., Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011). While the body of work on ELF is still thriving, one area that has attracted some attention is related to accent and its relationship with identity (e.g., Sung, 2013; Walker, 2010). Yet, relatively little is known about how accent relates to identity from a regular second language (L2) English user’s perspective. This paper presents the results of a case study of a Chinese speaker’s of English perceptions of her identity and pronunciation (accent) in terms of second language acquisition (SLA) and second culture (C2) acquisition.

Conceptual Framework

The need to learn a new language can be a daunting psychological experience. Even if it
is not essential for survival, having to participate in a new culture and acquiring a new linguistic identity often results in what Hoffman terms as a “seismic mental shift” (1989, p.105), in a way language learners understand and construe the world around them. This finding is especially important in the case of learners who plan on remaining in the new culture, at least for a longer period of time (Marx, 2002). Because the conceptions pertinent to language learner identity are complex, three fundamental will first be briefly clarified: the paradigm shift in English, the question of defining learner identity, and finally the understanding of accent in second language acquisition.

**Paradigm Shift in English and The Role of English in China**

Kachru’s (1985) demographic model of English speakers depicts three concentric circles that illustrate the spread of English. The inner circle (1) includes countries where English is spoken as the primary language (the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). The outer circle (2) is comprised of countries (often British colonies) where English is considered a second language (such as Ghana, Singapore, India, Pakistan, Malawi, Malaysia, and Nigeria, to name a few). The expanding circle (3) shows countries in which English is used as a foreign language (and it recently gained cultural and commercial significance), such as China, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, Greece, and Japan. China is one of the countries where English is seen as a medium of international communication. For the Chinese, English has become an indispensable instrument to communicate with non-native speakers, whose presence in China intensified after the Open Door Policy was implemented in 1978. English in China is neither an official language nor a second language. However, English has received a notable status in Mainland China, as a result of economic, political, technological, educational and cultural needs. Thus, various areas of China, including education, business, science, and technology, represent the use of English in a similar way to the countries placed in the outer circle of Kachru’s model (Aydemir, 2013).

Additionally, Kachru’s idea has contributed to the pedagogical standard where the ‘native speaker’ is perceived as a *norm provider*, and the ‘non-native speaker’ as *norm receiver*. However, this distinction was made blurry in recent years by huge demographic movements to English-speaking countries (Kumagai, 2013). This forced researchers to reconsider the hierarchical contrast between ‘natives’ and ‘non-natives’ and led to the creation of a new paradigm of English called World Englishes. This standard aims at moving away from ranking ‘natives’ in front of ‘non-natives’ and embraces the different varieties of English as the resources for the speakers (e.g. Cook, 1999; Deckert, 2010; Halliday, 2009; Jenkins, 2009; Park, 2012). It also argues against any form of marginalization and emphasises the importance of a pluricentric approach rather than a monolithic one (native-based) to language learning (Jenkins, 2006). Jenkins claims that learners must be exposed to varieties of English in order to nurture confidence in their own English varieties and as a result debunk a common belief that native speakers hold larger linguistic capital. According to Jenkins, raising awareness of English varieties is strongly linked to the relationship between language and identity.

**Accent & Identity**

Under the World Englishes paradigm, accent has evolved as one of the factors of English varieties. In sociolinguistics context, accents not only define people but also play an important part in showing their membership to a specific speech community (Aydemir, 2013). Thus, accent serves as a token of social identity. According to Becker (1995), accent identifies one’s regional
origin and national or ethnic identity, regardless of the language they speak.

The SLA research field seems to outline two main stances (amongst many) on accent. The first perspective derives from the split between accented and non-accented varieties of a language (Kumagai, 2013). Following Kumagai’s way of categorizing, the variance between people ‘with an accent’ and those ‘without’ it seems to be specified by the society, supports the social power differences fostered by the existence of accents. Therefore, this position is often referred to as a socially bound perspective on accent (Kumagai, 2013). As for the second viewpoint, it is strongly grounded in the idea that all language users have their own accents. This perspective is linked with the notion of World Englishes, previously discussed, which divides speakers into natively accented individuals and nonnatively accented individuals (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). Contrary to the first notion, this perspective is more neutral in terms of social power. Since both beliefs coexist in literature, no unified standpoint can be presented. A researcher’s perspective on accents seems to depict his/her social and pedagogical attitude towards accents. In this study, I take on the idea that accent shows speaker’s linguistic background as my fundamental premise. Having said that, I follow the definition of accent, aligned with the second notion presented above, namely as the way a speaker sounds, which reflects their linguistic background (Kumagai, 2013).

