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IDENTITIES IN NEEDS ANALYSIS FOR BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENTS

Abstract

This article concerns the issue of identity as a relevant dimension of needs analysis in English for Specific Purposes education. It explores identities that were narrated by five Business English students purposively selected from the first cohort of Business English students attending a Business English programme in a Chinese academic setting. A narrative analysis of a wide range of data including interviews, student journals, and other student texts revealed multiple identities at work such as professional identities, gender identities, cultural identities, and student identities. These identities were found to interact in complicated ways in the process of Business English learning. The relevance of these identities to the analysis of learning needs of Business English students is discussed.

Key words

needs analysis, identities, Business English, narrative analysis, case study.

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Sažetak

Rad se bavi problemom identiteta kao relevantne dimenzije analize potreba u nastavi engleskog jezika struke. Ispituju se identiteti kroz naraciju ciljano izabranih petoro studenata koji su pohađali kurs poslovnog engleskog na jednom kineskom univerzitetu. Analiza narativa urađena na osnovu većeg broja podataka koji uključuju intervjue, dnevnike i ostale tekstove koje su napisali/izgovorili studenti otkrila je postojanje višestrukih identiteta, poput onih profesionalnih, rodnih, kulturnih i studentskih. Ustanovljeno je da u procesu učenja poslovnog engleskog ovi identiteti međusobno deluju na komplikovan način. U radu se govori o značaju tih identiteta u analizi potreba studenata poslovnog engleskog.

Ključne reči

analiza potreba, identiteti, poslovni engleski, analiza narativa, studija slučaja.

1. INTRODUCTION

Needs analysis is the cornerstone of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching, as has been consistently articulated in the ESP literature (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Belcher, Johns, & Paltridge, 2011). While emphasis has been put on the target situation analysis generating the language, skills, and knowledge that are required for the ESP learner to function in the target situation, learning needs are not typically recognised in research and practice. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) are among the early ESP specialists who emphasise learning needs by arguing that ESP is basically concerned with learning where the route to learning matters as much as the destination (the target situation). Recent sociocultural research where identities and social contexts are prioritised contributes to highlighting learning needs. According to Norton Peirce (1995), language learners invest, or refuse to invest, their time, energy, and other resources in language learning depending on the social identities they desire for themselves. This means that learning needs vary with what learners want to be and become through the target language. Identities have thus become an important component of learning needs analysis. Belcher and Lukkarila (2011) call for putting identities centre stage in ESP needs analysis.

This article explores the role of identities in needs analysis by examining the experiences of the first cohort of Business English students attending a four-year undergraduate Business English programme at a prestigious university in China (IBSU as the pseudonym). IBSU initiated the Business English programme in China

and admitted its first cohort of Business English majors in 2007.[1] The article concerns what the students wanted to be able to do and to be through Business English and how a consideration of their identities may enrich understanding of their learning experiences and learning needs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on identity usually follows either discourse analysis or narrative inquiry. A discourse analysis approach to identity builds on the premise that identity is dialogic by nature, performed in discourse, and indexed by language and other semiotic resources (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Blommaert, 2005; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; de Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006; Gee, 2011; McKinlay & McVittie, 2011; Richards, 2006; van Dijk, 2009). Identity may also be approached through narrative inquiry. Cortazzi (2001: 388) writes that "[t]hrough life stories individuals and groups make sense of themselves; they tell what they are or what they wish to be, as they tell so they become, they *are* their stories". A similar point is made by Polkinghorne (1988: 150) who takes the position that "we achieve our personal identities and self concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story". For Benwell and Stokoe, "it is in *narrative* that we construct identities" (2006: 130).

This study follows narrative analysis as the approach to exploring identities of the Business English students. It adopts Patterson's (2008: 37) broad definition of narrative as "texts which bring stories of personal experience into being by means of the first person oral narration of past, present, future or imaginary experience". When the Business English students tell their stories of learning Business English, they may narrate a number of identities into being. For example, they represent and reconstruct their experiences of professional socialisation into the community of practice of international business, hence professional identities. As they are learning Business English, they may touch upon cultural identities (Belcher & Lukkarila, 2011; Lo Bianco, Orton, & Gao, 2009) – how they feel about being Chinese using English in handling international business matters. Other identities may include gender identities in the sense of "one's social identification as a boy or a girl, a man or a woman" (Weatherall & Gallois, 2003: 487) and institutional identities such as being university students. It will be interesting to see which of these possible identities are narrated and how they may interact in the process of their Business English education.

