Strengthening language capability through internationalizing education: autobiographical study of identity-adjusting by a Chinese doctoral candidate

Bingyi Li

Abstract

Australia attracts more and more international students for study in this country. This calls for investigating the role of social and intellectual interactions in the second language acquisition (SLA) among students studying in Western Universities. A review of the research literature shows ambivalence in the process of SLA in target country and the factors that contribute to SLA outcomes. This paper focuses on the author’s own narratives about her language use and learning, and the processes of adjusting her identities in new academic and work communities. This study draws on Amartya Sen’s capability approach to interpret the SLA processes to explore the author’s choices for identity-adjusting. This paper analyses evidence to indicate how an advanced second language learner actively draws on different choices she makes in the process of adjusting her identities in new social communities. It is argued that the amount and quality of interactional communication with native speakers, along with the learner’s identity-adjusting strategy, play a significant role in the SLA in the study abroad context.

Introduction to research context

It is a widely accepted that higher education is internationalizing. For many countries, higher education is now an important export sector with university campuses attracting international students from around the world. ‘Driven by advances in information and communication technologies and the growing hegemony of English as the world’s common language’, international students regard learning in developed country as one of the best ways to acquire a second language and understand its culture. International students are offered different levels and types of language input, opportunities for interactions and exposure to the target culture. Much empirical research has investigated how internationalizing education affects learners’ SLA. The positive aspect of developing language proficiency has been supported by a large number of studies. For instance, Davidson...
examined the impact on U.S. college students of studying in Russia on their second language (L2) proficiency. He found that language oriented programs as well as language study combined with professional study or research contributed considerably to high-level language proficiency growth for a range of learners. Among the studies of advanced-level SLA students, encouraging results were found in Isabelli’s research.7 The advanced learners in her study demonstrated gains in Spanish learning in the target country followed by explicit instruction in their home country (U.S.A.). These studies show that learners who obtained some basic target language knowledge in their home country benefited from studying abroad.

However, there is substantial variation in individual performance in SLA in the target culture. Some students show minimal language gains after a semester of learning, while others make significant gains even during shorter periods of language learning.8 At the same time, SLA scholars have investigated how internationalizing education changes learners’ language development and proficiency.9 But little is known about how the target culture affects learners’ perception of, and choices for using their identities in new learning and work communities, even though learner’s identity awareness is an important variable that contributes to SLA.

Examining SLA in terms of individual choice for identity-adjusting is important for two reasons. First, more learners are participating in international education. The Review of Australian Higher Education reports that:

Education is Australia’s third-largest export industry … export of education to international students has been an Australian success story over the last 20 years. Australia had the highest proportion of international students in higher education in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).10

Since a large number of international students from Asia in particular make Australia as a target country for further study, SLA is a subject reflecting the process of adopting individual identities in target social culture.11 Second, learners’ choice of adjusting identities in SLA are relevant to learners’ ‘expectation of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with’ their study abroad experience’.12 However, such cognitive development process has not been explored in depth. Given the importance of this topic, the present study seeks to investigate the connections between identity adjusting and language use in different cultures. Based on Amartya Sen’s capability approach, the author’s own narratives about her language use and learning in different countries are analysed to indicate how this language learner actively drew on different choices by adopting identities in new socio-cultural communities.13 Arguing about the influence of educational culture on international research candidates is not a matter of favouring the uniformity or the pliability of individuals but to explore the combining of culture and education for the capability development of the researcher.
The variety of research on identity includes speech accommodation theory\textsuperscript{14} and social identity theory\textsuperscript{15} in social psychology, theories of language ideology\textsuperscript{16} in linguistic anthropology and models of identity\textsuperscript{17} in sociolinguistics. Given the scope of such scholarly research, the definition of identity, as used here is deliberately broad and open-ended, and refers to ‘the social positioning of self and other.’\textsuperscript{18}

