

Narrative Identity Construction of Chinese Undergraduates in English under a Humanistic Exchange Framework

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Abstract: This study investigates how Chinese undergraduate students construct narrative identities in English within a humanistic exchange framework. Drawing on poststructuralist theories of identity and narrative inquiry methodology, the research examines the lived experiences of fifteen Chinese undergraduates enrolled in a humanities-oriented English program at a major Chinese university. Data were collected through semi-structured narrative interviews, reflective journals, and classroom discourse recordings over two academic semesters. The findings reveal that students engage in a multifaceted process of identity negotiation as they narrate personal experiences, cultural values, and intercultural encounters in English. Three dominant identity themes emerged from the data: the reflective self, the intercultural mediator, and the critical thinker. The humanistic exchange framework, which emphasizes empathy, dialogue, and mutual understanding, was found to facilitate deeper engagement with identity construction by providing students with a safe and supportive discursive space. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on second language identity by demonstrating how humanistic pedagogical principles can foster meaningful narrative identity work among Chinese English learners. Implications for curriculum design, teacher education, and intercultural communication pedagogy are discussed.

Keywords: Narrative Identity; Chinese Undergraduates; English Language Learning; Humanistic Exchange; Intercultural Communication; Poststructuralist Identity Theory.

1. Introduction

The relationship between language learning and identity construction has attracted increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades. Researchers across applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and education have recognized that learning a second or foreign language is not merely a cognitive or linguistic endeavor but also a deeply personal and social process through which learners negotiate who they are and who they wish to become. For Chinese undergraduates studying English in China's mainland, this process is particularly complex, as it involves navigating between the values, worldviews, and communicative norms embedded in their first language and those associated with the target language [1].

Narrative, as both a mode of thought and a form of discourse, plays a central role in this identity construction process [2]. When individuals tell stories about their experiences, they do not merely report events but actively interpret and give meaning to those events, thereby constructing a coherent sense of self. In the context of English language education, narrative activities such as personal storytelling, reflective writing, and dialogic exchange provide learners with opportunities to explore and articulate their identities in the target language. These activities become especially powerful when situated within a humanistic educational framework that values the whole person and prioritizes empathy, respect, and authentic communication.

Despite the growing interest in narrative identity in language education, relatively few studies have examined how Chinese undergraduates specifically construct narrative identities in English, particularly within a humanistic pedagogical context. Most existing research on second language identity among Chinese learners has focused on

study-abroad contexts, graduate students, or English as a medium of instruction settings, leaving a gap in our understanding of how domestic undergraduate learners engage in narrative identity work in their home institutional environment.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the narrative identity construction of Chinese undergraduates in English within a humanistic exchange framework. The humanistic exchange framework adopted in this study draws on principles of humanistic education, including learner-centeredness, experiential learning, and the cultivation of empathy and critical awareness. The framework is operationalized through a series of classroom activities designed to encourage students to share personal narratives, engage in cross-cultural dialogue, and reflect on their own cultural assumptions and values.

The study is guided by the following research questions. First, how do Chinese undergraduates construct narrative identities in English within a humanistic exchange framework. Second, what identity themes and positions emerge from their narrative practices. Third, how does the humanistic exchange framework shape the process and outcomes of narrative identity construction.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Narrative Identity in Second Language Education

The concept of narrative identity refers to the internalized and evolving story that individuals construct about themselves, integrating past experiences, present circumstances, and anticipated futures into a coherent sense of self. This concept has its roots in philosophical and psychological traditions that view narrative as a fundamental

mode of human understanding. In the field of second language acquisition and education, narrative identity has been adopted as a lens through which to examine how language learners make sense of their experiences and position themselves in relation to multiple linguistic and cultural communities [3].

From a poststructuralist perspective, identity is understood not as a fixed or essential attribute but as a dynamic, socially constructed, and multiply situated phenomenon. Language learners are seen as active agents who negotiate their identities through discourse, drawing on available linguistic and cultural resources to position themselves in particular ways. Narrative inquiry, as a research methodology, is well suited to capturing this dynamic process because it attends to the temporal, contextual, and relational dimensions of identity construction.