[1] For more information on Business English education in China, see Zhang (2007) and Zhang & Wang (2011).

3. DATA

The data for this study came from life-story interviews with five focal students selected purposively from the first cohort of 57 Business English students at IBSU following the sampling procedures proposed by Yin (2009). They will be referred to as An, Dong, Mei, Nan, and Lan in the study. The selection was made on the basis of their family background, pathway to the university (being graduates of language high schools and exempted from taking the national college entrance examinations or gaining admission to the university with outstanding scores in the national college entrance examinations), gender, ranking in the class, and quality and quantity of their data. Their ranking was an important selection criterion because it was felt that student ranking would somehow reflect their experiences of learning Business English as at IBSU the ranking was based on both their academic and extracurricular accomplishments. The five students included two males (Dong and Nan) and three females (An, Mei, and Lan); two graduates from language high schools (Dong and Nan) and three others admitted to the university for their high scores; two from metropolitan cities (Mei and Nan) and three from the provinces (Dong, An, and Lan); two top-ranking students (Dong and Lan), two middle-ranking students (An and Mei), and one low-ranking student (Nan) in the class. They all showed enthusiasm to participate in this study and contributed data for research rich in both quantity and quality.

3.1. Data collection

The data collection was conducted between October 2009 and July 2010 when the students were in Year 3. The study adapted McAdams' (1993) scheme of obtaining narratives through interviews. Two semi-structured interviews were held, one at the beginning of Year 3 (marked as Interview #1 in the Results section) and the other at the end of Year 3 (marked as Interview #5 in the Results section except for An whose second life-story interview was marked as Interview #4 and Dong's as Interview #6 because of the sequencing of the interviews and an extra interview, respectively). Similar questions were asked during both interviews. The second interview was intended to identify possible changes in the student and meanwhile clarify and/or confirm the student's ideas and use of terms and expressions in earlier interviews.

Six sets of questions were asked. The first set concerned their motivations for learning Business English. The second set concerned their experiences of learning Business English, including positive experiences, difficulties, and cultural conflicts they had experienced, and their reflections on the meaning of the experiences to their understanding of international business professionals. The third set concerned significant people in their experiences of learning Business English and the influence the significant others had had on their understanding of international

business professionals. The fourth set concerned their understanding of international business and international business professionals**.** The fifth set concerned their plans for the future, barriers they perceived to be preventing them from fulfilling their plans, and their initiatives in addressing the barriers. The last set consisted of prompts for them to reflect on the changes in themselves they perceived to have taken place in terms of understanding international business professionals and to make a summative statement of what they had become. The interviews lasted from 35 minutes 28 seconds to 93 minutes 54 seconds.

In addition to the life-story interviews, the five students were requested to keep journals throughout Year 3. No strict form of journal keeping was imposed on them other than asking them to record any activities they deemed relevant to learning Business English as well as their reflections on the effect of such activities on their perceptions of international business, of business professionals, and of themselves. An kept her diary on a weekly basis, with 26 journal entries covering various topics including her study at university, internships, and other extracurricular activities. She also provided copies of her research reports and blog texts, which provided further information on her activities of learning Business English. Lan produced 5 journal entries mainly on her internship experiences. Nan recorded explicitly in 6 consecutive journal entries his buying and selling of stocks in China along with his reflections on this experience. Dong and Mei did not submit any journal but reported in detail their experiences of academic and extracurricular activities during the two interviews. The five students also provided essays written during Year 3 on a variety of issues such as their personal niche.

To triangulate the data further, the students' profile was collected from their writing instructor who conducted a business writing needs survey at the beginning of Year 3. The students reported their career aspirations, their expectations of the course in terms of the types of business writing to be included in the writing course, their difficulties in writing, and their preferred methodology for teaching and learning business writing. There were also interviews based on the students' writing in a wide range of business genres (see Zhang, 2013). Although the text-based interviews were not the main data for this article, they will be cited where appropriate.