International students’ perspectives on language learning have been explored with an emphasis on how elements such as ‘motivation, individual differences, identity and level of acculturation’ are processed through this experience.\textsuperscript{19} Research shows that students who study the target language in another country are more likely to undergo identity transformations and develop intercultural sensitivity than those who do not have this experience.\textsuperscript{20} In particular, those students immersing themselves in new socio-cultural environments, find that their sense of identity is destabilized as they begin to negotiate ‘difference and its consequent fissures, gaps, and contradictions’.\textsuperscript{21} Such uncertainty of feeling or ‘ambivalence’ is a key concept in the process of SLA study.\textsuperscript{22} This ambivalence is the acute discomfort the student feels when s/he is unable to read the situation properly and choose between alternative actions. Given this ambivalence, Wang argues that the focus should be more on ‘social, cultural, and interactional contexts in which language and other kinds of knowledge are learned’.\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, it is necessary to have a better understanding of these complicated processes through investigating issues of ‘language and culture, language and identity and language socialization’.\textsuperscript{24}

Duff defines language socialization as:

\begin{quote}

The process by which novices or newcomers in a community or culture gain communicative competence, membership, and legitimacy in the group. It is a process that is mediated by language and whose goal is the mastery of linguistic conventions, pragmatics, the adoption of appropriate identities, stances (e.g., epistemic or empathetic) or ideologies, and other behaviors associated with the target group and its normative practices.\textsuperscript{25}

\end{quote}

Whether international students can make a difference in their SLA has to do with an infinite number of variables including ‘the type and the quality of interactions the learners have with others and with the [study abroad] environment’.\textsuperscript{26} The degree of exposure to and immersion in the target language culture may be determined by factors such as the kinds of relationships students have with host nationals and learner-specific personality traits.\textsuperscript{27} This suggests that research on SLA gains can be usefully interpreted and understood in terms of identity adjusting in the target culture.

Identity adjusting in this paper describes the fit between students and their academic environment which includes issues such as learning styles, educational communication, culture and language proficiency.\textsuperscript{28} Here, Sen’s concepts of identity, capability approach and choice are discussed for the
values as analytical tools to help investigate how international students operate their L2 by choosing and adjusting different identities from their home culture to target culture. Sen argues that the ‘identity’ refers to ‘how the person sees himself or herself. We have many [aspects] of identity, and being “just me” is not the only way we see ourselves’. Community membership, class, race, gender and sexual orientation are all ingredients in one’s identity that ‘can be, depending on the context, crucial to our view of ourselves, and thus to the way we view our welfare, goals, or behaviour obligations’. There are two dimensions to identity namely ‘self-perception’ which relates to ‘how we see ourselves’ and the other is ‘social affiliation’ or ‘social identity’ that is our embeddedness as ‘members of different ethnic, religious, cultural, occupational, national and other groups’. Identity includes how one positions oneself in relation to the existing background (home culture) and the new settings (target culture). It is a mediated relationship, a process of identifying who we are through our interactions with others and the world.

However, for an international student when and how can s/he add a new identity to the old—or subtract from it? It is not a simple half-and-half proposition whereby the individual becomes half of what he or she was, and half of what he or she has been exposed to the new culture. Such identity adjusting can be explained in terms of Sen’s capability approach which refers to a person’s ability to achieve valuable goals by choosing from a bundle of functionings, or ways of ‘doings and beings’. Sen’s ‘selection view’ and ‘options view’ offer an analytical lens for explaining choice with respect to identity. The selection view is focused on the comparison of the goodness of a bundle of choices. The option view provides an interactive comparison between the commodities themselves and the ‘revealed preference’ of an international student who chooses from a particular set of choices. With the ‘endowed faculty of reason’, they are able ‘to compare the options on offer and make individual choices’. Of course, an international student’s choice of identity in certain situations may be constrained or influenced by the goals of others, or by rules of conduct operating in different social contexts.