Before I move to exploring the notion of identity, I feel it is important to mention the main differences between Chinese and English phonologies, given that this study focuses on a Chinese speaker of English. Standard Chinese (SC) and American Standard English (ASE) are different on the segmental level as well as on the prosodic level. This is because these languages (SC & ASE) stem from two dissimilar language families, namely Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European (Swan & Smith, 2001). While SC consists of 22 phonemes (17 consonants and 5 vowels), SAE contains 24 consonant phonemes and 11 vowel phonemes (International Phonetic Association, 1999). Thus, at the segmental level, Chinese speakers have problems with vowels in terms of hearing and producing them, but also with interpreting differences between sounds (Nathan, 2008). In addition, considering the prosodic level, SC is a tonal language, which means it uses changes in pitch to distinguish between words (Lin, 2007), while SAE uses pitch for word stress and intonation purposes. This in turn creates difficulties for Chinese speakers in these two areas making their speech sound monotonous in English and creating troubles in word linking (making it sound choppy). Studies have proven that some phonological features are more important than others for English speakers when rating accent (e.g., Derwing, & Burgess, 2010; Derwing & Munro, 2009; Kang, 2010; Munro). While Americans rely on segmental features (Derwing & Munro, 2009), word stress (Kang, 2010) and intonation (Munro, Derwing, & Burgess, 2010), it is often pointed out that intonation might not always be categorized as accent but rather misinterpreted as rude (Moyer, 2013).

The extensive use of ELF has brought about concerns regarding how speakers express their identities through English. Norton (1997) positioned identity in the foreground of language learning research by reframing it via a poststructuralist lens. She defines it as “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 408). For this case study, identity is mainly framed as understanding of who we are and where we stand in relation to other people (Edwards, 2009).

Learning a second language often results in negotiating, constructing or reconstructing
identity (Kinginger, 2004) because language learning incorporates both a formal set of rules and the culture. This means that a second language learner acquires a second identity, which not only involves the formation of self, but also the perceptions of oneself within their community and the entire society (Aydemir, 2013). Ryan (1997) points out that identity should be seen as a result of negotiation within the social surroundings and Hall (1990) adds that it is a construction continuously in progress and hence never complete.

Norton (1995) claims that SLA theorists have had abiding difficulties in forming a concept of the connection between the language learner and the social world due to the fact that a comprehensive theory of social identity has not been established. Most theories of SLA focus either on individual or social variable but hardly ever integrate the two. Yet, if language is the key way of depicting social identity, then one’s language affects the way a person sees oneself in relation to the environment (Miller, 2000).

In terms of SLA, two essential elements of identity construction seem to emerge (i.e., interaction with others and desire for recognition). Firstly, identity is often seen as formed and shaped through action or performance (Richards, 2006; Wardhaugh, 2010). According to this concept, through showing whom we are and acting on it in various interactions, our identities are constructed. However, this notion pictures identity construction as an extremely complex process, as multiple identities are likely to emerge from interaction (Deckert & Vickers, 2011). Naturally, the link between constructing identity and interacting brings about the individual’s desire for recognition during such interaction. West (1992) views the fundamentals of identity construction as the desire for recognition (visibility), association (affiliation), and protection (security, safety, and surety). While Norton (1997) supports this representation, she adds the claim that desire cannot be separated from the distribution of resources in society, which may result in power and privilege and, in turn, influence identity construction.

Finally, one important note has to be made regarding participation versus acquisition in language learning (Marx, 2002). Marx (2002) emphasises that past scholars understood learning as gaining ‘knowledge’ as a commodity, and hence static and resistant to any modifications. In an attempt of exposing this notion’s simplistic take, Marx turns to Sfard’s (1998) metaphor, which defines acquisition as “gaining possession of some knowledge” and participation as “becoming a member of a given community” (p. 6). Diverse types of participating in a specific community of practice include both absorbing such community and being absorbed by it (Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to Lave and Wenger (1998), while a person is learning how to act as a licit member of a new community, he or she is simultaneously taking part in this community; so participation is an integral part of language and culture learning. Also, it is worth mentioning that Wenger portrays identity construction not only by what we are but also by what we are not (e.g., being or not being a native speaker).