Recent research has demonstrated the value of narrative approaches for understanding the identity experiences of language learners in diverse contexts. Studies have shown how learners use narratives to negotiate conflicting identities, make sense of critical incidents, and imagine future selves. Narrative identity research has also revealed the ways in which institutional, ideological, and social forces shape the identity options available to learners, highlighting the unequal distribution of linguistic and symbolic capital in multilingual societies [4].

In the Chinese context, narrative studies of English learners have explored how individuals navigate tensions between their Chinese cultural identity and the global identities associated with English proficiency. Research has documented how Chinese students experience identity shifts as they move between Chinese-speaking and English-speaking environments, and how they use narrative to reconcile these shifts with their sense of self.

2.2. Humanistic Education and Language Learning

Humanistic education, broadly defined, is an approach to teaching and learning that emphasizes the development of the whole person, including cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical dimensions. Rooted in the work of educational philosophers and psychologists, humanistic education prioritizes learner autonomy, experiential learning, meaningful interpersonal relationships, and the cultivation of empathy and self-awareness. In the context of language education, humanistic approaches have been advocated as a means of creating more engaging, personally meaningful, and transformative learning experiences [5].

The humanistic exchange framework adopted in this study extends the principles of humanistic education to the specific context of intercultural English language learning. It emphasizes dialogue, mutual understanding, and the respectful exchange of perspectives across cultural boundaries. The framework is informed by the recognition that language learning in a globalized world requires not only linguistic competence but also intercultural sensitivity, critical awareness, and the ability to engage with others as whole persons with complex identities, histories, and values.

Within this framework, narrative activities serve as a key pedagogical tool. By inviting students to share personal stories and engage in dialogic reflection, the humanistic exchange framework creates a space in which identity exploration becomes possible. The emphasis on empathy and mutual respect helps to reduce the anxiety and defensiveness

that can inhibit self-expression in a foreign language, while the focus on authentic communication encourages students to move beyond formulaic language use and engage more deeply with the target language [6].

Research on humanistic approaches in Chinese English education has shown promising results in terms of student motivation, engagement, and overall language development. Studies have found that Chinese learners respond positively to humanistic pedagogies that acknowledge their emotional and personal needs, and that such approaches can foster greater willingness to communicate, deeper cultural understanding, and more meaningful learning experiences.

2.3. Identity Construction Among Chinese English Learners

The study of identity construction among Chinese English learners has been a growing area of inquiry. Scholars have investigated how Chinese students negotiate their linguistic, cultural, and academic identities as they engage with English in various educational settings. This body of research has revealed that identity construction among Chinese English learners is shaped by a range of factors, including language ideologies, educational policies, peer and teacher relationships, media exposure, and personal aspirations [7].

One prominent theme in this literature is the tension between learners' desire to achieve high levels of English proficiency and their commitment to maintaining a strong Chinese cultural identity. Some studies have found that Chinese students experience a sense of cultural ambivalence or hybridity as they become more proficient in English, while others have documented strategies that learners use to integrate their multiple identities into a coherent self-narrative. The concept of the bicultural or multicultural self has been particularly useful for understanding these dynamics [8].

Another important theme concerns the role of investment in identity construction. Drawing on the work of scholars who conceptualize language learning as a social practice, researchers have examined how Chinese students' investment in English is shaped by their imagined identities and their desire to access social, economic, and cultural capital. This perspective highlights the agency of learners in constructing their identities, while also acknowledging the structural constraints that shape their choices and possibilities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry design, which is well suited to exploring the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of language learners. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to attend to the ways in which individuals construct coherent accounts of their experiences, positioning themselves in relation to others and to broader social and cultural narratives. The study was conducted over two academic semesters at a comprehensive university in eastern China.