The choice of a functional identity is an act of individual agency that comes from engagement in communities. These identity choices involve weighing up the potentiality among different possible social affiliations in particular social contexts. In the pursuit of private goals, one may well ‘be compromised by the consideration of the goals of others in the group with whom the person has some sense of identity’. Previous studies have found that in the course of language socialization, both identity and academic achievement are closely interconnected. Learning is situated in the context of experiential participation in the target culture, ‘subsuming personal identity and social identity under one ‘logic’ can lead to a tendency to link individual closely to some particular community to which they are seen as belonging’.
Autobiographical research method

Research shows the role of culture and personal identity in language learning to be paramount in understanding the learner’s experiences of SLA. For these reasons, autobiographical research is used in this study of the author’s narratives as a means of elucidating the contextual and individual factors involved in SLA during study abroad. Autobiographical research is based on a person’s life story. Although generalizability is a concern raised against autobiographical research, this method has ‘redeeming features which makes [it] highly valuable in the education community’.41 It provides a more personal understanding of the phenomenon and the results can potentially contribute valuable knowledge to the community. Hellstrom argues that ‘knowledge is always in the particular…but more complete knowledge of the particular would include being able to recognize it in new and foreign contexts as well’.42 Therefore, autobiographical research makes it possible to explore the significant life experiences in their own circumstances which may help and/or hinder international students extend and deepen their identity in multicultural learning and work contexts. Thomas argues that autobiographical research provides ‘an insider’s view of a life by describing how events are interpreted by the person who has lived those events and who is the product of their influence’.43

For the study reported in this paper, personal narratives are used to explore language development as an identity adjusting process whereby an international student from China accounts for her doctoral studies in Australia. Instead of the real name of the author, the name Tiantian is used to create a ‘critical distance’ between myself as the researcher and the evidence of my everyday life practices.44 The identity adjusting process consists in ‘transforming human “identity” from a “given” into a “task” — and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences of their performances’.45 The critical distance enabled myself as the researcher to jump out of myself to explore that the identity adjusting tasks I had undertaken subconsciously as a by-product of fulfilling different study or work tasks using my L2. These personal, retrospective accounts provide a place where Tiantian could ‘be completely honest and where, by learning from previously noted experiences and mistakes, she [could] chart a continuing process of growth’ in SLA.46

Ambivalence in a different culture is regarded as a natural state for human beings who are forced to choose by their individual life trajectories or projects to engage with cultural and linguistic differences.47 Dealing with ambivalence depends on a person’s capability to achieve valuable goals by ‘choosing from a bundle of functionings (doings and beings)’.48 The accumulation of autobiographical evidence provided a rich data set for analysing what Tiantian might be, do and become in different study and work contexts in Japan, the Netherlands and Australia. The reflections have been analysed using ‘an excerpt-commentary unit’ approach which
comprises of four parts—‘analytic point, orienting information, excerpt and analytic commentary’. Excerpt-commentary unit analysis focuses attention on the concept or:

Analytic point; illustrates and persuades through a descriptive excerpt introduced by relevant orienting information; and explores and develops ideas through [conceptual] commentary grounded in the details of the excerpt.

As the researcher I had to assess which of my reflections (n=31) were relevant and which were unrelated, in part using criteria of ‘length, relevance, readability, comprehensibility’. The conceptual commentaries analyse the interactions described in the evidentiary excerpts to elaborate on their relevance to the research problem. The connection between the evidentiary excerpts and analytical or conceptual point progresses the argument developed in this paper. Below different analytic points are presented with different excerpts and incrementally these explore the identity adjusting process governing my use of English in each country. Each analytical unit were organized chronologically to develop a progression of ideas to deepen understanding of Tiantian’s language development and identity adjusting.

It may be argued that Tiantian’s background as an English teacher in her home country marked her as quite different from other international students from China. However, most universities recruit international students with the requirement of higher IELTS score, which made it possible to explore Tiantian’s study experience as a common case.