These sources of data complemented and/or confirmed each other in various ways. An example of confirmatory data is the case of An who in the life-story interviews presented a view of herself which was echoed in her journal, essays, blog texts, and student profile. The data together can thus be said to provide a panoramic view on the five focal students' Business English learning experience, what they thought they were, and what they wanted to be and become while learning Business English. All the data collection received ethics approval.

3.2. Data processing procedures

This study generally followed Riessman (2008) in conducting a narrative analysis of the data. There are two important features to Riessman's (2008) approach to narrative analysis: prior theories or concepts are used as guidance and the whole episode or story is used to bear out themes rather than being broken down into separate themes. The prior theories or concepts would contribute "a priori codes" (Duff, 2008: 160) or codes that are anticipated before the data analysis. Riessman (2008) also specifies four methods of narrative analysis including thematic analysis, which is geared towards exploring what is spoken by the narrator rather than how he or she narrates. As this study is concerned with the identities for the Business English students, a thematic analysis of their experiences of learning Business English was conducted with the focus on the identities they talked into being. It should be mentioned that the basic principle of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was followed to the extent that the prior/pre-set codes were guiding devices and were borne out by the data. Where the data suggested new codes or themes, they were treated as equally valid information and incorporated into the study results.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several identities emerged in the narratives of the five focal students, including professional identities, cultural identities, gender identities, and institutional identities (students at the university). They will be illustrated respectively in the Results section and then discussed to highlight their relevance to an analysis of learning needs. Where the data quoted for illustration were originally in Chinese, they will be presented in the original language first and then the author's translation will follow immediately in brackets. No linguistic errors in the quotations will be corrected to keep the flavour of the students' original utterances.

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Professional identities

Professional identity is the most salient in the narratives of the students. It is conceptualised in terms of four interdependent factors including professional goals, values and perspectives on international business professionals, technical competence, and discursive competence (Zhang, 2012). These factors were underlying the students' perception of international business professionals and their application of the factors to evaluating themselves.

Nan, for example, set the professional goal of working in the finance sector of investment and consultancy due to the challenging nature of the profession and the similarity between the profession and his character. He was generally receptive to values and views of international business professionals. For example, he found that the institutional design of the futures market in China favoured the rich (Journal Entry #5, 24 May, 2010) and did not give the small investors the equal access to information (Journal Entry #6, 31 June, 2010). Although he was unhappy with the operation of the securities market in China, he was learning to accept the status quo and to 让自己成长得更适合这个社会 [make myself grow so that I will suit the society better] (Interview #1, 27 November, 2009). As for technical competence, he described an ideal international business professional in terms of qualities and capabilities as follows:

> 首先他**能经营**好这个公司，**能经营**好他的business，然后**有**自己独到的creative的ideas，无论是关于治理一个公司还是关于公司的发展前景，然后这些ideas**能结合**这个市场的变化，**能结合**政策方面，一些国际关系的变化，因为是international trade吗，然后还有嗯就是怎么说呢还有**应该是**一个处事比较圆滑的人，**能够处理**好各方面的人事，**有自己的**social network [first he **can manage** his company well, **can run** his business well, then he **has** his own unique creative ideas, whether about corporate governance or about corporate vision, then these ideas **can be** considered along with changes in the market, he **can** consider policies, changes in international relations, because it is international trade, then em how to say it he **must be** tactful, **able to** manage his various relations well, he **has** his social network] (Interview #5, 4 July, 2010).

Note the lexicalisation of the capabilities, skills, and qualities in Nan's depiction of technical competence for international business professionals (marked in bold font in the original and corresponding translation). With regard to discursive competence, he realised that the business world had its ways of talking and writing (Interview #1, 27 November, 2009). He insisted that talking skills were crucial to international business professionals because they had to communicate with their clients and persuade them to believe what they said to them and trust their analysis. Writing skills were less important than talking skills, but they differed from writing in daily life in the format and the use of business terminology (Interview #1, 27 November, 2009).

This image of international business professionals guided Nan's academic and extracurricular endeavours. He claimed to have stepped into the international business world. In order to support this claim, he concluded that he had acquired the qualifications for the banking and securities profession by saying 硬件方面的东西我感觉准备得差不多了 (Regarding the qualifications I feel I am almost well prepared) (Interview #5, 4 July, 2010).