3.2. Participants

Fifteen Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in a humanities-oriented English program were purposefully selected to participate in the study. The participants were second- and third-year students with intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency levels. They represented a range of regional backgrounds, academic interests, and prior

intercultural experiences. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect their anonymity.

3.3. The Humanistic Exchange Framework in Practice

The humanistic exchange framework was implemented through a specially designed course module that integrated narrative activities into the existing English curriculum. The module included personal storytelling sessions in which students shared narratives about formative life experiences, cultural traditions, and intercultural encounters. It also included dialogic exchange activities in which students engaged in paired and small-group discussions about cultural values, social issues, and personal beliefs. Reflective writing assignments asked students to compose narrative essays exploring their evolving sense of self in relation to English and to the cultures associated with the language. A safe space protocol was established at the beginning of the course, emphasizing principles of respect, confidentiality, and nonjudgmental listening.

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected from multiple sources to ensure the richness and trustworthiness of the findings. Semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with each participant at the beginning, middle, and end of the study period. The interview protocol invited participants to narrate their experiences of learning English, their perceptions of themselves as English users, and their reflections on the humanistic exchange activities. Reflective journals were collected at regular intervals throughout the two semesters. Classroom discourse was audio-recorded during selected narrative and dialogic exchange sessions. All data were transcribed and translated where necessary, with member checking conducted to ensure accuracy.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a combination of thematic narrative analysis and positioning analysis. Thematic narrative analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns in the participants' narratives, focusing on the content of their identity constructions. Positioning analysis was employed to examine how participants positioned themselves and were positioned by others in their narrative accounts, attending to the discursive strategies through which identity claims were made, negotiated, and contested. The analysis proceeded iteratively, moving between individual narratives and cross-case comparisons to identify both shared patterns and unique variations.

4. Findings

4.1. The Reflective Self

One of the most prominent identity themes to emerge from the data was what this study terms the reflective self. Many participants reported that engaging in narrative activities within the humanistic exchange framework prompted them to think more deeply about their own values, beliefs, and life experiences than they typically did in conventional English classes. The process of composing and sharing personal narratives in English encouraged a kind of introspective engagement that went beyond language practice to encompass genuine self-exploration.

Participants described how the act of narrating formative experiences, such as childhood memories, family relationships, and educational turning points, in English required them to make deliberate choices about which aspects of their lives to foreground and how to frame these experiences for an audience. This process of selection and framing was itself an act of identity construction, as students crafted particular versions of themselves through their narrative choices. Several participants noted that telling their stories in English gave them a sense of distance from their experiences that facilitated reflection and self-understanding.

The reflective dimension of narrative identity construction was further supported by the humanistic exchange framework's emphasis on empathetic listening and nonjudgmental response. Participants reported feeling more willing to share personal and sometimes vulnerable stories because they trusted that their classmates would respond with understanding and respect. This sense of safety enabled deeper levels of self-disclosure and reflection than might otherwise have been possible in a language classroom.

4.2. The Intercultural Mediator

A second major identity theme was the intercultural mediator, referring to participants' construction of themselves as individuals capable of bridging cultural differences and facilitating understanding between Chinese and other cultural perspectives. Through the dialogic exchange activities, participants had opportunities to discuss cultural values, social norms, and everyday practices with peers who held different viewpoints. These discussions often prompted participants to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and to develop more nuanced understandings of both their own and others' cultural frameworks.

Several participants narrated experiences in which they had served as informal interpreters or cultural mediators in real-life intercultural encounters, drawing on their English skills and cultural knowledge to help bridge misunderstandings. These narratives constructed a sense of identity that went beyond simple English proficiency to encompass a broader set of intercultural competencies, including cultural sensitivity, perspective-taking, and communicative flexibility. The humanistic exchange framework, with its emphasis on empathy and dialogue, provided a supportive context for developing and articulating this mediator identity.