Findings from data analysis

Tiantian was a university teacher from China who successfully undertook her doctoral studies in Australia. Six vignettes from Tiantian’s study and work experience in Japan, the Netherlands and Australia were chosen for analysing her identity adjusting choices for using English in other cultures. Tiantian’s experience involved a transfer from a familiar community to strange communities. The excerpt-commentary units below show how she chose to foreground different functionings of her Chinese identities in specific situations in different cultures. The excerpts were analysed using Sen’s concepts of functionings to explore how Tiantian chose valuable and valued ways of ‘being and doing’ and becoming an English speaker in these different contexts. ‘Being’ an academic was constructed in terms of being intellectual, capable of critical thinking, knowledgeable and committed to scholarship. ‘Doing’ refers to Tiantian practice of research-related activities. ‘Becoming’ refers to her construction of new knowledge or skills (capabilities) that drew on her ‘being’ and ‘doing’.

Excerpts 1-3 recall Tiantian’s life experience in Tottori University from 2000 to 2002 after she obtained a Japanese Government Scholarship to study education there. Excerpts 1 and 2 describe the study and study-related
work experience Tiantian was offered by competing against other students. Even though she was in Japan, the communication with other students was conducted in English.

**Evidentiary excerpt-1 universal communicative language**

I studied second language acquisition in Tottori University. The university chose me to teach Year 5 pupils English. I could only say very simple Japanese words at that time and English was the main language for me to communicate with them. When I went to the elementary school, I dressed in light colour suits which was popular among Japanese women, I heard the girls whispered かわいい (cute or lovely). I taught them some useful English words to stimulate their interest in learning English. I taught them numbers, fruit or vegetable names and some actions such as stand, jump, hop, sit... by using Roman letters, pictures and body language so that they could understand the meaning of each word.

**Evidentiary excerpt-2 sharing English knowledge**

My supervisor asked me to organize English learning workshops with second year Japanese college students majoring in English once every fortnight. I designed some topics about food culture, festival, travelling experience, ideal husband or wife which they were interested in. Therefore we had heated discussion and exchanged different ideas in English.

The results for these teaching practice was successful as they sent me thanks card and photos and gifts by saying ‘Bingyi is such unforgettable teacher; interesting experience’ or just say ‘I love you’.

The relationship between language learning and its use is a contrivance. Learning occurs as the interactions are underway. Tiantian functioned as an English teacher in China but she met challenges in this new environment doing the same job. She taught Japanese school pupils and university students who did not know Chinese and knew little English. How could she successfully convey some English language knowledge to them? First, she chose to dress in a way that fitted the Japanese aesthetic in order to be accepted in this new community of intellectuals. Then she chose to use the non-verbal communicative methods of body languages and pictures for purpose of teaching English. For the Japanese university students, she chose topics to stimulate their interest in expressing their opinions. To encourage the use of English among her Japanese students, Tiantian learned some Japanese culture related to this intellectual community and also improved her English teaching methods. According to the students’ feedback, she achieved her goals of sharing English knowledge successfully with different groups of people.
Excerpt 3 recorded Tiantian’s involvement in a university film intended to introduce campus life to international students. Tiantian acted in the film as an ‘international student’ on her first day in Tottori University.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidentiary excerpt-3 being an actress in a film in Japan</th>
<th>theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The university recruit actress and editor to produce a short film oriented international students by providing basic information about life in Japan. I was interviewed and selected to act as a new coming international student in the film. I was also involved in designing the plot and the dialogue for the film with Korean and Japanese students. I was given good comments about my performance in the film in which I used some cute expressions learning from Japanese’ girls. But I was asked to repeat again and again because of my clumsy Japanese.</td>
<td>1. being an actress in a film 2. cooperate with other group members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the film, Tiantian foregrounded her identity as a Chinese student by sharing her experience of living abroad. She discussed the plot with other team members in English. It was not presumed that Chinese, Japanese and Korean team members would communicate in English as fluently as native speaker. However, it was the only common language they could use for fulfil the task of making the film. In addition, traces of the influence of Japanese culture were given expression when she made cute poses for the camera, presuming this would increase recognition of ‘かわいい (cute or lovely)’ by the potential audience. This excerpt shows Tiantian enlarged her identity by negotiating the being and doing of acting in a film and editing it with other international students in English. In the process she also improved her Japanese as she entered further into this intellectual community.