Unlike Nan, who formed his professional goal of working in the finance sector and was pragmatic about the status quo of the business world, An's professional

goals changed with time. She was inclined to explore herself and the business world in order to find a profession that was "challenging" and "interesting" and that she "may be good at" (Interview #4, 12 June, 2010). She thought that international business professionals were normal people who appeared "more professional" in the sense that they dressed formally, behaved differently (e.g. going to expensive cafés and making friends with professionals, celebrities, and well-educated people), and combined English and Chinese in their talk (Interview #1, 10 November, 2009). There were no special values for them as "businessperson have the values that people value much in the daily life" (Interview #1, 10 November, 2009). She provided a list of the qualities of international business professionals which may represent her understanding of their technical competence, including profound knowledge, consideration, communication skills, good English, and professional experience. Her understanding of discursive competence for international business professionals was demonstrated in her insight into the Clarity-Brevity-Sincerity style of business communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2001):

> what is a little special is the time is very important to a businessman, yeah, they want to save time, they know the other side doesn't have much time to read your email … in business letter … the words you use should be as less as possible, and usually you should state your purpose at the first sentence, yes, it is also called consideration, when you are writing, you think from their position, and make the letters or something the compositions as clear as possible (Interview #1, 10 November, 2009).

Dong was both different from and similar to An. He was similar to An in that his professional goals kept evolving. At the beginning of Year 3, he stated that "[w]orking in a foreign enterprise would be my first choice, besides, I would also like to be a teacher in an English-speaking country, to spread the Chinese culture around the world" (Student Profile, November 2009). Towards the end of Year 3, he said firmly:

> I don't like to be a business professional, because I know (sighing) I do not fit for that job (sighing) it does not mean I'm not qualified, but it's just that I don't like that kind of feeling (Interview #6, 6 July, 2010).

What he held to be his ideal career was working for an NGO "committed to environmental protection" (Essay on Future Career, July 2010). His perspectives on international business professionals also changed over time. When he visited the university as a high school student, he thought that he would become a businessperson speculating that international trade would be very complex as it would take him four or more years to learn how to do business. After almost two and a half years into the Business English programme, he compared international trade to a "complicated machine" with lots of parts (Interview #1, 17 November,

2009) and described international business professionals in such terms as "just like press the button" (Interview #1, 17 November, 2009). He was also disillusioned when he realised that foreign enterprises were not essentially different from Chinese enterprises. Despite the practice of the staff calling each other by their first name, there was no equal opportunity for them. He appeared very negative about the hierarchy in the corporate world, in particular, the huge gap between the salaries paid to foreign management and Chinese staff (Interview #6, 6 July, 2010). He also noticed that businesses succumbed to the power of the political and social structures. He reported that while foreign enterprises were often believed to be more efficient, there was no guarantee that they got things done as quickly as state-owned enterprises. Foreign enterprises operated in a way similar to domestic Chinese enterprises. For example, when it came to receiving someone from the authorities, they would put up banners at the entrance to their premises with the slogan of 热烈欢迎 … 领导莅临指导 [warmly welcome the arrival and guidance of leaders ...] (Interview #6, 6 July, 2010). He asserted that in the Chinese context, whatever the foreign enterprise, 他们脑子里东西还是一样的 [the mentality of the staff is the same] (Interview #6, 6 July, 2010). He concluded that international business professionals 很假 [lived unnaturally] (Interview #6, 6 July, 2010) and he did not like the feeling, which caused him to give up a career in international business.

His depiction of the technical competence for international business professionals was a combination of personality, way of thinking, persuasiveness, accuracy, and efficiency in expressing oneself, and a wide scope of knowledge. In addition to these he emphasised the importance of sensitivity and foresight in international business. Regarding discursive competence, he came to appreciate that the world of international business had its ways of talking and writing. He said that language use for international business was "formal," "professional," but not "humorous" or "beautiful" (Interview #1, 17 November, 2009). He also realised that business writing followed formats or conventional ways of organising ideas. His awareness and acceptance of business language as different from language use in the "life world" (Gee, 2011: 208) and as having conventional patterns of organisation suggested that he was gaining insights into discursive practices in international business.

