The Journey Toward English Reading Literacy for Professional Purposes

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Abstract
The study aims to explore the EFL learner’s developmental process of English reading literacy for professional purposes. Drawing on Gee’s (2001b) sociocognitive perspective on reading, Peirce’s (1995) theory of social identity, and Wenger’s (1998) social ecology of identity, the research investigated how a novice became a competent English for Specific Purpose (ESP) reader. By purposeful sampling, a pharmaceutical product agent in her middle adulthood was invited to take part in the study. The experienced ESP reader received four Mandarin-based life-story interviews between October 2007 and February 2008. The findings indicated that the participant’s investment in literacy and ESP reading was heavily involved with the identity that she had acquired in the family. It was also shown that at the work site, the participant’s ESP reading proficiency varied with her positioning in her community: at the periphery, she experienced tremendous difficulties while at the core of the community, she demonstrated high level ESP reading proficiency along with full membership. The study suggests the need for a more comprehensive reading theory to capture the dynamism of reader identity. Pedagogical implications relate to the need for teachers to raise ESP readers’ awareness of their positions and orientations in the literacy journey.

Key Words: second language reading, English for Specific Purposes, Discourse, identity
If we want to study reading, we must focus on one of the many literacy Discourses. And this is to focus on the world of social practices, that is, people and things in relationship, not on heads. Gee (1992, p. 80)

We have crossed into a millennium in which English serves as an important language for “plug [ging] into the international grid of business and finance” (Pakir, 1999, p. 107). As a lingua franca, English has become a contact language for a wide range of communities given forms of “globalization [are] marked by new technology, transnational economic and production relationships, and the porous nature of nation-state boundaries” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 197). In this context, most professionals in Taiwan are required to read English at reasonably high levels of proficiency in order to survive and thrive in their careers. Due to its close tie to globalization of information exchange, communication, and education, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has flourished and become an international phenomenon (Belcher, 2006). For these reasons, the study reported here aims to investigate the developmental process of ESP reading of EFL learners in Taiwan.

During the last 30 years, knowledge of reading, including second language (L2) reading, has grown rapidly. For example, Just and Carpenter (1980) provided evidence in support of word-level reading. Anderson (1984) moved the role of reader schema, or knowledge of the world, to the foreground to arrive at an understanding of readers’ text comprehension. In L2 reading, Clarke (1980) introduced the notion of language threshold to indicate that a threshold level of L2 proficiency has a role in L2 reading ability. In the same vein, Alderson (1984)
raised questions about whether L2 reading was more a reading problem or a language problem. In addition, we now know that fluent reading requires a large recognition vocabulary as well as both lower and higher level processing; reading strategy instruction could benefit certain types of students; different reading purposes involve different reading processes; and personal motivation, attitude, interest and other factors may be at play in text processing under certain circumstances (Bernhardt, 2005).

In spite of the rich base of knowledge now established, reading research reports have been criticized for missing the forest for the trees (e.g., Gee, 2001a). The componential approach of much reading research has been one focus of criticism. Adding up bits of knowledge about individual variables cannot give a fully fleshed out picture of any reader. Since readers are constantly on the move in culture and in time-space, the whole reader is always bigger than the sum of the parts. The heavy reliance on psycholinguistic tasks has been the second focus of criticism. In this tradition, participants tend to be viewed as objects that are submissive to researchers’ manipulation. For instance, when participants fail to follow the task instructions of a study, they are routinely excluded from a quantitative analysis. In this way, subjects are treated as objects, and denied the agency attributed to true subjects (Roebuck, 2000).

It is indeed true that at the moment that a reader engages with a text, reading is a cognitive activity. However, it is not possible to understand a longer developmental process of a reader without recognizing social influences on literacy development (Grabe, 2002). In other words, to know what it takes to read well, the reading researcher has to acknowledge that reading is a long term
developmental process, which involves both historical and social influences. In recent years, calls have been made for more reading research to account for contextual factors involved in reading. However, few ESP studies have responded to this call. Two exceptions are Huang’s (2006) and Malcolm’s (2004) studies. Huang used questionnaires to gain insight into 212 Taiwanese business majors’ motivation during EAP reading. Descriptive statistics of the study indicated that learners were more willing to read when teachers were available for consultation; key points were highlighted in textbooks; and relevant reading skills had been taught. Malcolm interviewed a Saudi Arabian medical student to explore the EFL learner’s beliefs. The participant’s first-person account showed that reading is the key to his L2 development. Both Huang’s and Malcolm’s studies focus on readers in the school settings. However, ESP reading in the workplace has not received due attention, despite some exploratory studies conducted using a componential approach (e.g., Pugh & Ulijn, 1984).