Literature review: Accent and Identity studies

While growing interest in research of the ELF speakers’ identity has been noticeable in the recent years (e.g., Baker, 2011; Virkkula and Nikula, 2010), few studies have been conducted to investigate such speakers’ identity relationship with their accent (but see, Jenkins, 2007; Li, 2009). In his study, Jenkins (2007) looked at non-native English teacher’s identity. Interviews with 17 teachers of different nationalities were carried out to find out that these teachers had mixed feelings in terms of belonging to an international ELF community, with particularly
opposing attitudes towards constructing L1 identity in English. They desired a native-speaker identity shown through a native-like accent, but at the same time they were strongly attached to their mother tongue. In detail, they wanted “a native-like English identity as signalled by a native-like accent” (p. 231), because they recognized a native-like English accent as a crucial contribution to their competence and hence professional success. Jenkins also interestingly noted that a majority of non-native EFL teachers may be affected by the existing standard native-speaker of English ideology.

The second study previously mentioned as an exception (Li, 2009), examined the notions of identity and intelligibility amongst bilingual speakers of English and Chinese in Hong Kong. 107 questionnaires and 1 focus group revealed that about 80% of the participants had a preference towards speaking English with a native-like accent, while the rest were willing to maintain their local accent when speaking English. Those who wanted to express Chinese identity and speak English at the same time found themselves in a quandary. Yet, this study neglected to look at the choice of using a native-like accent and focused mainly on identity conceptualized with relation to the local accent.

Another project, by Gluszek and Dovidio (2010), explored over 200 natively-accented and non-natively-accented English speakers’ sense of belonging to the United States and their communication challenges. Quantitative analysis showed that non-native-like accent is strongly linked to a weaker sense of belonging to the society. This study reflected on two different perspectives when it comes to accent and speaker’s identity linkage, namely accent with negative implications of discrimination and accent as a positive feature. Both types were reported to have made a difference in the construal of speakers’ identity.

While Jenkins (2007) represented identity construction with positive views on accents, I am now turning to identity building with negative views of accents, where Derwing’s (2003) study depicted how L2 speakers see their accents and establish identities when they are not granted access to the preferred accent. This study focused on ESL learners in Canada and uncovered that some participants felt socially discriminated due to their non-native-like accents, but many of them also did not demonstrate any interest in keeping their own accents to preserve their identities. Most of the participants in this study claimed that their identities were tied strongly enough to their first language hence obtaining a native accent would not threaten them. The results of Derwing’s investigation showed that once L2 learners’ identity is firmly established with their L1, they do not see the need to accentuate their identity through their L2.

Unlike Derwing’s study, Hooper (1994) revealed that many speakers kept their regional accents with a specific goal to maintain their social bonds. This study zoomed in on regional English accents in Great Britain and even though proved that regional accents affected negatively speakers’ social, academic and economic status quo, they helped them retain unanimity with their communities. These results make an interesting contrast with those in the previously mentioned study, by indicating that participants consciously chose to speak with their local accent even if it meant looking socially degraded. So, they chose to preserve their already constructed identities instead of acquiring new identities via speaking with another ‘standard’ accent.

One more study, Marx (2002), is worth mentioning as a great delineation of longitudinal shift of identity and accent perceptions. This was an autobiographical study of Marx’s
experiences of German (L2) learning as an English (L1) speaking Canadian. She focused mainly on her own perceptions of L2 accent and her identity as a learner. This project showed as many as 6 stages of her journey in terms of accent and identity while her stay in Germany. Two significant shifts of her accent and identity were reported: mutual relationship between her perceptions of accent and identity and the shift from loss of identity to gain of identity in the process of developing that mutual relationship. In this regard, Marx’s study portrays fluidity and dynamics of the nature of identity building and its correspondence to accent perceptions.

The present study

Focus of the study & Research questions

The present study is a case study of a Chinese English speaker’s perceptions of her pronunciation and perceived cultural identity. The focus is to investigate the relation between a speaker’s identity perceptions as a foreign language speaker and her English accent. The study looks at the participant’s experiences as a language learner who started learning L2 English back in her home country (China) and later moved to the L2 environment (the USA) to pursue higher education, and becoming a legitimate participant in this culture (the C2).

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are a Chinese English learner’s background and experiences of learning English?
2. What are the participant’s self-perceptions of English learning experiences regarding accent and identity?
3. What are the complexities and ambivalences in the participant’s identities in relation to L2 English accent?

