The Third Space Identity Construction: 
A Narrative Inquiry into a Chinese College EFL Learner’s 
Experience of Online Intercultural Writing Exchange*

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Drawing on in-depth interviews with a Chinese EFL learner, this qualitative study explores her identity changes through her engagement in the third space—the online intercultural writing exchange. The findings show that her productive construction of the third space is marked by a transformation from a reticent student to an open thought sharer and her claim of a legitimate ownership of using English as a global language. A split is exposed between her newly acquired English rhetorical conventions and her deeply rooted perceptions in the Chinese context. It is suggested by the study that EFL learners be provided greater opportunities to explore language as both a linguistic system and a sociocultural practice where they can exercise their agency and expand the range of identities.

Keywords: the third space, identity construction, narrative inquiry, online intercultural writing exchange, EFL teaching

Introduction
The online intercultural writing exchange program (also named “Cross-Pacific Exchange” and “Cross-Border Exchange”) in this paper, is a foreign language teaching reform launched by University G in South China. In this program, second language learners of English from University G and their native peers of English from University P in the US, take a self-created website as a shared platform, post their compositions on different cross-cultural topics and themes, and exchange comments on each other’s works. Based on Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (1996, pp. 413-468), intercultural communication and interactive learning take place throughout this activity (Zheng, Du, & Wu, 2013, pp. 17-23). As an extension beyond classroom teaching, the Cross-Border Exchange leads students of the two sides to an intercultural learning community, where they conduct meaning negotiation (Canagarajah, 2011) and obtain lived experience of intercultural communication by using English as a global language. In such an online intercultural context, the learning community can be

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considered space in between: between the native English community in the US and the interlanguage community in China where teachers and students often find the difficulty having English communication in authentic situations.

Relevant research on this teaching reform has been centered on linguistic dimensions: form-meaning tangling in Chinese students’ writing (Zheng & Chang, 2014), a rhetoric-based pedagogical design (Liu & You, 2018), effects of the reform on Chinese students’ written production (Xu & Zhang, 2018), etc.. Scant attention has been paid to the non-linguistic level. In Chinese context of EFL teaching, apart from their efforts to improve students’ language skills, teachers should as well pay due attention to learners’ non-linguistic outcome, especially their identity changes (Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2002). To fill the gap, this study, following a qualitative perspective, attempts to explore a Chinese EFL learner’s identity construction throughout the online intercultural writing exchange, which may generate implications and suggestions for further improvement of the reform and college EFL teaching and learning.

Grounded Theories

Identity and Identity Change

Generally, identity is the understanding of “who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people’s understanding of themselves and of others (which included us)”, which embeds beliefs, values, attitudes, knowledge and capabilities (Farrell, 2000). Olsen (2008, pp. 32-35) states that it is an understanding and confirmation of “who I am” and “where I belong”; hence the integration of a personal attribute and a social attribute: on the one hand, it is a perception of self identity, referring to the individual self; on the other hand, it reveals the connection between self and others, emphasizing the collective selves—the commonness between self and others (Li & Qiu, 2016).

Identity change has been a topic of theoretical interest in the field of social psychology. Burke (2006) indicates that identity change involves changes in the meaning of self as a member of a group, in a role or as a person, serving as a reference for judging self-in-situation meanings. Identity is, rather than unitary, pluralistic; rather than static, fluid; rather than preset or fixed, undergoing construction and reconstruction (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). These process-oriented views assume that identity is open to being redefined, “being reconstructed and negotiated” (Li & Qiu, 2016).

The Third Space

In the field of intercultural communication and foreign language teaching, the third space was proposed by Claire Kramsch (1993) and promoted by Lo Bianco (quoted from Ye, 2012). By proposing this theory, Kramsch (1993) holds the view that two parties in intercultural communication adopt an equal and multiple vision to build a third space for communication. It is a productive space of possibility for their identity (re)making (Ai & Wang, 2017). In such a multicultural context, on the one hand, the two sides employ both their home and target culture to build up the third space, the purpose of which is to get rid of limitation of the cultural differences and to communicate freely; on the other hand, both the home culture and the target culture are interacted, strengthened and integrated into a new innovative one, rather than a compromised cultural platter or hodgepodge (Ye, 2012).