To understand the reader as a whole person, the present study adopts the life-story approach to depict a holistic picture of an ESP reader’s literacy journey. Gee’s (2001b) sociocognitive perspective on reading was first used as a lens to view reading as a social practice. The model posits that language is ingrained with Discourse (with a big D), namely language is used to enact activities and identities. Peirce’s (1995) concept of investment is also used. It conceives of an L2 learner as one with a complex social history and multiple desires. Furthermore, the study borrows Wenger’s (1998) social ecology of identity, which addresses identities in terms of an interplay of identification and negotiability. Two research questions were investigated in the study:

1. Prior to ESP reading, what language learning experiences
does the learner have?

2. How is the learner’s ESP reading literacy situated in his/her working and living experiences?

The term “reading literacy” in the research question is used because of the belief that there is no artificial separation between what is in a text, the roles of readers, and the context in which the text is processed (Johns, 1997). The term intends to integrate varied social, historical, and cognitive influences on readers, instead of viewing reading as an individual activity. When the term “reading” is used in the paper, it refers to this more inclusive concept.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Social Languages and Discourses

Two of the main components of Gee’s (2001b) sociocognitive perspective of reading are social languages and Discourses. Social languages are “ways with words (oral and written) within Discourses that relate form and meaning as to express specific socially situated identities and activities” (Gee, 2001b, p. 126). Social languages are integrally connected to the characteristic social activities, value-laden perspectives, and socially situated identities of particular groups of people or communities of practice. They tie text comprehension closely to people’s experiences of situated action in the material and social world. As illustrated by Gee (2001b), comprehending the word “coffee” is associated with specific patterns of experiences rooted in particular sorts of contexts, such as coffee as a liquid, coffee as berries on bushes, coffee as a flavor in ice-cream amongst other
experiences. As reading is rooted in the connections of text and social worlds, what matters to reading literacy learning is social languages, rather than a closed system of words or grammar.

Gee argues that to learn to read a certain type of text one has to be socialized into a Discourse. He suggests thinking of Discourses as “identity kits” (Gee, 2001b, p. 719). Metaphorically speaking, each person has a tool kit full of specific devices, such as ways with words, deeds, thoughts, values, objects, tools, and technologies. These devices enable us to enact a specific identity and engage in specific activities associated with the identity. Gee also makes a distinction between primary Discourses and secondary Discourses. Primary Discourse refers to those in which people are apprenticed early in life during the primary socialization as members of their families; secondary Discourses, on the other hand, are those which we acquire when we enter the “public” world beyond our families, such as the army, job sites, business, and professions. Working with Gee’s perspective, this study views the reader’s family as primary Discourse while literacy practices in the school and workplace are viewed as secondary Discourses, in which both L1 and L2 are involved.

Identity and Investment

Our understanding of the relationships between language and identity has been fine-tuned by poststructuralist approaches, in which learners are perceived as individual agents whose multiple identities are subject to change over time (Pavlenko, 2002). Drawing on the poststructuralist conception of social identity, Peirce (1995) proposes a theory of social identity and investment. Unlike instrumental motivation, the notion of investment conceives of the learner as having
a complex social history. The notion presupposes that when language learners use the target language they are “constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Norton, 2000, p. 11). The concept of investment relies heavily on Bourdieu’s (1977) economic metaphor, cultural capital, which refers to knowledge and modes of thoughts that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms. In a given social context, some forms of cultural capital have a higher exchange value than others. Therefore, Peirce (1995) argues:

[I]f learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on that investment—a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources. (p. 17)

Social Ecology of Identity

Wenger (1998) argues that there is a profound connection between the negotiation of identities and the formation of a community of practice. In terms of practice, it is about meaning as an experience of everyday life while living is a constant process of the negotiation of meaning, a process constituted of participation and reification. Participation refers to an encompassing process of being an active participant in the practices of a social community and constructing identities in relation to the community. On the other hand, reification is about “the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience” (Wenger, 1998, p. 58).
It should be noted that participation and reification come as a pair and are mutually complementary. As noted by Wenger (1998), a Constitution is a form of a citizenry. The production of such a reification is important for citizens to bring together multiple perspectives and interpretations that participation entails. Yet, without the citizens’ participation, the Constitution is empty.