Participant’s profile

There is one participant in this study, who chose a name of Jasmine for this study. Jasmine’s L1 is Mandarin Chinese. She began learning English in third grade, when she was 9 years old. This is a widespread practice in China where after the Open Door Policy every child is required to study English in primary school. As many other Chinese students, Jasmine did not have a choice in picking other foreign languages. English was a sole language offered. She continued learning English throughout middle and high school and finally college. Her decision to major in English was not exactly hers. Since students in China are faced with a stressful experience of sitting gaokao (national college entrance examination), her parents wanted to spare her the trauma and placed her in a foreign language high school instead. Gaokao’s score determines which tier college can one enter. The stakes are as high as the pressure imposed on students and their families in China. Part and parcel of attending a foreign languages high school is having the right to be excluded from gaokao and enter the university via taking less demanding tests, but with the price to pay: one must major in English. That is how Jasmine ended up completing English Literature and Language and earning her Bachelor’s degree. Jasmine’s journey with English did not end in China as she decided to pursue her master’s degree and later her doctoral studies in the United States, with an impressive TOEFL score of 113. This is also seen as a premeditated move amongst a lot of Chinese families who see sending their children abroad for education as their only advantage at an extremely competitive job market in China. Given her educational trajectory, Jasmine makes a solid representative of the 90s generation from China. I have chosen her for this study for two reasons. Firstly, her
English pronunciation is non-native. Secondly, having spent years in China myself, I assumed she might have experienced an identity shift considering coming to the US. Whether accent and identity relate to one another in Jasmine’s case was the focal point of my investigation. I wanted to know how she perceives the two and if she notices any link between them, that is if it is of critical importance to her. Jasmine makes a good participant for another reason, which I discovered while interviewing her, namely the fact that she’s a linguist and currently deepening her knowledge of linguistics, which in turn depicts her as a more reflective and conscious participant. Equally valid issues such as code-switching, inner speech, and private speech in her L2 (English) emerged but they will not be discussed here.

Research design & Materials

This study applies a qualitative research method for its research design. This is done for two reasons. First, this study’s above-mentioned purpose matches the purpose of the qualitative research, which is perceived as to provide an in-depth description as well as to understand the human experience in a given context (Lichtman, 2006). Furthermore, the poststructuralist interpretation of reality, on which this study is based, concurs with the main characteristics of the qualitative approach, namely people’s behaviours change over time and are influenced by context; all individuals are unique and non-generalizable; the ways people perceive reality are multi-layered; and people’s actions are built on their interpretations of particular situations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

Two types of instruments were applied to collect data, i.e., an interview and a questionnaire. The in-depth semi-structured interview was aiming at considering the interviewee’s mind and her perceptions of English learning experiences, with a particular focus on accent and identity. This was done to capture the complexity and ambivalences in the participant’s identities in relation to English. The second instrument, the 6-point Likert-scale questionnaire was created by means of combining and adapting specific items from various questionnaires measuring L2 English experiences with focus on accent and identity (Aydemir, 2013; Borges, 2014; Pullen, 2011; Zoss, 2015). Several of the items were taken directly while others were adapted to better serve the current study’s purpose. The questionnaire also collected the participant’s background information and her experiences and perceptions of learning English.

Procedure & Data analysis

The participant was approached by a researcher in person and gave a verbal consent to willingly participate in this study. The interview was scheduled and the questionnaire was given to her to fill out and return the following week. The participant was provided with the necessary instruction concerning the completion of the questionnaire. Additionally, the purpose of conducting this study was clearly explained.

The interview as audio-recorded and conducted one-on-one with the participant in English (some translanguaging occurred in the exchange of cultural information). The interview protocol covered a few areas, including the participant’s experiences of learning English in China, her pronunciation background, background and views, and her identity as a learner. The interview lasted approximately one hour and was later transcribed in NVivo. Later, the interview was analysed by the researcher both by visually inspecting the data and creating codes and nodes in NVivo. In the process of data analysis, the research findings emerged from the frequent and
dominant categories and themes were created within the data set. To ensure that the analysis was firmly grounded in the specifics of the actual data, the emerging themes went through three separate cycles of analysis so that the findings could be substantiated and revised if necessary. Patterns between categories and themes were developed via constant questioning and comparing the collected data. Finally, the findings were confirmed by the participant by her reading over this paper.