Excerpts 4-6 recorded Tiantian’s study of applied English linguistics in the Faculty of Arts, Vrije University, in Holland after she won a Netherlands Government Scholarship (2006-2007). Since she had some study and living experiences in Japan, the cultural shock she experienced in learning cultural differences was not so great. However, she still met some unexpected situations. According to Excerpts 4 and 5, Tiantian expected to get academic credit after completing her course of study but could not do so according to the conditions of the scholarship.
When I discussed my study plan with the supervisor, I was told that I could undertake any course I was interested in but not allowed to get credit according to the scholarship conditions. However, it was my great desire to get credits after undertaking the courses. I thought it would be useful in my future career when going back China. Disappointed after the discussion, I began to consider how I can get credits after study. I asked for advice from other Chinese students and looked for information on line.

When I met the supervisor for the second time, I expressed my eagerness to learn the knowledge and indicated the importance of getting credits for my future career after completing study in Holland. In addition, learning from other Chinese student, I told him that my home university was the sister university with Vrije university, which means they have agreements on some special items for exchange students. I presumed that it was my sincerity for learning that moved the supervisor and he promised me to negotiate with the administration. Three days later, he sent me the good news by email that I could get credits if completed courses successfully.

Rather than aiming to achieve native speaker English proficiency or a standardized form of English, the English language practice in excerpts 5 and 6 indicate that Tiantian aimed to achieve another study-related goal. Within this intellectual context, what was especially important was getting official recognition of course credits. Such demand deflected Tiantian’s attention from acquiring English language proficiency to language production, developing the equally important skills of using English in problem solving. Confronting an unexpected situation, Tiantian chose not to give it up and finally achieved the goal by using her communication skills (such as empathy) and the interpersonal resources she possessed such as information from her friends. She obtained her supervisor’s support by emphasizing the benefit of getting academic credit for her future career. She expanded her knowledge network to get more information about relevant university policies to achieve her goals. This shows that Tiantian linked her desires with the norms of the intellectual community. The newly achieved goal was definitely helpful for enhancing her capabilities in the academy.

Excerpt 6 shows how Tiantian achieved her study goal by extending and deepening functionings she had previously acquired, for example, combining the knowledge of Chinese (Hànzì) with the new linguistic knowledge she learned at Vrije University.
It was difficult to write the paper on ‘Construction Grammar’ with English examples. Thinking and thinking, I had an idea—languages have something in common. Why not I applied the polysemy network of ‘心 (xin), heart’ to explain the metaphor-metonymy relations in Construction Grammar? Once having research topic, I collected words and idioms constructed by 剖字 (Chinese character) ‘心 (xin, heart)’ in the newspaper, magazine and novel. The ‘xin, heart’ constructions are the result of the ‘heart’ metaphorical schema but bearing with the respective specific meanings. Following such idea, I finished the paper—On Metaphor of ‘Heart’.

Tiantian found it difficult to present evidence of grammar construction in English as a Chinese student. However, she creatively combined her pervious linguistic knowledge gained in China with the polysemic network she learned to produce a creative research work. She had some linguistic knowledge of both Chinese and English which she gained through her education in China. As a result, her linguistic knowledge is inseparable from Chinese intellectual heritage. One reason is that the language is a part of culture and plays an important role in it. For another reason, as a mirror of culture, language is strongly influenced and shaped by culture.

Excerpts 7-9 recorded Tiantian’s internship in Australia when she won a UWS International Postgraduate Research Scholarship (2008-2011) and studied for her doctorate in education.54 During her studies, she competed for an internship to work as a Research Assistant on a local government study of home-based business, undertaking the analysis of a survey.55 Tiantian gained entry into this new work environment and built relations with others in this English speaking context. This work added new a facet to her intellectual identity. Excerpts 7 and 8 describe her acquisition of the target language (spoken and written) tied to the acquisition of the target culture content in this work place setting.

During the internship, first, I learned how to collect data with effective software, ‘Survey Monkey’ which is totally new technique for me. The expert in the working team taught me how to apply the software for collecting data and generating the data for further research.
When we discussed about how to design the questionnaire, I put forward my suggestions directly because all the members were friendly and showed interest in what I said. Many of my ideas were adapted in the questionnaire.