In addition, Wenger (1998) points out that we define ourselves not only through the practices we engage in but also through practices we do not engage in. That is, as a source of identity formation, non-participation is as important as participation. In our life, it is inevitable that we will pass into new communities of practice and experience non-participation at the boundary. The notion of boundary here points to discontinuities encountered by newcomers as a result of their lack of a shared learning history with the insiders of the community. To create continuities, one may count on brokering and boundary objects. Brokering refers to the act of introducing some element of one practice into another; it is a direct connection to the community. Boundary objects provide reificative connections which transcend the spatiotemporal limitations inherent in participation. As illustrated by Wenger (1998), “[w]e cannot be all over the world, but we can read the newspaper. We cannot live in the past, but we can wonder at monuments left behind by long-gone practices.” (p. 110)

There are two cases of the interaction of participation and non-participation: peripherality and marginality. According to Wenger (1998), “whether non-participation becomes peripherality or marginality depends on relations of participation that render non-participation either enabling or problematic.” (p. 167) In the case of peripherality, non-participation is enabling. It is an opportunity for
learning. For instance, if a novice is trying to become a member of a certain community, realization of inability to understand a conversation between old-timers may contribute greatly to the new member’s sense of self (Wenger, 1998). In this case, participation is enabled by non-participation and might lead to full participation. In contrast, when participation is restricted by non-participation, the non-participation is problematic and causes marginality, which prevents full participation. For instance, if women seeking for equal opportunity are constantly pushed back into identities of non-participation, marginality arises and leads them either to non-membership or a marginal position (Wenger, 1998).

**METHODOLOGY**

**Data Collection Tool**

This study employs the method of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Specifically, the tradition of life-story research is followed. A life story is defined as a narrative about a specific and significant aspect of a person’s life in either oral or written form covering all or most of a life (Chase, 2005). The main data collection tool in this study was a life story interview protocol informed by the works of Belcher and Connor (2001), Ivanic (1998), McAdams (1993), and Lu (2005). The protocol was developed through two pilot studies conducted by the researcher in the spring and summer of 2007. The core parts of the instrument included (1) A Self Description, (2) Landscapes of English Learning, (3) Landscapes of English Reading, (4) A Profile of a Professional, (5) Landscapes of English Reading for
Professional Purposes, and (6) Themes of the Life story.

The Participant

In October, 2007, I contacted the participant of this study, Wen-Li\(^1\), who was recruited via purposeful sampling. She met the pre-determined criteria, namely she was an individual who (1) is in middle adulthood, (2) has received her primary and secondary education in Taiwan, (3) is a professional and experienced ESP reader, and (4) acknowledges that ESP reading is of great importance to her career. Middle-age was a criterion because it was assumed that people at this age are more able to conceive their lives as a full-fledged and integrated narrative (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). In the study, middle adulthood was operationally defined as the years between 30 and old age. This definition was informed by Erickson’s psychosocial theory (Bee & Boyd, 2002).

The first meeting with Wen-Li took place in a hotel lobby during a business trip. We took advantage of the initial small talk to help establish rapport. I explained to Wen-Li the purpose of my study, guaranteed that her identity would be protected, and that her story would be used exclusively for academic research. Wen-Li was 43 years old, giving an impression of being candid and eloquent. Since she took her bachelor degree in veterinary medicine, she has been in jobs in relation to her major. When we first met, Wen-Li had been in her profession for 19 years. At that time, she ran a company with a business partner. Her duties included importing animal drugs from foreign countries and promoting their sales in Taiwan. She reported that she had engaged in ESP reading for 24 years.