From this perspective, the Cross-border Exchange can be considered as a third space where Chinese EFL learners and their American peers conduct intercultural communication and undergo identity (re)making.
Research Method

The Participant

Among the Chinese participants in the program, I followed, observed and studied Annie, who was my former student and voluntarily joined in the activity invited by a professor from University G. Different from her Chinese peers in the program whose participation and performance were linked with their compulsory English writing course, Annie was a non-English major and she was exempt from earning her grades during the process as part of the formative assessment in the course. Her voluntary participation sheerly aimed at improving her English proficiency and intercultural communication competence. In other words, during the Cross-border Exchange, Annie exercised her own agency to construct a third space and tried to survive in it on her own. For Chinese EFL students, such a third space may not be “a smooth and harmonious process where tensions and incommensurability of cultures are evened out” (Koh, 2012). Thus, the following two specific research questions are formulated:

(1) How did Annie construct her identity in the third space?
(2) During the construction, what did she achieve and what problems did she meet?

Narrative Inquiry

The investigation of Annie’s identity construction was conducted through a narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is considered the most appropriate way of representing and understanding the experience of identity construction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp.12-20). Identities emerge from and through the collections of narratives people create and tell about their lives (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). As “a powerful methodology for qualitative exploration” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 18), narrative inquiry “enables researchers and writers to show that social reality is a layered phenomenon that requires subjectivity based on personal experiences and intuitiveness as interpretive guides for its study” (Aguirre, 2005).

In this study, I adopt narrative inquiry not to draw out general rules for Chinese EFL learners’ identity construction in the third space. Rather, I recount the “first hand or experiential stories” (Brophy, 2009, p. 40), reflect upon my personal and Chinese EFL teaching, and inform and encourage EFL teachers and policymakers who seek for the further improvement of EFL teaching.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to collect information on Annie’s relevant learning experience, her engagement with the online intercultural writing exchange, and her self-perceptions and views of English study prior to and after the online exchange, a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out in the past two years. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, and were all audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The quoted data in this paper were translated into English. Supplementary explanations about some expressions with special cultural connotations were provided where necessary.

The transcriptions of each participant’s data were first coded and categorized according to the emerging themes. All the categorized data were then compared and analyzed so as to generate commonalities and noteworthy differences.
Annie’s Identity Construction in the Third Space

From a Reticent Student an Open Thought Sharer

Annie was born and raised in Shenzhen, a well-developed modern coastal city in South China, neighboring to Hong Kong. As her parents attached great importance to education, she was sent to bilingual schools from her childhood on, where she had access to communicating with native teachers of English. But, as she mentioned, “it was just a teacher-student communication: We simply exchanged questions and answers about English study. I never felt my role as a thought sharer in front of the teachers.”

Thanks to her bilingual education, she laid a solid foundation for English study. But what was deeply rooted in her mind is a typical Chinese exam-oriented model:

I had been a girl that didn’t quite dare to express personal point of view, be in daily communication or classroom study. My Chinese teachers were fond of quiet and obedient girls like me, listening attentively and taking notes in their class. In the exams, I could always get high marks because I’d figured out all those ‘tricks’. For example, in English writing, you just need to follow a ‘three-paragraph model’ by using as many long and complicated sentences as possible. That would help me get good grades. (Interview 1)

When asked why she tended to hold reservations about a profound talk with people in daily life, she described it as “no offense”:

I was cautious about whether what I said or what I did would offend others. Sometimes I’d rather hold back my real feelings and emotions if I sensed that it might be below the safety line. (Interview 1)

But from the first time she was involved in the Cross-border Exchange, she realized that her tricks did not work:

I was pushed to the corner. They kept asking me to explain my point of view. It was a race-related topic (based on an American movie and a Chinese one) and I had not dared to talk much about it with people as I had always considered it a sensitive topic. But my American peers kept encouraging me to express my personal view. At first I tried to escape and gave them a very vague answer. But they kept writing me their point of view and asking for mine. If I kept turning down their invitation, it’d never become a sincere and open intercultural exchange. Then I just wrote down how much I admired Kobe Bryant and Barack Obama and quoted their stories as examples... What amazed me was that they gave high comments on my view… (Interview 3)

This critical incident has exerted an impressive impact on Annie. In her previous experience, she considered it a safe way to be reserved about her own thoughts and keep listening to others. But in the intercultural exchange, including the following periods of the writing exchange, she was repeatedly encouraged and required to share her real voice with her peers. She came to realize that her former “silent trick” that had to some extent helped to shape her into a “good” student should be dumped in the third space. She should reshape herself into a girl open to sharing her deep thoughts without reservations, in an equal position with her American peers. On some occasions, she even tried to negotiate, or debate with her peers on some issues where they did not agree with each other. The purpose, as she mentioned, was not to “force” the other side to accept her personal views, but to “justify” and “share” her inner voice.