When I presented the draft of the report, my supervisor was not satisfied and told me to write it with ‘the word that gramma can understand’. In the following revised process, I still used some academic word,

‘Why not use some plain words?’ he asked

‘Because I want to show off my “good” English’. 

‘haha’ all the colleagues laughed with the humorous answer.

Sometimes when they discussed in slang or difficult English words which I cannot understand, I just asked them and they were very glad to be my ‘language teachers’.

Tiantian was surprised by what she first encountered, finding she was readily accepted in this new culture or work community. Although she was not overly confident in her English or in undertaking research work, she identified as an international doctoral candidate who had developed some initial research capabilities. The supportive cooperation of the team members stimulated her to maximize the employment of her potential. She applied her newly acquired research capabilities to design and refine a questionnaire, collect and analyse the survey data, and give a presentation of the results to the Council’s Research and Marketing Committee. Then Tiantian set her target on being a qualified research worker when she combined communication and problem-solving capabilities in the new workplace. By participating in this workplace community Tiantian’s conceptions of doing research and sense of being a researcher became clearer, thereby contributing to her goals. Excerpt 9 was Tiantian’s reflection after being offered the internship by the University.
It is a big surprise for me to get ‘Outstanding Student Award 2009’ for the internship and I kept thinking why I, a Chinese student can get such award. Do I really ‘outstand’ the others?

Of course, I NEVER think in this way. I just tried my best to complete the internship program. I own it to the supervisor’s nomination letter. It is his great credit for my working performance that play important role in getting the award. What I learned from the internship is to be myself in workplace, to show the others what kind of person I am. I have confidence of my personality and working capability for long time. The important thing is that I should find a platform so that the other people have chance to know about me, which is beneficial to find a job in the future.

Tiantian attributed her achievement to two points. First, she emphasized on ‘being herself’ by keeping key aspects of her professional identity in different contexts. The other key idea was using this identity as a ‘platform’ for the opportunities that presented themselves to her. She valued the chance of showing where and how her linguistic studies, research education and work could be interrelated. Her story indicated that learning advanced English is more functional outside of classroom and more effective through interaction with peers. The on-spot learning provided her an effective way to develop her linguistic capabilities and gain recognition for these in a new community and then to become an integral and valued member of this new community.

**Discussion**

SLA includes transference of identity from one’s place of origin to a new locale involving ‘distance traversed in time and space, institution, language; set of conditions for acceptance or resistance at new location; and the now accommodated idea’.\(^\text{56}\) Tiantian’s reflections provide insights into the relationship between identity, linguistic knowledge and research practices across time and space. The evidence suggests Tiantian accepted rather than resisted identity transformation by being flexible and open to opportunities as an international student in each target country. That the multiple roles of researcher, student and worker are combined was salient to Tiantian’s SLA development. Her ways of doing and being shed light on how to adjust identities in target communities and may provide implications on University language pedagogy.

*Adjusting identities through minimizing or maximizing identities*

When international students from Asia face cultural ambivalence in learning the English language, the variables of social identity such as gender, class, race, motivation and personality may impede or enhance a person’s interactions with the target language community and result in reduced or
improved language awareness and acquisition. Identity is not merely a matter of individual agency. Individuals do not carve out an identity from the inside out or from the outside in. Rather, their environments impose constraints while they act on those environments, continuously altering and recreating them.