\(^1\) This is a pseudonym selected by the participant.
Data Collection and Sources

After giving formal written consent to participate in this study, Wen-Li began to unfold her life story in Mandarin, with occasional code switches to Taiwanese and English. I delved into her past via four interviews, conducted on October 23, November 13, December 19 of 2007 and January 21 of 2008. Except for the initial interview, which was conducted in a hotel lobby, the interviews took place in Wen-Li’s house because the location was good for producing high quality audio-recordings. The total length of the interviews was eight hours and 35 minutes. They resulted in an account of 192 single spaced pages. The verbatim transcripts served as the main data source for this study. Other data sources included entries from the researcher’s reflexive journal, a copy of Wen-Li’s magazine related to animal raising, some of her email exchanges with clients, photographs of the gold medals Wen-Li won for career excellence, and an interview with our common friend Xu. Xu recommended Wen-Li to me as a research participant. Xu had co-worked with Wen-Li in a branch of an established international pharmaceutical company in which ESP reading was a must. Xu reported that Wen-Li had high level ESP reading proficiency; therefore, she recommended Wen-Li to me when she learned that I was conducting a study on ESP reading. After Wen-Li’s life story was finished at the end of 2008, a hard copy was mailed to her to check whether her character was misrepresented. The participant did not raise issues in this regard.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Wen-Li’s story was read initially from a holistic content-perspective. I analyzed the meaning of the part of the
narrative “in light of content that emerges from the rest of the narrative or in the context of the story in its entirety” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Ziber, 1998, p. 13). The data analysis process was recursive and involved dialogical listening to voices of the narrator, the theoretical framework, and my reflective monitoring of the act of reading and interpretation of the field text (Lieblich et al., 1998). The verbatim account was repeatedly read with a focus on the transition from primary Discourse to secondary Discourse, namely from family to school and workplace.

The theme of Wen-Li’s narratives was determined to be subsumed under a Chinese expression: “In the book resides a gold house.” The saying places particular emphasis on the promise that hard work in reading pays off, bringing the reader material rewards such as fame and wealth. To investigate the research questions of the current study, Wen-Li’s story was organized into two themes, i.e., “experiencing early language learning” and “becoming an ESP reader.”

THE LIFE STORY: “IN THE BOOK RESIDES A GOLD HOUSE”

Experiencing Early Language Learning

The third daughter overweight. Wen-Li was born in 1965 in a rural area of Northern Taiwan. She was the third child of a traditional Taiwanese family. Her mother shouldered the responsibility of giving birth to a male child to pass down the family name. Unfortunately, this family expectation was not met until the mother gave birth to the sixth child. When she was pregnant with Wen-Li, she was pacified by the thought that the baby expected must be a male. Wen-Li reported
that upon her birth, as a newborn, she was greeted with a sharp exclamation: “How come it is not a boy!”  

(2007/10/23) This story was told to Wen-Li again and again throughout her childhood. She recalled:

Since I was a child, a part of me asked me to assume a vital role of the family. Although I am the third daughter, I now take care of my parents like the first son in a family in many ways, especially in the aspect of monetary support. (2007/10/23)

During Wen-Li’s childhood, her father was the only bread winner. As a local governmental employee, he counted on his low income to feed his parents and his family of eight. Wen-Li remembered that when the meals were served, she had to snatch food in a whiz; otherwise, the dishes would be devoured by her siblings in no time. In spite of pinched finances, Wen-Li’s parents saved most of their limited resources to pamper the only boy in the family. In protest against this domestic injustice, one of Wen-Li’s younger sisters isolated herself from the family for years.

Since childhood, Wen-Li was overweight, which denied her a chance to be an adorable girl. Her physical image was projected distinctly in an incident in which Wen-Li’s dog attacked a woman in the neighborhood. Wen-Li reported that upon learning the accident, her mother rushed to Wen-Li and snapped: “You set the dog upon the woman, didn’t you? The woman told me a very, very ugly and fat girl was on the spot when she was under attack. It’s you! Right?” (2007/10/23)

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2 The Mandarin-based interviews were translated into English by the researcher.
Although Wen-Li was plain in appearance, she distinguished herself by her good memory. She recalled that in her childhood she could memorize texts effortlessly, which was an advantage for her academic studies. Her father noticed her good scores and bragged about them in public to flatter himself. To guarantee her academic excellence, he paid extra attention to her. If Wen-Li did not do her homework after school, he would coerce her into it by either unremitting scolding or empty threats, for example, that he would burn her treasured textbooks. Deeming her father as the sun of her universe, Wen-Li always took his words seriously and fretted in the shadows of pain and anxiety.