I think the effect is still there. I’ve noticed my change from daily life to classroom study. I’ve become more comfortable with myself by letting my voice out. And I embrace it as a positive transformation in my life. (Interview 5)
Annie’s transformation from a reticent student to an open thought sharer can be considered an exploring process of self searching and self reshaping in the third space, and the effects extend beyond the third space to her real life. Termed by Lo Bianco “surrender value” (Hay & Wang, 2009), which means foreign language learners’ significant improvement and progress in terms of qualities, confidence and competence that are achieved through language study will not be suspended even if they suspend learning the language.

To Convey or to Display?

As Annie mentioned in her previous experience as a Chinese EFL student, she had figured out the “tricks” in exams and in class that could help her get good grades. One thing she would usually do in her English writing was to adopt fancy expressions or make up long and complicated sentences that appeared an advanced level in her eyes and “in Chinese teachers’ eyes”. Even in the face of questioning by her American peers in the writing exchange, at first, she had her own “justification” and “confidence”:

I did surprisingly notice at the very first round of the writing exchange that they tended to use fairly simple and concise sentences but with a strong cohesion. In spite of that, I was still confident that my writing would impress them and I was expecting to receive comments like ‘I could never imagine an EFL learner could write such amazing sentences’. Then I was shocked and disappointed when they ‘criticized’ my writing style. They expressed the difficulty figuring out my ‘vague’ meaning. And they suggested I cut my sentences short and express my view in a straightforward way.

(Interview 3)

Annie, used to get high comments from her Chinese teachers on her English compositions, still tried to negotiate with her American counterparts, “Shouldn’t we write appropriate sentences to convey our deep thoughts?” Then the same reply from different individual peers struck her, “To be appropriate means to convey your meaning directly and concisely.”

Annie’s adoption of fancy words and complicated sentences is not a single case among Chinese EFL learners. In the context of Chinese EFL teaching, it has been a long-run tendency for teachers to encourage students to focus more on the development of their language skills and “the innovation of language forms is considered a higher level of English proficiency” (Zheng & Chang, 2014, p. 516). The split of target language community and classroom community also leads to a twist of EFL learners’ perception that only when they well display their language forms can they be considered qualified writers (Zheng & Chang, 2014).

From that crucial incident on, she reported that she figured out a “flexible” way in between: When writing to her American peers, she purposefully imitated their writing style by using concise language with cohesive markers; when doing her school assignments or taking English exams, she switched back to what she had followed before—to adopt complicated sentence structures in order to gain approval and high marks from her Chinese teachers.

When asked whether the Chinese education provided a misleading way for English writing, her answer was a “No”:

I guess in China we do need an efficient way to distinguish language learners’ proficiency in examinations. And maybe the way is simply language itself. How well you can write depends on how well you organize your language. What I need to improve is to convey my view more precisely. But I don’t think it wrong for us to write complicated sentences.

(Interview 5)
But is the “efficient” way in her eyes actually “effective”? As EFL teachers, we need to reflect on our EFL writing courses and attach equal importance to both form and meaning by facilitating students to gain more native sense of the target language and to “achieve the harmonization of form and meaning in their English writing” (Zheng & Chang, 2014)

On the other hand, as the writing schools with a cultural critical stance opposes, top priority should not be placed on native speakers’ writing habits and rhetorical preferences. Rather, equal weight is called for to be given to understanding of and respect to non-native speakers’ language forms (Canagarajah, 2006).

Whether Annie’s “flexible” choice is a negative compromise or a positive insistence remains to be explored. But it can be reflected that deeply influenced by the Chinese education of English writing and confronted with her native peers’ questioning, she worked out an alternative way to adapt to, or to “survive” both in the third space and in her Chinese context.