Preference is an important indicator of an individual’s selection and options of an identity. Sen argues that ‘the politics of social consensus calls not only for acting on the basis of given individual preferences, but also for sensitivity of social decisions to the development of individual preferences and norms’. Tiantian recognized the existence of other people’s goals were part of the intellectual communities in which she was working and ‘the observable conflict in the individualistic pursuit of the respective goals must call for some response in behaviour’.58

Identity is not fixed completely and can be elaborated, stretched and elongated in different contexts. It is fixed to a degree because everyone is a unique ‘package’ of innate characteristics and a set of acquired knowledge and skills which s/he identifies as valuable to his/her life’s project. One’s identity is less likely to change if one stops in a small isolated community—and that community does not change—but both are increasingly unlikely given contemporary global flows of people, images, technology and ideas. A person’s identity is also changeable with the revisions to his/her life goals, adjusting some aspects of identity to bring them in line with those of others they value and seen as valuable. The individual has a degree of freedom to choose between one and another aspect of identity, or add a new aspect to his/her identity and therefore, enhance the capabilities for pursuing his/her valuable goals in different cultural contexts.

As Bauman argues, the issue is not ‘so much how to obtain the identities of their choice and how to have them recognized by others, but which identity to choose and how best to keep alert and vigilant so that another choice can be made’. Tiantian’s reflections indicate that she chose to minimize some aspects of her original identity and to foreground the salience of an aspect of identity after acquaintance with and cultivation of what was found to be the most rewarding in another cultural practice. For example, she minimized aspects of being both ‘Chinese’ and ‘student’, and maximized the ‘teacher’ aspect of her identity when she gave English lessons in Japan. In another situation, she maximized her ‘Chinese’ and ‘student’ aspects of identity and minimized the ‘teacher’ aspect in accordance with the requirement of the film making (see Excerpts 2-4). Similarly, she minimized her ‘Chinese’ and ‘student’ identity and maximized the ‘career worker’ aspect of her identity to obtain her Dutch supervisor’s empathy to help her get academic credit for her studies (see Excerpts 5-6). Such identity choices provide insights into how Tiantian developed her SLA, produced knowledge and achieved her valued goals. Tiantian tried to complete the tasks in her studies or work by choosing aspect of her identity which seemed contextually appropriate.
Tiantian’s choice to privilege one aspect of her identity was influenced by the position of others. Sen\textsuperscript{60} indicates that ‘acceptance of rules of conduct toward others with whom one has some sense of identity is part of more general behavioural phenomenon of acting according to fixed rules, without following the dictates of goal-maximization’. Metaphorically, Tiantian takes all the identity ‘balloons’ with her but choose to ‘blow up’ the one that seems to suit the context, which suggests her being, doing or becoming depends in part on what others value in their community. Tiantian’s ways of ‘being’, and ‘doing’ and ‘becoming’ largely foregrounded her identification with the community to which she gained access.

**Implications on university language pedagogy**

Tiantian’s experiences show that different intellectual communities did not determine her identity but influenced her functional identity-adjusting with respect to using English for study and work. As a result, she was able to complete teaching, study and research tasks in English in specific language contexts. She took the values she inherited from her original community and subjected them to critical reflective assessment in each new community. Both the boundaries and the content of her ‘self’ were shaped but not determined by her background identity and the social understandings that identity embodies. The range of attitudes, desires, behaviours and dispositions that constitute Tiantian’s particular identities inevitably found sources of connection in the communities of which she became a member. All of these were engaged in each target country by means of oral and written English.

Tiantian’s experience suggests that a focus on L2 learning is to connect activity and interaction with the social settings, in which language input is provided to learners.\textsuperscript{61} L2 should not be confined to its use and learning in the classroom but extends to extra-mural educational and instructional environments. Bradley et al. also propose that Australian higher education focus ‘more on the quality of the experience for international students on- and off-campus and on preparing them for subsequent employment in Australia if that is what they seek’.\textsuperscript{62} Socio-linguistic interactions and cognition are intricately linked with the work and study environment which require the processing of culturally specific forms of English language (Stewart, 2010). Language learning is not just about increasing access to information and skills but also about acquiring language competencies to make economic contributions across different workplaces. Therefore, as an important subject for international students, English language learning should emphasize the social context required for language use.