**A craving for a change.** Wen-Li was sensitive and voiceless in the first three years of her primary school life. She noticed that some of her peers seemed to be more knowledgeable about the world. Most of them were from affluent families and therefore had ready access to information resources. Deep in her heart, Wen-Li wanted to be as competent as they were one day. She happened to find that the dictionary was an affordable tool to which she had access. After that, she spent days and nights reading and studying her dictionary to gulp down knowledge just as a sponge sucked up liquid.

In fourth grade, the little girl was urged by a strong desire for a change. She told herself: “I want to do something different” (2007/10/23). Specifically, she wanted to have her own voice; she refused to submit to her parents and teachers meekly. To this end, she joined a speech club to obtain opportunities to express her own opinions.

When Wen-Li was a sixth grader, a dramatic incident occurred. One day the homeroom teacher introduced a new Chinese character
together with its pronunciation. Wen-Li realized that the pronunciation was incorrect. She raised her hand and pointed out the mistake on the blackboard. Panic-stricken by the unusual behavior, the teacher fumbled for a dictionary, hoping her authority was supported by the little book. Wen-Li took out her dictionary, of which she had had so much intimate knowledge, walked straight toward the teacher, and showed her the very entry. The teacher was dumbfounded. Although Wen-Li suspected that she fell into disfavor as a result of the incident, the victory strengthened her faith in studying the dictionary.

**An avid but baffled reader.** In spite of her academic excellence, Wen-Li described her reading experiences in primary school as frustrating and confusing. Surprisingly, her bewilderment was caused by her avid reading: as her world knowledge failed to grow at the same pace, her eager reading created a wide gap of text understanding. She noted:

> While I was studying the dictionary, very often I bumped into things I didn’t understand. A prime example was words carrying negative connotations. School teachers in general instructed us in positive words only. To a third grader like me, the meaning of a negative term like *jian yin* (adultery) would remain vague and elusive for at least five years. (2007/10/23)

The same problem also plagued her in her fifth grade when she followed her adolescent sisters to read Chiung-Yao’s romance.

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3 Chiung-Yao is a well-known writer of romances in Chinese-speaking communities; her name is viewed as an equivalent to her novels. In the text, I spell the author’s name as what is posted at her website http://www.chiungyao.com.tw/ retrieved on February 8, 2008.
I started to read Chiung-Yao after I had read most of the books in the tiny school library. Although I knew each character, I hardly understood what the book was about. I felt very frustrated, very, very frustrated. Why? Why was I troubled by the feeling which I had not experienced when reading “Snow White?” I got completely lost in reading Chiung-Yao. There was no fun in reading the romance at all; it brought me tremendous perplexity. As I felt confused, I tried to read more to facilitate my understanding. It turned out that the more volumes I read, the more my frustrations. (2007/10/23)

In retrospect, Wen-Li compared her negative experience of reading with Health Education instruction in the junior high. She concluded that the latter was less troubled, however. For her, the course at least gave hints to save knowledge beyond comprehension under a category called “sex.” But Chiung-Yao’s books or terms like jian yin were totally opaque to her.

Unpleasant experiences of border crossing. After primary school graduation, Wen-Li was sent to a private junior high school located in Taipei city mainly because her father did not trust public school education. Her father shared the common belief that college education was a ladder to social mobility. He assumed that his daughter would be better trained at the private school in test-taking strategies, thereby having a better chance to succeed in the entrance exams of senior high schools and colleges.