Mei was to a great extent similar to Nan in that she consistently embraced the goal of working in marketing and public relations for a prestigious international company and maintained a positive image of international business professionals. She specified three values for them including "profit", "sustain growth and development", and "make advancement" (Interview #1, 25 November, 2009). She herself embraced these values. For example, she attributed her professional goal of working for a foreign corporation to the dynamic and competitive working environment and opportunities for personal achievement. She expressed her understanding of technical competence for international business professionals in terms of what they did and what they were able to do. She came up with a list of

can-do's or should-have's such as "can manage the intercultural diversification", "can manage multiple works and pressure at the same time", "good at English", "has the business mind", and "should have enthusiasm in acquiring more and more knowledge and want to dig more into the interesting field and then make a lot of contributions to what's to their interest and to the field of knowledge" (Interview #5, 5 July, 2010). This conclusive account covered the three essential components of professional expertise, namely, professional knowledge, professional practice, and discursive competence (Bhatia, 2004). She noticed the formulaic nature of business discourse and the importance of 格式 [layout and format] (Interview #2, 30 December, 2009). Also similar to Nan, Mei concluded that she was not "really far away" from being an international business professional because of her knowledge of the business world (Interview #5, 5 July, 2010).

Lan perceived herself as an "always match person" who would be needed by any institution (Essay on Personal Niche, July 2010). She did not come up with a clear professional goal. She considered her peers to be mistaken for wanting to get into the 500 most prestigious companies in the world. She came to realise the complexity of business and felt embarrassed that she had no brain for handling it (Interview #5, 3 July, 2010). However, she reconciled herself to this state when she realised that:

> 很多情况下只有老板才是 decision-maker，只需要他们有眼光就可以了，
> 你不需要有眼光， 呵呵， 你只是你更多的而是更多的只是听他们的命令，
> 然后去做你的事情 [often it is only the boss who is the real decision-maker, only they need to have the vision, you don't, haha, you just follow their orders, and then do your job] (Interview #5, 3 July, 2010).

She seemed to have formed an image of members of her target community of practice:

> 他们还是普通人只是，只是加入了他们跟这个，工作本身相关的一些东西，所以要表现得，我觉得说可能可能表现得不那么情绪化一些，更更中性一些吧，更理智理性一些 [they are still ordinary people, it's only that something relevant to their job is embodied in them, so they behave, I feel they perhaps behave less emotionally, more neutrally, and more sensible rational (Interview #1, 27 November, 2009).

They also were 会包装 [good at packaging] (Interview #5, 3 July, 2010). They were thus capable of performing their business-related roles but were probably not likable. Her perception of the technical competence for international business professionals can be inferred from her attribution of qualities and abilities to them: international business professionals were glorious, 有战略脑子 [having strategic brain] and 灵活 [flexible]; they held resources and power and were influential. Her understanding of their discursive competence was expressed as an insight into the routine nature of workplace writing and their reliance on 模版 [templates] in

writing (Interview #3, 15 January, 2010). Their speaking and writing was "concise," exact to avoid "ambiguities," and 必要还要透出一些人性化 [may display a human touch where necessary] (Interview #1, 27 November, 2009).

It is clear that while the students shared considerable insights into technical competence and discursive competence, they differed from each other qualitatively with reference to professional goals and values and perspectives on international business professionals, giving their emerging professional identities different orientations. An had no definite professional goals as she opted to explore herself and the business world in order to find her ideal profession. She also did not treat international business professionals as a special group of people. Dong was disillusioned by the contrasts he observed in the business world, in particular foreign enterprises in China, and decided not to pursue a business career. Mei cherished a positive image of international business professionals and set herself the goal of working as a marketing and public relations specialist for a leading international company. Nan decided on a career of financial and investment services reconciling himself to the status quo of the business world. Lan perceived herself as an "always match person" who would be needed by any institution.

4.1.2. Cultural identities

The five students also narrated their cultural identities. For example, An felt that her Chinese identity was her true self. In response to the question "What do you think you have become now?" she said:

> I can experience more now, I'm open to more em more activities, I learned more, but I know deep in my mind I'm a traditional Chinese, and I'll be HAPPier in that way, so that's I'll keep myself (Interview #4, 12 June, 2010).