Tiantian’s reflections show that English language proficiency was not her only goal of studying abroad but that she hoped to fulfil her goals of teaching, filming, getting academic credit and producing a survey report. Tiantian’s experiences also show that the combination of formal instruction and immersion in the target language resulted in gains in her language proficiency. Furthermore, the different learning contexts allowed her to
choose the terms in which she expressed her problem solving capabilities and deciding which dimensions of the English language were more worth developing in specific contexts. The analysis of evidence shows that the process of learning in the target culture did not mean acquiring ‘some kind of native speaker “target” or “standard” form of (in this case) English … [but] learning activities [were] marshalled in the services of fulfilling work-related tasks and responsibilities’. Firth explored how L2 competence is developed in social contexts such as workplaces, contribute to and expand the stock of knowledge about SLA. He observed that second language practices ‘are dependent on complex calibrations of various interactional kinds, on synchronizations of action, pacing and tempo, and on ongoing assessments of what is appropriate and interactionally expedient’. Therefore, international students need to be trained to be ‘flexibly competent’ to do the particular job required for a particular assignment.

The ease of entry into each target culture’s communities of intellectual practice and attitude towards learning the target language are also influenced by foreign language settings. Tiantian’s linguistic achievements were inseparable from the opportunities offered by the target communities. Such opportunities positively influenced her application of English in diverse ways by challenging her cultural perceptions and beliefs, and broadening her mind. The evidence indicates that Tiantian’s SLA was closely connected to its positive social recognition. The educational institutions and workplaces where she studied or worked were not just places to convey knowledge or skills but also emphasized her cognitive development and freedom of choice, increasing the interactions of minds in line with changing work and study environments. They can offer more resources that increase the chances for international students access to dominant groups and maintain or increase his/her socio-economic advantages. It is suggested that Australian university and workplace be not just tolerance of the diversity, but acceptance of and respect for intellectual diversity.

Conclusion

This study used an autobiographical method to analyse evidence of SLA in terms of identity-adjusting choices. The analysis shed light on concerns about L2 learning. It suggests that the curriculum be planned to bring the real world into the classroom through pedagogies of task-focused communication which is always a key aim of SLA. In the absence of opportunities for real English practice, language scenarios could provide international students with various resources to practice everyday interactions, focusing on the complex reality of actual processes of communication. In addition, identity-adjusting maximization and minimization indicate that SLA requires positive interactions in new academic and working contexts for international students from Asia. The particular conceptions of identity for both individuals and the community...
are conditioned by the social understandings embodied in that community. Individuals balance their beings, doings and becomings in relation to values and revise these choices in the light of experiences.

Acknowledgement
This paper has been produced as part of an ARC Project (DPO 0988108) investigating ‘argumentative Chinese students’ being conducted by Professor M. Singh and Dr. J. Han.

Bingyi Li is currently Research Assistant at the Central for Educational Research, University of Western Sydney. She received her PhD in education at the University of Western Sydney in 2011. She is interested in students’ outcomes in terms of social equality and self-concept. She also researches the effect of ICT on teacher education.

Endnotes
5. ibid.


22. ibid.


31. Ibid.
34. A. Sen, *Inequality re-examined*, p. 39.
35. Ibid., p. 34.
36. Ibid.
41. M. Myers, ‘Qualitative research and the generalizability question: standing firm with proteus’, *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 4, no. 3/4, 2000, p. 3.
45. Z. Baumann, ‘Identity in the globalizing world’, p.124
47. D. Block, ‘The rise of identity in SLA research, post Firth and Wagner (1997)’.
48. A. Sen, *Inequality re-examined*, p. 5.
50. Ibid., p. 182.
51. Ibid., p. 187.
52. The University of Western Sydney requires international postgraduate students to demonstrate proficiency in the English language by achieving IELTS (Academic) 6.5 or 7 according to different subjects (http://www.uws.edu.au/international/admissions/english_language_requirement).
54. B. Li, *Inequality and choice in senior secondary school students’ outcomes: Queensland’s reforms of vocational education and training in schools*, University of Western Sydney, Sydney, 2011.


58. A. Sen, *Rationality and freedom*, p. 211.


63. A. Firth, ‘Doing not being a foreign language learner: English as a lingua franca in the workplace and (some) implications for SLA’, p. 149.

64. ibid.

65. ibid.