**Identity and interculturality through English as a lingua franca**

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**Introduction**

Identity has emerged as a substantial field of research in a range of disciplines including applied linguistics and intercultural communication. While identity in one form or another has always been of interest, it has taken on particular prominence in recent times. This is due in part to the new forms of identity and community opened up by increasing mobility and interconnectivity but also the erosion of traditional forms of identity, especially in regard to local geographical communities and nation states (Bauman, 2004). In this paper I argue that research on intercultural communication through English as a lingua franca (ELF)[[1]](#endnote-1) provides an important window into the processes of identity construction and negotiation. The huge scale of ELF communication, across multifarious settings and characterised by variability and fluidity, offers an opportunity to explore the diversity and complexity of the relationship between language, communication and identity. The discussion here will focus on cultural identity and interculturality because of its prominence in both intercultural communication and ELF research; however, the overlap with other forms of identity is also recognised. While the brevity of this paper means that a comprehensive overview is not possible, I hope to illustrate key themes in the current debate and will draw on data from Asia as well as underscoring the relevance of ELF research to Asian contexts.

**Characterising identity and interculturality**

In characterising identity it may be helpful to distinguish between identity and subjectivity. Identity can be viewed as the network of social groups that we participate in, orientate towards, and identify with. In this sense identity is external and something that is always performed and in process. Subjectivity, in contrast is concerned with the construction of self, including both internal representations and external projections of that self (Kramsch, 2009). The distinction between the two concepts is clearly blurred and these leads some scholars of identity to treat them as synonymous (e.g. Joseph, 2004). However, for the purposes of this discussion the focus will be on identity in the sense of external *identification* with groups. Such a perspective emphasises the multiple, complex and fluid nature of identity in which it is always in process but never complete.

A central part of identity is language since language forms the prime semiotic system through which identity is constructed. This approach, which takes identity as discursively constructed through language, has been prominent in applied linguistics (e.g. Joseph, 2004) and has also frequently been linked to post-structuralist theory through explorations of power relationships in identity construction (e.g. Norton, 2000). Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004: 21) propose three perspectives on identity as regards power relationships: imposed identities (which are not negotiable), assumed identities (which are accepted and not negotiated), and negotiable identities (which can be contested by groups and individuals). It seems likely that the notion of negotiable identities will be most relevant to intercultural communication and ELF given the variability in such communication. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this perspective does not entail that identity is therefore a completely free choice and there are likely to be social constraints related to a variety of factors, from proficiency, to language ideologies, to attitudes, among others. Indeed,ELF research has revealed imposed identities in relation to ‘nativeness’ as a significant part of ELF communication (Jenkins, 2007).

Cultural identity has been a major aspect of both intercultural communication and ELF studies and typically concerns identification with, or ascription to, ethnic, racial and national groupings (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Holliday, 2013; Zhu, 2014). However, it is important to stress that cultural identity is not synonymous with any one particular culture and even less with national cultures (Baker 2015). Much traditional intercultural communication research has conflated cultural identities with national characterisations of culture (e.g. French culture is like this so all French people are like this too), resulting in essentialist descriptions of the ‘other’ in intercultural communication (e.g. Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). This is more likely to hinder rather than help understanding in intercultural communication by stereotyping and simplifying, leading to superficial ‘neat’ answers to what are often complex questions (Piller, 2011; Holliday, 2013; Baker 2015). Instead, cultural identities need to be recognised as one aspect of identity alongside other identifications and it is equally important to be aware that cultural identities can be constructed at a variety of scales from the local, to the national and the global. This is not to deny the importance of national cultural identities but it does emphasise that this is one scale among many.

Two scholars who have explored the manner in which identities are constructed across a range of scales are Pennycook (2007; 2010) and Canagarajah (2013). Both are interested in the relationships between language, and especially English, community, globalisation and identity. Pennycook has investigated the way in which global flows of linguistic and other cultural practices results in the opening up of new spaces and possibilities for identity construction. Pennycook’s notion of transcultural flows is used “to address the ways in which cultural forms move, change and are reused to fashion new identities in diverse contexts. This is not, therefore, a question merely of cultural movement but of take-up, appropriation, change and refashioning.” (2007: 6) Importantly, this suggests that the process in relation to English is not a one way flow from the ‘centre’ Anglophone countries to the ‘periphery’ but rather a process of adaptation and transformation of local practices and identifications through concurrent flows between multiple localities. Canagarajah adopts a similar perspective arguing that through global flows “we are able to enjoy identities that transcend our native language, ethnicity, or place of birth.” (2013: 198) However, he adds the important caveat that we are still not free to fashion any identity we wish, as is sometimes implied in Pennycook’s (2010) writing on notions such as metroethnicity. In constructing these new more fluid identities we still need to negotiate through existing social structures and these can limit our choices.