In her first year at the urban school, Wen-Li was disoriented. When looking back, she gave three reasons to explain her maladjustment. First of all, she noticed that she was from a lower economic class than
that of her new schoolmates. The disparity discouraged her from starting a new life. Secondly, Wen-Li had no friendship network in the new school as most of her old peers went to public schools in her hometown. Worst of all, after school, her father continued with a long litany of complaints about the high cost of her tuition. In these circumstances, Wen-Li was, in her own words, “dim in the first year about everything” (2007/11/13). Her academic performance suffered greatly. She recalled a bad experience with a harsh Chinese teacher who humiliated her in class by shouting at her: “How old are you? How come you asked such a stupid question?” (2007/11/13)

An English learner enlightened. Wen-Li’s English learning in the first year was also unproductive. She said, “I got totally lost. I did not realize how English letters strung up to form a word” (2007/10/23). However, in the second year, she had an experience of illumination:

I had this English teacher, who enlightened me by saying “English is like math. English has its formula. Grammar is its formula. If something is changed on one side, others have to be changed on the other.” Somehow, I suddenly realize what was going on in English. At that moment I had the feeling that the power was on. (2007/11/13)

A light in my head was switched on. Miraculously, the mental blocks against learning receded all at once. Ever since, English learning has become effortless to me; I took pleasure in it. I believe it is the understanding that brought about the joy. (2007/11/13)

Due to her success in the joint entrance examination, Wen-Li went to one of the most prestigious girls’ senior high schools in Taipei.
city. Like the other senior high schools at the time, the school placed much emphasis on English education but provided little opportunities for English use. By chance, Wen-Li followed one of her schoolmates to the publisher of Studio Classroom,\(^4\) in which she acquired the chance to speak English with native speakers. She commented “I had never used English before I went to Studio Classroom. In it, for the first time, I realized that English was not merely a subject to be tested on; it also served the purpose for communication” (2007/11/13).

**Becoming an ESP Reader**

_A new hand at ESP reading._ Wen-Li was admitted to the department of plant biology of a prominent university in 1992. In the second year, she transferred to the department of veterinary medicine via a competitive test. In spite of her success, she did not devote herself to the academic studies of her discipline. Wen-Li skipped classes very often, for example, she attended her biochemistry class no more than two or three times. Wen-Li told a significant story about this class. The night before her final biochemistry test, she read notes taken by her classmates, only to find them unintelligible. Desperately, she turned to the English-medium biochemistry textbook and stayed up whole night to read the large volume. She recalled:

> While I was reading, very often, a term like Oligo-whatever would jump out in the way to intimidate me. But I kept reading. I read, read, and read until very late. Eventually, I realized the keywords were of great importance. I knew I should ignore everything but the

\(^4\) Classroom Studio is an English language learning magazine published in Taiwan.
terms like oligosaccharide. I committed the terms and their atomic structures to memory, with the assumptions that they were the keys to the success of the test next day. To my amazement, I passed the test and the course. (2007/12/19)

To highlight the ease of ESP reading, Wen-Li compared it with literature reading in Freshman English. She said:

ESP reading consists of technical terms, such as names of diseases. What you have to do is to link the name to a phenomenon. That’s it. But reading Shakespeare was totally different. It’s distressing because I did not have background knowledge of Western literature. If I had been asked to read a piece of Su Dong-Po\(^5\), it would have been possible for me to associate it with some related information, such as his writing purpose. But Shakespeare?! Give me a break. It’s more than painful! I didn’t understand the values of Romeo and Juliet, either. Why should the characters go through so much hardship for love? The story was too difficult to understand. More often than not, I had to rack my brains to engage in the reading. (2007/12/19)

Although Wen-Li described college ESP reading as relatively easy, she admitted that the reading load was a problem for her. She commented:

Medical students tend to assume that anatomy is the most burdensome course as far as its imposition on memory capacity is concerned. In my opinion, studying human parts is not the most

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\(^5\) Su Dong-Po is one of the best-known ancient Chinese literary figures.
arduous task. As a veterinary medicine major, I had to study many different kinds of animals, including the dog, the cat, the pig, the ruminant, etc., with one different from another to some extent. So the reading load was extraordinarily heavy. (2007/12/19)

Setting reading aside, Wen-Li did not lead a carefree life in her college days. Financial pressure hovered in her mind all the time. Although she took part time jobs, she had to ask for money from her parents to cover her living expenses. Under these circumstances, her parents never hesitated to show their long faces. Wen-Li figured out that the only way to obtain liberty was to be economically independent. Therefore, after graduation, she worked for a trading corporation instead of going into veterinary science. Explicitly, she announced, “I hungered for money” (2007/10/23; 2008/1/21).