“English is My Credit Card”

When asked what changes of affection toward English study had occurred throughout the intercultural writing exchange, Annie gave her positive feedback:

I’ve become more attached to English. It has filled the gap that I had not had access to real intercultural communication with native speakers. What amazed me most was it not only helped me with English study, but also brought me a fresh sense of fun when I could use English as a tool to deliver my voice and share my thoughts, as a Chinese girl, with people across the Pacific Ocean. (Interview 4)

I’ve been considering English as my credit card, which means as long as I invest energy to learn it and upgrade it—actually it’s the capital to be accumulated in my account—I could carry it anywhere I go and use it anytime I want. English is just as helpful as a credit card. (Interview 5)

Norton (1997) uses the term “investment” to signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of English learners to the target language and their ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. This investment in the target language learning is “an investment in a learner’s own social identity” (Norton, 1997). One’s investment in English learning is an investment in identity construction with the aim of “claiming the right to use the English language” (Ai & Wang, 2017, p. 228). In her metaphor, Annie also tried to claim her right to use English as a voice maker and thought sharer. Her involvement in the intercultural writing exchange confirmed her right and further motivated her to be committed to that right. When looking forward to the near future, she expressed her will to be a cross-cultural communicator in the context of globalization:

I’ve always been considering English as a tool for international communication. Since I’ve acquired such a practical tool, I’d like to open a restaurant with a North European style in Shenzhen. It will attract many international friends I guess. If they come eat in my restaurant, I can treat them well as a friendly Chinese hostess. (Interview 5)

In her “imagined community” (Norton, 2010), by addressing “the power of individual to shape a future life” and highlighting “hope and desire”, Annie constructed her “imagine identity” (Norton, 2010) and captured a new cultural identity as an owner of an international restaurant. Under the concept of Wegner’s *power* (1998), Annie was empowered by her possession of English knowledge and her practice—the legitimate engagement in the online intercultural writing exchange. Such empowerment as we have seen, also generated her claim of the right as an equal thought sharer, and her ownership of English as a practical tool that she acquired.
Implications and Conclusion

Empowered by her possession of English knowledge and the legitimate participation in the intercultural writing exchange, Annie exercised her agency to construct her identity in the third space in a productive way: She accomplished the transformation from a reticent student to an open thought sharer. And she flexibly followed her American counterparts’ writing habits and rhetorical preferences in order to achieve effective communication with them, which could also be considered an improvement in terms of the varieties of her writing. Based on the third space she constructed, she claimed her right to use English as a tool for international communication and took a further step to build up her imagined identity as a cross-cultural entrepreneur. However, the process of constructing the third space is not smooth and harmonious. As Chinese exam-oriented education deeply took root in her mind, when she went offline and turned back to her Chinese context, she had to resort to her “trick” to survive, which was to cater to Chinese teachers’ criteria about good English writing.

Drawing upon her productive construction and the split between the third space and the real space, this study here tries to provide several implications for EFL teaching. First of all, with the transition of EFL teachers’ role from “dominator” to “planner, facilitator and guide” (Zheng, Du & Wu, 2013), apart from their focus on pedagogical practice, teachers should also place equal priority on empowering EFL learners by expanding their range of identities and encouraging their investment in language and literacy practices (Norton, 2015). “The range of research…supports the view that investment is enhanced when the pedagogical practices of the teacher increase the range of identities available to language learners, whether face-to-face, digital, or online”, and “learners are given an opportunity to exercise their agency and claim their right to speak and be heard” (Norton, 2015, p. 390). The online intercultural writing exchange functioned as an extension of classroom pedagogical practices, and exactly as an opportunity to increase learners’ range of identities; hence the significance to further promote and organize such intercultural exchange programs in various forms.

Secondly, previous contrastive rhetoric-informed pedagogical designs have been found to perpetuate an essential understanding of language, culture and rhetoric (Liu & You, 2018) and Annie’s case of “to convey or to display” correspondingly echoed with that. To break the fossilization of fixed perceptions about English study rooted in EFL learners’ mind, and to promote a non-essential, dynamic and negotiable awareness of English writing norms, EFL learners should be provided with access to authentic contexts and with opportunities to perceive their roles in the intercultural space and the negotiability of English writing conventions (Liu & You, 2018).

To conclude, this study sheds light on how EFL learners can be provided greater opportunities to explore language as both a linguistic system and a social practice so that they can exercise their agency and expand their range of identities. The study has its limitation: It is situated in specific time and space, drawing on data collected from one single participant. Thus, in order to further reveal the dynamic and fluid process of participants’ identity changes in the program, more findings are supposed to be found and reported based on follow-up research.

References