An approach to cultural identity that incorporates many of the themes presented above is the concept of interculturality. Studies of interculturality reject essentialist perspectives of cultural identity as an a priori given. Rather they approach cultural identity as one of many membership categories which are negotiated and constructed through interaction using a range of symbolic and indexical cues related to linguistic and other resources (e.g. Nishizaka ,1995; Mori, 2003; Zhu, 2014; 2015). Zhu (2014) in particular offers a productive framework for investigating the extent to which cultural identities can or cannot be negotiated. She utilizes the notions of ‘alignment’ and ‘misalignment’ of identities through ‘self-orientation’ and ‘ascription-by-others’ (2014: 217). Where there is misalignment then negotiation may be necessary but this will be dependent on the extent to which participants can resist the ‘ascription-by-others’ of imposed cultural identities. Interculturality thus offers a framework for conceptualising identity that takes account of the fluidity and complexity of cultural identities as one of multiple membership categories, but at the same time recognises that cultural identities may need to be negotiated, and that we are not free to adopt or adapt any cultural identity we desire. Such a framework is well suited for investigating the complexity of cultural identities constructed through a global language such as English (Baker, 2015; Zhu, 2015).

**Identity and interculturality through ELF**

The construction and negotiation of identity through ELF has been an issue of interest to ELF researchers for some time and in a number of different areas including professional identities in business (Ehrenreich, 2009), teacher identities (Jenkins, 2007) and, the area of focus here, cultural identities. Before proceeding though it may be useful to clear up a potential area of confusion for those less familiar with recent ELF research. In early ELF research a number of scholars, although certainly not all, suggested that ELF might be a culturally and identity neutral medium of communication or that participants were at least able to choose between representing identity or being ‘neutral’ (e.g. Meierkord, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007; House, 2014). However, this represents a misunderstanding of communication and identity. There is no such thing as ‘neutral’ communication, including intercultural and ELF communication, there are always participants, histories, purposes, contexts and language choices, none of which are neutral (Baker, 2015: 37). There are, of course, times when cultural identities are not especially relevant to the communication and an analysis of them may tell us little of interest but this does not make the communication neutral. There also seems to be an underlying assumption that cultural identities here are equated with national identities. While it is true that national identities may not always be present or relevant in the interaction, as discussed previously, such a perspective on cultural identity is essentialist and ignores the many other cultural groups we may identify with.

As a counter to the ‘culturally neutral’ approach suggested in early ELF research, Pölzl and Seidlhofer (2006) presented data which showed ELF being used to represent and construct local cultural identities. In their study of Jordanian Arabic L1 speakers and an Austrian German L1 speakers communicating through ELF in Jordan, the Jordanians made reference to aspect of their L1 linguaculture and constructed identities which demonstrated their membership of this local ‘habitat’ (Pölzl and Seidlhofer, 2006: 162). Similarly, other studies, such as Klimpfinger (2009), have illustrated the multilingual nature of ELF communication in which code-switching is made use of to index particular local cultural identities through the use of tags such as oui, oui ‘yes, yes’, and specific cultural references which are linked to the interlocutor such as ‘Roma’ rather than ‘Rome’ (2009: 362). Importantly, such multilingual language use is not just used to signal local cultural identities but also to index the multicultural and multilingual identities of speakers through the adoption of cultural references from other participants in the interaction as well as the creative mixing of idioms and metaphors. Pitzl presents examples of this from VOICE (Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English <https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/>), such as ‘we should not wake up any dogs’ (2012:45)[[2]](#endnote-2).

Much recent research in ELF has focused on this multilingual and multicultural orientation to identity in which the identities observed in the interactions are neither linked to a fixed L1/C1 (first culture) or target language/target culture. Instead identities are approached as multiple and liminal with no fixed point of reference. Kalocsai (2014) in a longitudinal ethnographic study of ERASMUS students in Hungary illustrated how the students constructed their own community of practice with ELF as a key resource “in building and maintaining locally relevant identities” (2014: 212). She also suggests that due to the range of hybrid and emergent cultural resources that this community of practice created and used, the corresponding “identities the members construct are multiple, fluid and dynamic” (2014: 212). In my own research on Thai users of English I have also observed similar constructions of identity with multiple identifications at local, national and global levels orientated towards without apparent contradiction (Baker, 2009; 2011; 2015). Significantly, participants in my research also reported taking on liminal identities in which they explicitly positioned themselves ‘between’ cultures or even transcending cultural boundaries in which, in the words of one participant, they “forget their own culture for a while and they become more open.” (Baker, 2009: 580)

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise, as argued previously, that this does not entail that participants in ELF communication are free to construct any identity they wish. The concept of interculturality has been used productively in ELF research to highlight the negotiated nature of identity (Baker, 2015; Zhu, 2015). Zhu (2015), using data from the VOICE corpus, presents an example in which there was misalignment between the self-oriented identity of an Argentinian (S3) and that ascribed by another (S2) who equated the use of Spanish language with a Spanish identity. Through analysis of the transcript, Zhu (2015: 80–81) shows negotiation over the course of the conversation with S3’s continued resistance to S2’s ascription of Spanish identity. Likewise, data from my own research highlights the importance of accounting for the negotiated nature of identity. In the following extract a group of students from a UK university and a Thai university are taking part in a synchronous online chat sessions and discussing their use of English and where each of them comes from.