In her first job, Wen-Li suffered from the unrelenting pressure of ESP reading. She recalled:

I did not understand the messages sent to me via telex or fax. I understood each word but when the words were put together, I got lost. An example is like a mail written by A to B, saying “B, I would like to remind you of our appointment on date X at stop Y of MRT.” Imagine the letter were read by a primary school student or an African. The reader would be overwhelmed by questions like “What is the relationship between A and B,” “Why do they meet there,” “What does MRT stand for,” “Where is Y stop,” etc. When I first read a mail like this, I was stressed out. I thought I was finished. I would lose my job in no time. (2007/12/19)
I had no idea about the product name. For example, a drug might be named “blue sky.” For an outsider, the sentence “How much does blue sky cost” is just enigmatic. I was rather frustrated. I lost confidence in my English proficiency although it was rated quite high in my school days. (2007/11/13)

In the following four months or so, Wen-Li cut and pasted her business letters into a notebook. She asked her co-workers for help to figure out the context of the messages. She wrote down the information and studied it like a student preparing for an important test. After going through that stage, Wen-Li felt comfortable with ESP reading in the workplace. She noted:

After I figured out that terms like blue sky were product names, I sat back in relief. I realized that the reading problem I encountered had nothing to do with my English proficiency. In fact, there were stories beneath the sheer coat of English language. It was the stories that kept me from retrieving the meaning of the mails. (2007/11/13)

In retrospect, Wen-Li compared her feeling at that stage to the fable of a blind man inspecting an elephant. She explained:

The elephant refers to English language. I used an incomplete picture of the beast to apply to my job, only to find that reading in the workplace was a different matter. Now I know it is the same animal, except that on one occasion I touched its tusk but on the other I felt its trunk. (2008/1/21)
An ESP reader with full participation in the profession. In 1995, Wen-Li was recruited by an established pharmaceutical company Q as a marketing manager. She successfully launched a new drug and sold more than five million units in a couple of years. For this she won the Gold Pig Award, the highest honor bestowed by the international company. However, hoof-and-mouth disease broke out in Taiwan in 1997, thereby striking a devastating blow to the pig farms. As the market shrank dramatically, Wen-Li left the company and joined another pharmaceutical company, K.

As a China-based marketing and training manager for K, Wen-Li was engaged in much more ESP reading. She read mainly for two purposes. First of all, K sold antibiotics, which were promoted in quite a different way from vaccines, the product for which Wen-Li was responsible at Q. In the early days, it took Wen-Li quite a while to read materials concerning antibiotic products. After that, her reading was aimed at training her Mainlander sales representatives. Wen-Li explained:

The major problems of the Chinese team members were their ignorance of products, clients, and diseases. Honestly speaking, I also had very little understanding in this regard. So, I devoted myself to wide reading. I singled out texts of interest, digested them, and transformed them into teaching materials in a systematic way. I asked my team members to commit the information to memory. I even gave them tests. I assumed that if my team members were equipped with the same pool of knowledge and therefore speak the same language, the sales would soar up. (2007/12/19)
At that point, Wen-Li’s ESP reading was, in a way, facilitated by the advent of new technology. K had a voluminous file for each of its products. The company’s Asian headquarters in Taiwan had a well-equipped library, in which hard copy journals and online databases were available. Wen-Li spent considerable time in the library searching, retrieving, and reading information. She recalled:

I went to the internet or our database to search for knowledge with which I had not been adequately equipped. I read materials from many different resources. If I wanted to compare, say, product A of our company with product B of another company, I would find out the related reports by all means, be it in a database or in some hidden corner of the library. Sometimes, I had to work late until midnight or even to stay up whole night. The reading load was great, especially under time constraints of the scheduled training sessions. The members of the Taiwanese team wondered why I kept myself so busy during the stay in Taiwan. After all, I was supposed to relax between the trips to Mainland. One of my colleagues even challenged me with a note of sarcasm, “You are selling nothing more than a drug against coccidiosis. What is it for to compile so much data? Could it be of any help?” (2007/12/19)

Wen-Li surprised her colleagues when she received a big order from a major Mainland food company, which had not bought any product from K for years in spite of its efforts. The man who questioned about her data collection went to Wen-Li and asked her how she did it. Looking back, she responded, “I should have teased him and said that there was nothing special except that I happened to know how to compile data” (2007/12/19).
An expert ESP reader with a personal theory. Wen-Li’s good command of English is widely recognized by her colleagues and friends. Many of them have inquired about her keys to language success. In response, she has shared with them her personal legend as follows:

