

Negotiating East Asian Identities Through English: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Japan, China, and Korea

1. Introduction

The advancement of AI has changed not only the way people learn foreign languages but also the “why” for learning them. According to Block (2007), beyond practical purposes, intercultural language learning constructs a new language identity. Nonetheless, he concludes that, in the EFL context, learners' identity shifts through the new language are “minimal to non-existent” (Block, 2007, p.165). In reality, English education in South Korea (hereafter Korea) has focused on achieving success in education and career (Vasilopoulos, 2015). Despite that, people seldom acquire communicative competence in exam-focused circumstances (Cho, 2017). On top of that, in the era of AI, learning English would not be as necessary as it was before; people can rely on technology when communicating with others from different linguistic backgrounds. In such a time, it is essential to reconsider the importance of language learning in EFL contexts. To do so, the current research was designed to answer these two research questions: (1) Does the English acquisition impact each group’s participants' national identities? If so, how? (2) Do participants in each group perceive the English language differently based on how frequently they use it? If so, how do they differ from each other?

2. Current study

In this research, we investigate and compare the English identity construction of the participants who have studied English from Korea, China, and Japan, where English has become more than a global language. This topic explores how young adults in these three countries use English not only for communication but also to position themselves within local and global cultures. By comparing their attitudes, experiences, and emotional responses to English, we can see how the language becomes a site of identity negotiation. An online survey was used to collect data from 33 Koreans, 30 Japanese, and 50 Chinese participants. The survey consists of quantitative questions regarding the frequency of English use, attitudes and perceptions toward English, relationship between English and identity. The survey also includes qualitative questions asking the participants’ positive and negative experiences associated with English and how English acquisition has impacted their national identity, to delve into the quantitative data.

3. Results

Its ANOVA results revealed significant differences in how English intersects with identity across the three countries, deeply reflecting their distinct social contexts. As for frequency of

English use, Chinese participants exhibited a significantly lower frequency of English use at work and online compared to Japan and Korea. Meanwhile, Koreans use English most frequently during travel, and Japan leads in speaking with friends, highlighting distinct usage patterns across contexts. Overall, Chinese participants exhibited the strongest national identity but were the least inclined to use English for authentic self-expression. In contrast, Korean participants strongly associated English with a cosmopolitan identity and social mobility, while simultaneously facing the highest societal pressure and expectations regarding English proficiency. Meanwhile, Japanese participants perceived lower economic and social pressures tied to English, yet reported the highest level of personal enjoyment in its use, suggesting that English functions as a distinctly different identity marker within the sociocultural structure of each nation. The qualitative data were analyzed using manual coding. The results indicate that Japanese participants tend to hold a positive image of their English-speaking self, with more than half of them reporting identity shift through English acquisition. In contrast, a greater proportion of their Korean and Chinese counterparts reported a negative image and no identity shift.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the results indicate that the participants rarely experience an identity shift in their English learning; rather, it is their national identities that impact their English learning. Furthermore, it also shows that the less frequent their English use, the stronger their national identity becomes. Utilizing the results of the research, including some examples from the qualitative inputs, we will discuss why identity shifts in English learning are still hard to achieve in the era of the internet and AI, and how our national identities impact English acquisition and identity shift, how it differs in each country, and how we can foster the construction of new language identity in the era of AI.

References

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