Findings & Discussion

The participant stated that her speaking English with a Chinese accent is closely related to her identity: ‘it’s my personal marker, my identity’. She never tried to speak without an accent mainly because after attending a pronunciation course she realized it was too hard for her to acquire a British or American accent. Also, she showed strong preference towards American accent, claiming that British accent ‘is just too hard to understand’. When asked about which pronunciation she aims at when speaking, she responded: ‘I’m aiming probably for my own accent. I don’t care.’

After having been in the US for over three years, she does not identify herself as an American, but shows a powerful desire to return to China, her home country, right after completing her studies in the US. ‘I’m only 10 or 20% Americanized’. She doesn’t have many Chinese friends in the US, but she experienced discriminatory treatment from her American classmates. She feels that any instances of being treated differently by native speakers are related to her speech’s intelligibility rather than her accent. She recalls: ‘All of my native classmates would gang up against the international students. They won’t talk to us or do group work with us’. What’s more, she uses her mother tongue to communicate with her parents in China and her boyfriend there, but feels like she’s losing her Chinese identity to which she is deeply attached. ‘I feel my Chinese has deteriorated. […] I don’t want to lose my culture or my language but I’m feeling it right now. I get so worried sometimes, because my English isn’t good and so isn’t my Chinese’. Accordingly, with advances in L2 and exposure to C2, difficulties in using the L1 naturally begin to appear. According to Pavlenko (1998), the process of immersing into L2 learning environment often results in gradual loss of L1. Jasmine reported to have experienced this challenge: ‘I lose words in Chinese. Even when I’m talking to my parents, it’s sometimes hard for me.’

When it comes to her perceptions of English, she displays negative attitudes towards learning it, or any learning any languages for that matter. ‘I use it as a tool’. This attitude corresponds with Halliday’s (1975) concept of seven functions of English, namely the instrumental one, where learners view a given language as an implement to express their needs.

In terms of identity, she noticed both advantageous and detrimental elements of the American society and hence does not feel like she can get involved in the society: ‘[…] in the academic world or with the classmates in my cohort, I feel it’s okay for me to get involved, but if I wanna get involved in real society, it’s really difficult’. This coincides with Schuman’s (1976) idea that the bigger the social and psychological distance from the target culture, the harder it is to acquire the target language. Since Jasmine perceives herself as Chinese all the way, she sees a broad gap between native speakers and immigrants in the United States. In terms of strategies foreigners usually apply to blend in linguistically and culturally, she differentiates between making friends with Americans and with Chinese people. ‘I tried once. I had a native speaker
friend in the buddy programme, so we became really good friends but still the friendship [here] is very different from the Chinese friendship. We cannot talk about a lot of topics.’, Jasmine said. This finding suggests limitations in the interactional function of language, which is responsible for contacting others and creating bonds (Halliday, 1975).

Analogously, Lambert (1967) emphasises that if one wants to successfully learn a target language, she or he must be willing to adopt various aspects of behaviour typical for this language’s natives. The learner’s attitudes towards the target language group determine to some extent how successful the learning of the language would be. So, in Jasmine’s case, the lack of interest in learning English or deepening American culture impeded her accent’s development. When asked what her attitudes towards English are, she said: ‘If I do not have to use it, I’d probably just drop it’. I also wanted to know what in her opinion drives this negative attitude and I learnt that amongst discouraging experiences with English teachers in China (their methods were not engaging and their accents were entirely Chinese), her own fear of ‘losing face’ plays a significant role. ‘Sometimes when you make mistakes, you feel people lose attention when talking to you. I feel that’s the source of my negative attitude. Because people don’t want to talk to me’.

Jasmine, being a conscious English learner and a scholar of SLA, mentioned as well that she notices certain aspects of English, pronunciation in her case, underwent a process of fossilization and therefore might never change. This statement agrees with Lightbown and Spada (2006), who wrote: “some features in a learner’s language may stop changing” (p.80). In such case, her social identification with an American or British culture may have already been ‘fossilized’, thus after her early years of studying English, the degree of linking with the target culture will most likely never increase or decrease. In this participant’s case, the level of identification with a foreign culture appears to be lower than a middle ground.