Earlier, she had claimed that she had developed an "international perspective" (Interview #1, 10 November, 2009). She was no longer surprised by the presence of a foreigner on the street or in class as she felt a kind of transnational identity (Rampton, 2006; Warriner, 2007):

> this is a world, not a country, yeah, a world that involve different nations, people of different em different cultural background, yeah, people who speak different languages, who have different color of skin, and who may hold different beliefs or values (Interview #1, 10 November, 2009).

It seems that An was fusing her "international perspective" and her true Chinese self both of which co-existed with no apparent tension in between.

Mei and Nan were apparently assuming culture-free professional identities by embracing international business as competitive and being pragmatic about hegemonic practices in the business world. While Dong acknowledged the power

of English and the US dollar in international trade, he maintained his perception of himself as a Chinese with the ambition of using English to spread Chinese culture and serve a global cause. As a Chinese, Lan was aware of her cultural identity while being critical of foreign enterprises as she felt that she was given an inferior subject position and was exploited there. For example, she made this reflective account of her internship at a foreign enterprise:

> 我没有觉得我在变成他们中的一员，而是觉得是我是被他们剥削的一员，呵呵 … 尤其是跟那些外国人接触的时候，因为他本来你就是他付你钱，然后你要为他工作，所以就是地位上本来就他们已经高于你了，而且你语言上要讲他们的语言，就也是一种退让了已感觉上，就好像你的地位很低 [I didn't feel I was becoming one of them, instead I felt I was the one who was being exploited, haha … especially when I was in contact with those foreigners, because it was they who paid you, you worked for them, so regarding the status they were already higher than you, and you had to speak their language, this also felt like a concession, you just felt as if you had a very low status] (Interview #5, 3 July, 2010).

4.1.3. Gender identities

The focal students, in particular, Lan and An, also narrated their gender identities. An was aware of her gender identity and took it as a barrier to pursuing a career in business as she said:

> marketing and sales I think maybe is challenging and exciting but after a long time you'll be tired and it's not quite suitable for a girl or a person who may want a stable life, after years (Interview #4, 12 June, 2010).

Lan, however, was positive about her gender identity as she thought feminine features could be a source of advantage for females to beat their male rivals because:

> 女强人一定不是因为像男人所以才会成功，而是更会利用女性优势去击败自己的异性对手 [Iron ladies are successful not because they are like men but because they are good at using their advantages as women to beat their male rivals] (Journal Entry #4, July 2010).

Due to this perception of the secret for successful businesswomen, she was not following in the footsteps of her female peers to complain about gender discrimination in the corporate recruitment process or to compete with men in the business world.

Unlike An and Lan, the third focal female student Mei did not invoke gender identities. Nor did the two focal male students Dong and Nan. For Mei, gender may appear to be neutral in the workplace without noticing the gender discrimination

that has been reported in research (e.g. Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). Nan and Dong may not be concerned with a gender-related issue because they were, by default, in an advantageous position in the male-preferred job market. These three students may thus be reproducing hegemonic gender practices in the workplace which may be taken as their way of narrating their gender identities.

4.1.4. Student identities

The primary identity accessible to the Business English students was their institutionalised student identity. Lan, Mei, and Dong were fulfilling the institutionalised role of student. For example, Mei's primary concern in handling her assignments was to meet the requirements of the writing instructor and to produce safe papers as she said in her account of her objectives of writing a business plan assignment:

> I want to let him know that um what I have learned from his class, and I want to show a show a um business plan in a good order and good logic which he emphasized in his class, and which he um required for us (Interview #4, 5 July, 2010).

However, An was defiant. During Year 3, she had several arguments about the assignments with her writing instructor even though she said that she respected the instructor. She tended to produce types of texts she thought were more appropriate despite explicit instructions for her assignments. For example, she would rather fail or get a poor score for her business plan than meet her instructor's specific requirements such as the mission and vision statement being one-page long.