4.3. The Critical Thinker

The third identity theme that emerged from the data was the critical thinker. Many participants described how the narrative and reflective activities in the humanistic exchange framework encouraged them to question taken-for-granted assumptions about language, culture, and identity. Through the process of narrating and reflecting on their experiences, students developed a more critical awareness of the power dynamics, ideologies, and social structures that shape language learning and use.

Participants narrated moments of critical awakening in which they recognized how their own attitudes toward English and Chinese were influenced by broader social and economic forces. Some students described how the humanistic exchange activities helped them move beyond an instrumental view of English as a tool for career advancement to a more nuanced understanding of English as a medium for self-expression, intercultural dialogue, and social participation. This shift in perspective was associated with a

more confident and autonomous sense of self as an English user.

The critical thinker identity was not without tensions, however. Some participants expressed ambivalence about the role of English in China, noting the potential for English dominance to marginalize other languages and cultural traditions. These critical reflections added complexity and depth to participants narrative identities, demonstrating that identity construction is an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a fixed outcome.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that narrative identity construction among Chinese undergraduates in English is a complex, multidimensional process that is deeply influenced by the pedagogical context in which it occurs. The humanistic exchange framework played a crucial role in facilitating this process by providing a discursive space characterized by trust, empathy, and authentic communication. Within this space, participants were able to explore and articulate aspects of their identities that might have remained unexpressed in more conventional, skills-focused English classrooms.

The three identity themes identified in this study, the reflective self, the intercultural mediator, and the critical thinker, are not mutually exclusive but rather represent overlapping and interconnected dimensions of narrative identity. Participants often moved fluidly between these positions within a single narrative, reflecting the dynamic and situational nature of identity construction. This fluidity is consistent with poststructuralist understandings of identity as multiple, shifting, and contextually contingent.

The findings also highlight the importance of the affective dimension of narrative identity construction. The humanistic exchange framework emphasis on empathy, respect, and nonjudgmental listening created conditions in which students felt safe enough to engage in genuine self-disclosure and critical reflection. This affective safety was identified by participants as a key factor enabling deeper and more authentic identity work. The study thus underscores the need for language educators to attend not only to the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of learning but also to the emotional and relational conditions that support meaningful identity exploration.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on second language identity by demonstrating how humanistic pedagogical principles can be integrated with narrative approaches to create a powerful framework for identity construction. The findings suggest that when learners are given opportunities to narrate their experiences within a supportive and dialogic environment, they are able to construct richer, more complex, and more agentic identities than when identity work is left to emerge incidentally from language instruction.

The study also has practical implications for English language education in China and similar contexts. Curriculum designers and teachers may consider incorporating narrative activities and humanistic principles into their programs to foster not only language development but also personal growth, intercultural competence, and critical awareness.

Teacher education programs can prepare future educators to create classroom environments that support narrative identity construction by emphasizing skills in facilitation, empathetic communication, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored the narrative identity construction of Chinese undergraduates in English within a humanistic exchange framework. The findings reveal that students engage in a rich and multifaceted process of identity negotiation through narrative practices, constructing themselves as reflective, interculturally aware, and critically minded individuals. The humanistic exchange framework was found to be a powerful facilitator of this process, creating conditions of trust, empathy, and authentic dialogue that supported deeper and more meaningful identity work.

The study contributes to the growing body of research on narrative identity in second language education by providing empirical evidence from the Chinese undergraduate context, a population that has been relatively underexplored in the literature. It also offers a practical model for integrating humanistic principles with narrative pedagogy in English language education. Future research could extend this work by examining the long-term effects of humanistic narrative pedagogy on identity development, exploring the role of digital narrative practices, and comparing identity construction across different institutional and cultural contexts.

The limitations of this study include its focus on a single institutional context and a relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The self-report nature of the interview and journal data may also introduce social desirability bias. Nevertheless, the in-depth qualitative approach provides rich insights into the processes and meanings of narrative identity construction that quantitative methods alone cannot capture.

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