Moreover, Jasmine sees the need for constructing a good L2 learner identity, but she is not willing to sacrifice the goal of speaking intelligible English for the sake of showing identification with the target community through changing her accent. It appears as if she thought that using the local accent at this point of her journey with English would be juxtaposing her desired identity as an L2 learner, even her linguistic identity. To put it simply, trying to speak English with a native accent at this point could be seen as maintaining her perceived identity of a good language learner but it would not be concurrent with her perceived social identity.

After having moved to the United States, Jasmine did notice a visible improvement in her accent. However, she does not display any desire to have a minimal a foreign accent as possible. This finding goes against many mainstream research studies on accent reduction. As many English L2 speakers want to be judged as competent users of L2 and members of C2, Jasmine does not follow this desire. ‘I don’t care about my accent’. As Lippi-Green (1997) underlines popular accent reduction courses in the US promise their participants: “Sound like us, and success will be yours. Doors will be open; barriers will disappear.” (p.50). This is an interesting finding, because it debunks the widespread belief that all language learners try to sound like native speakers.

Surprisingly, Jasmine did not indicate a typical behaviour of a foreign student in the US. Even though being a graduate student makes her attend courses in the L2 and creates the need to communicate in English primarily, she is not willing to become a full member of the C2. This can be partially attributed to the constraints of her graduate student life, but also might be seen as
a survival method of preserving her identity in a foreign environment to make her return to China less painful. This is commonly displayed choice amongst short-term visitors (Marx, 2002).

Furthermore, to become a fully competent speaker of English, especially regarding accent, seems to be extremely difficult, particularly for Chinese people. Jasmine observed: “Chinese and English are two different language families. I don’t know if it’s true but I heard that if your first language is a European language, then you’re 50% better than Asians at learning English.” As Marx (2002) clearly mentions, one does not require native competence to participate in the L2 community. Similarly, in her questionnaire items, Jasmine indicated that she strongly believes that one can become a legitimate member of an L2 country without having to speak its language.

All in all, the co-existence of two or more identities amongst bilinguals is not a scarce phenomenon. Norton (2000) indicates that it is possible to unite these identities without having to choose between them. This can be achieved through self-translating, which is often described as a continuous process. In Jasmine’s case, however, self-translation does not appear to be a favourable method to shift between identities. She prefers to attain her Chinese identity rather than delve into taking part in the C2. Since the ability to navigate between borders of linguistic and hence cultural identities depends strongly on one’s need for survival, Jasmine did not have to practise the fusion of both aspects.

Conclusion

This study emphasises how one Chinese national’s identity correlates with her pronunciation perceptions. Her journey with learning English offered her a new and distinct set of cultural values and ways of interpreting the world. She had become more aware of the uniqueness of the Chinese culture and how differences in values influence her communication with people from other countries. Apart from being able to experience the world, the study process also offered her a chance to encounter herself, her Chinese identity. In this case, with the relation to accent, Jasmine seemed to have challenged her own assumptions about the possible associations with identity. Her extensive expedition to the unknown world of an L2, allowed her to reinforce her social identity. Jasmine represents a bigger group of Chinese students who have recently become globally mobile for education and whose identities are formed via means beyond geographical boundaries of China.

This study showed that there is a relationship between the perceptions of cultural identity and L2 accent, but it juxtaposed multiple studies’ findings which state that the more learners identify themselves with the C2, the higher their accent score would be (e.g., Marx, 2002; Rindal, 2010). The most important finding seems to be the fact that this learner prioritizes comprehension and intelligibility rather than the way she sounds. In terms of pedagogical implications, this fact alone points out that teachers should be aware of the goals learners set for themselves when planning their instructional practices.

It is most surprising that this participant, as a member of linguistic academic body, does not perceive the L2 accent as a contributing element to the construal of the L2 identity. Instead, she sees using her native accent as natural. This perception seems to be motivated by pragmatic considerations rather than trying to build one’s identity. Considering this, teachers should be determined to accommodate pronunciation self-concept in the curricula to help students understand their L2 identities in-depth.
I also hope that this study presents valuable insights into the perceptions of ELF because it focused on a conscious learner’s experiences. I wish that this inquiry adds to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between identity and accent, as discerned by L2 users. However, this was an exploratory case study conducted with one participant and so its findings cannot be representative of all Chinese speakers of English.

Finally, given the considerable scarcity of research into the relationship between accent, identity, and SLA, there is an evident need for further research. For instance, it would be effectual to consider reasons underlying L2 English speakers’ accent proclivities. Also, alleged fear of losing identity by adopting a native-like pronunciation could be empirically explored.
References