It is interesting to note the sources of the tensions between An and her writing instructor. One source may be her sudden awakening to being an individual for whom "[e]ntering university means little protection from parents and fighting for one's own future instead of just getting high marks" (Journal Entry, 29 March, 2010). Another one may be her (mis)conception of a major difference between academic writing and writing in the workplace. She did not accept her writing instructor's criticism of her shorter than required mission and vision statement in her business plan because

> it's a paper for a course in a college, it's not in the workplace … the the assignment is quite open, you can write whatever you like, but in the workplace, it's not, the boss told you the idea, and you write for HIM, so in this way, I will write as the boss instructs me to do, yeah, I will do according to HIS reading habits, or what he told me I will just follow it and do not have my creativity on this (Interview #5, 4 July, 2010).

This inclination may be deeply rooted in her understanding of university education. She held a consistent idea of the university being a "free environment"

(Interview #1, 10 November, 2009) which opened to students various "possibilities" of making their own choices and decisions (Interview #4, 12 June, 2010). She resented specialisation as something contrary to a university education. She challenged the programme goal of preparing students for foreign enterprises at IBSU:

> 我觉得就是…有一个缺点，就是给所有的学生都是固定的一个思维，思路，就是进外企，然后，进公司，进什么顶多进政府啊什么的，我觉得人生可以有还有很多，很多很多可能，为什么就是一定去做这个呢？[I feel there is a defect in IBSU, that is, it gives students one fixed mindset, train of thought, that is to get into foreign enterprises, then, get into companies, and next to the best choice, the government, and the like, I think life may have many, many possibilities, why should one be bound for this path?] (Interview #2, 30 December, 2009).

The series of tensions were thus more of a reflection of An's struggle with her perception of student identity: An's desire to be free to experience all-round growth versus preparation for a specialised field and pressure to converge to its conventions, which is the goal of the programme. Her explosive reaction to what happened in the business writing course signalled her frustration.

Interestingly, Nan regarded his writing instructor as a source of assistance assigning him the role of helping him perfect his writing in the business genres. He also sought for knowledge of the real world business practices such as extracurricular activities, internships, and hands-on experience of buying and selling stocks rather than whole-hearted devotion to the classroom remarking that he did not have much to lose when missing some classes (Interview #5, 4 July, 2010).

4.1.5. Interactions between multiple identities

There were intricate patterns of interaction among professional identities, gender identities, cultural identities, student identities, creating distinct configurations of identities for each of the five focal students. For example, cultural identities were subsumed by professional identities for Mei and Nan, were in tension with them for Dong and Lan, and co-existed in harmony for An.

Professional identities can be conducive to shaping student identities. For example, Mei set herself the professional goal of working for a prestigious foreign company. The goal had a significant impact on her experience of learning Business English. When she realised that high efficiency, competitiveness, and relationship were important to business, she made efforts to make herself more "extroverted" and to improve her communication skills (Interview #1, 25 November, 2009). She also took up the challenges of campaigning for the presidency of the student union at her university and of teaming up with students of different majors and personalities in the branding competition sponsored by L'OREAL, a top business

company in the world (Interview #2, 30 December, 2009). Lan perceived herself as "an 'always match' person … adaptable and can deal with all kinds of people … willing to accept various kinds of assignments" (Essay on Personal Niche, July 2010). This assumed professional identity gave her the peace of mind as a student of Business English and an "always match person" on the job.

Identities in a learning situation can be complex with some identities facilitating other identities, for example, student identities facilitating professional identities for all the five focal students, and other identities setting each other back as in the case of An whose gender identity prevented her from pursuing a career in marketing and sales and the case of Lan who was aware of the secret of successful women employees and decided not to follow the mainstream model of iron ladies. An's foregrounding of her student identity in writing business genres rather than highlighting professional identities caused the tension between her and the writing instructor. Dong, in another way, experienced internal struggle in his Business English education due to his emerging professional identities. Despite his mastery of technical and discursive competences that would allow him to play the professional role in international business, he was disillusioned by the contrasts he observed in the business world, in particular foreign enterprises in China, and opted not to pursue a career in it. The five focal students' trajectories were embedded in the interaction between professional identities, gender identities, cultural identities, and student identities in the students.