**Are you Chinese?**

**Sarah (female, English L1), Ying (female, Chinese L1), Som (female, Thai L1), Wasana (female, Thai L1) and Ana (female, Portuguese L1)**

1 Sarah: I originally come from Canada, but grew up in Germany. So I consider myself to be in-between a native and a non-native speaker.

2 Ying: Actually, when I am with my friends who are from the same country as me, I always speak my mother tongue. But when I am alone, I speak English to myself.

3 Som: wow that’s really good.

4 Wasana: Are you Chinese, Ying?

5 Ying: Yes!

6 Som: Ni Haw Ma?

7 Wasana: Ni hao!

8 Ying: Ni hao!

9 […]\*

10 Ana: this is a real intercultural communication, uh? People from different backgrounds.

11 Som: sorry i tried to say hi in chinese.

12 […]

13 Som: what about you Ana?

14 Som: where are you from?

15 Ana: I am originally from Brazil

16 […]

17 Wasana: My ancestors are Chinese.

18 […]

19 Sarah: Wasana. Do you consider yourself multilingual then?

20 Ying: Oh, nice to meet you! Perhaps that’s why you say you are not talktive?

21 Ying: For Chinese are sometimes overmodest.….

22 […]

23 Wasana: I don’t consider that because I don’t talk chinese when I was a child.

24 Wasana: I just have taken some chinese courses and I don’t speak it in my daily life.

25 […]

26 Sarah: Wasana. Did you spend some time in China as well?

27 Ana: Ying is a great teacher! She taught our class some mandarin the other day

28 […]

29 Wasana: I never been in China, too.

***\*****Multiple conversations were taking place simultaneously in the chat session but for ease of reading they have not all been transcribed. ‘[…]’ represents an untranscribed section.*

(Baker, 2015: 227)

In line 1 Sarah identifies as “in-between a native and a non-native speaker” due to where she grew up and in line 2 Ying reports using English to speak to herself while still identifying as Chinese in line 5. Both these self-orientations to identity go unchallenged by the other participants and no negotiation appears to be needed. However, with Wasana the situation is more complex. The use of a Chinese greeting in lines 6 to 8 leads Wasana to write that her ancestors are Chinese in line 17. This results in Ying’s ascription of a Chinese identity to Wasana with various characteristics such as ‘not talkative’ and ‘overmodest’ in lines 20 & 21. However, this ascription is rejected by Wasana for a number of reasons including, not speaking Chinese as a child, not using Chinese every day and never having been to China (lines 23–29). In this example we can see that Sarah, Ying and Wasana all reject simplistic language, culture, nationality correlations and identities, underscoring the necessity of avoiding a priori ascriptions. Importantly, in Wasana’s case we can see how different identifications are negotiated in situ and emerge from the interaction.

**Conclusion**

As stated at the beginning of this paper ELF research offers a productive lens through which to investigate issues of language, communication and identity. However, this is not because there is anything necessarily unique about ELF communication. Quite the opposite. It is because it shares features with other types of intercultural communication, but played out on such a large scale, that makes ELF so interesting. ELF research has highlighted the multiple, dynamic and emergent nature of the relationships between language, communication, culture and identity in which the links between them cannot be taken for granted. Identify and identifications have been seen to operate at multiple scales moving between local, national and global groupings and cultures but also being created and negotiated in situ resulting in hybrid and emergent identities. At the same time though existing social categories and structures can also lead to the imposition or ascription of identities in ELF interactions and the extent to which this can be negotiated also needs to be part of any investigation.

I believe these are issues of much relevance to many Asian settings. English is now well-establish as an Asian language in its own right, most obviously as official language in countries such as India and Singapore (Kachru, 2005) but also due to its extensive use as lingua franca in the region (Kirkpatrick, 2010). This is manifested at a number of levels, particularly in English’s growing roles in organisations such as ASEAN and ASEAN +2, in government language and education policies and more recently English medium instruction education. Given this extensive use of English *as a lingua franca*, rather than as a second language, in Asia, it is clearly important to understand its role in the construction and representation of identity and equally important is the relationship between English and other languages in this process. Research has begun to engage with these concerns (in addition to those already mentioned see Le Ha, 2009; Murata and Jenkins, 2009; Sung, 2014 among others) but it still represents a very small minority compared to the research on official L2 varieties and EFL uses, both of which are in a minority compared to ELF uses, and much more work is clearly needed.

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1. ELF here is characterised following Seidlhofer’s functional definition as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often only option” (2011: 7). To this is added Jenkins’ (2015) more recent focus on the multilingual nature of ELF in which English is viewed as a *Multilingua Franca*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Such language use matches well with what is commonly referred to now as translanguaging (e.g. Garcia and Wei, 2014) which avoids reifying language use through rejecting a priori delineation of boundaries between languages. However, in the original research the term code-switching is used and so is repeated here. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)