4.2. Discussion – multiple identities and learning needs

This article has demonstrated the complex identities that emerged from the Business English students' narratives. While attending their Business English programme, the students gained insights into the knowledge, discourse, and skills of the community of practice of international business, hence their "knowledgeably skilled identities" (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 55), or professional identities as they are referred to in this article. They also narrated their gender identities, cultural identities, and student identities. These identities interacted with the professional identities in complicated ways, setting each student apart from the other and making it compelling to address identities in the needs analysis for the students.

That the Business English students developed multiple identities is a positive learning outcome. Wenger (1998) argues that education differs from training in that it opens up trajectories. As the five focal students were expanding their identities either in relation to their target professional fields or their sense of their native culture, their identity formation and transformation may be described as a productive process (Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2007).

The interaction between the multiple identities bears witness to Hutchinson and Waters' (1987: 61) thoughtful observations that target needs do not equate with learning needs and that the "learners' motivation in the target situation will

not necessarily carry over to the ESP classroom". Learning needs seem to vary from time to time for the Business English students in accordance with their evolving and multiple identities. At the beginning of their Business English education, the students seemed to be making a unidirectional pursuit of a professional identity as international business professionals and were motivated to learn Business English as the route to the desired identity. However, they diverged from each other as they went along. What they wanted to learn differed from each other and from their earlier ambition. In terms of Dörnyei's (2009) L2 self theories, the students' Ideal L2 self and Ought-to L2 self were congruent at the beginning but were in tension at later stages, at least for some of the students, for example Dong, Lan, and An. If this change were observed and addressed, the students, at least An and Dong, could have had a more satisfying experience of learning Business English.

This study points to the need to consider the sociocultural context of learning, including Business English learning. Identities are developed not in a vacuum but are enabled and constrained by potentially competing discourses. For example, Dong's choice of opting out of international business proved that he might be playing with a few concurrent discourses such as the Utilitarian discourse of international business (Scollon & Scollon, 2001), the Confucian egalitarian discourse of 不患寡而患不均 [not concerned with being poor but with being ill-apportioned] (Confucius, 1998: 216), and possibly the social discourse circulating in contemporary Chinese society – the pursuit of equality and justice. The Confucian egalitarian discourse apparently prevailed in its interaction with Western-originated Utilitarian discourse in international business. It is, therefore, important to treat ESP students as people in a real world rather than idealised learners disassociated from their sociocultural context and to examine their investment in learning with reference to their social identities as Norton Peirce (1995) and Norton (2011) argue.

This study shows that identity is relevant to needs analysis and plays a significant role in student experiences. It corroborates Ortega (2009) who writes about language learning thus:

> For many, perhaps most additional second language learners, it is about succeeding in attaining material, symbolic and affective returns that they desire for themselves. It is also about being considered by others as worthy social beings. (2009: 250)

Identity is thus an important dimension of needs analysis and should be incorporated into any analysis of learner needs. As identities evolve, learning needs analysis should be duly responsive.

The difficulty involved in carrying out identity-relevant needs analysis for ESP practitioners has been recognised (Belcher & Lukkarila, 2011). This article provides a way of addressing this concern by showing the use of student profile,

narrative interviews, student journals, and writing about personal niche as part of the writing course in obtaining information on the multiple identities that were experienced by the students. While it is a valid critique that identity is more than "interpretive recounting" (Hyland, 2010: 162), this study suggests that narrative inquiry is an important approach to researching identity issues. While narrators give an account of their experiences, they represent to themselves and the researcher who they are and who they want to become. A narrative analysis can thus unveil how they (co-)talk their identities into being (Cortazzi, 2001).

5. CONCLUSION

This study indicates that when English learning takes place in an ESP setting, it is appropriate to consider the relation to the profession as a key dimension of learners and their identities, that is, identity is an important dimension of needs analysis. This study also suggests that identities relevant to Business English education are complex. In addition to professional identities, other identities such as gender identities, cultural identities, and institutional identities, are significant to Business English students. These identities interact in complicated ways which need to be addressed when investigating learner needs. Our appreciation of the multiple identities and their interplay enriches and deepens our understanding of the purposes and experiences of learning Business English, which will be invaluable information to contribute to Business English education. Effective management of the multiple identities by students may be the key to their productive learning.

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