When I was 20 something, my sister and I paid a visit to a Tantric Buddhist, who was very famous for his past life analysis. Upon seeing me, he asked my sister, “Your sis is extremely good at English, right?” Later, he pointed out that I had been an American in my previous life. Basically, my memory about the language was not erased. That’s why my English was so competent. He also announced that in my past life I had worked as a nurse. Therefore, my career in this life must be related to medicine. I was so shocked at what he had said. (2007/10/23)

In a Chinese society, it is not uncommon for an individual to attribute his/her high level proficiency to learning or practice in the past-life. Nevertheless, the way Wen-Li juxtaposed English and her career gave me an impression that the two must be related to each other in one way or another. My intuition was confirmed when she provided me with a metaphor to describe them. She said, “English

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6 A prime example is a legendary account of a well-known ancient literary figure called Huang Ting-Juin, who was Su Dong-Po’s contemporary and match in terms of writing and painting. In the story commonly called “Celery Noodles” [qin cai mian], Huang had a dream in which he ate a bowl of celery noodles provided by an old woman. Later, in his real life, he came across the gray-haired lady and found she had been his mother in the previous life. Huang discovered that in his past life as a female she had been extremely fond of celery noodles as well as reading and writing. It was later concluded by other literary figures that Huang’s expertise of literacy was an accumulative result of unremitting efforts across lives.
language and my career are like an ivy plant and a wall. The prosperity of the plant is achieved not only because it can grow upward but also because there is a scaffold for it to climb” (2008/1/21).

Wen-Li had strong opinions about spending big money to learn English in *bu xi ban* or language institutes in Taiwan.

I am in deep belief that necessity is the mother of proficiency. It’s meaningless to spend ten or twenty thousand dollars a month to learn “How do you do” in the institute. I asked my colleagues “Why don’t you study the mails from CEO?” Reading the junk mails is one of the best ways of learning English. To an employee of a pharmaceutical company, the mail from CEO is the trunk of English learning. Skills to book a flight ticket or order food are the branches and leaves. Once you have the trunk, you could learn and have the branches little by little and finally become very versatile.7 (2007/10/23)

She also took issue with those people who went to *bu xi ban* for any other purposes than learning English. She was shocked by a bosom friend who said she would not hesitate starting an affair with her institute peers if there was a chance. This married woman once left her three kids at home on a stormy day to linger at *bu xi ban*. Wen-Li could not disagree more with the woman’s presumption that a man in a language organization was more decent than one in a bar. It was also difficult for her to understand why so many people were

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7 The word was uttered directly in English by the participant and therefore was highlighted in boldface.
eager to link their lives to the language institute in one way or another and why they honored English more than a language deserved.

Wen-Li’s conceptualization of both English reading and English language was utilitarian. She stated emphatically that they were “no more than computer software” (2007/12/19). “To my job, English is like *Excel* or *PowerPoint*, which I view as money making tools. Anything facilitating my professional development can trigger my drive to master it since making money is my first concern in life” (2008/1/21).

Wen-Li attributed her dexterity in using the tool of English to two main causes: “I have been using the software for many years; therefore, I became very proficient. The efficiency is also achieved with the aid of my increasing knowledge of the market” (2007/12/19). Furthermore, she pointed out that different demands from various workplaces led to variation in the amount and salience of ESP reading. In comparing ESP reading to food, she commented:

> When I was in K, I used to have buffet as my breakfast. In fact, at that stage, ESP reading was more like air, without which I could not survive. However, it becomes less and less important to me. I am still in the habit of retrieving texts from the internet and reading them. But now ESP reading is more like a small sandwich for breakfast. I can skip it without doing any harm to my life. I guess the differences result from different institutional needs. (2008/1/21)

All in all, Wen-Li divided her ESP reading story into six chapters, which she respectively titled as “Beginner,” “Sponge,”
“Frustration,” “Hunger for Money,” “Hard Work for Profession,” and “Harmony.” The first two stages referred to her school days. What comes next was the initial stage of her career development, which was characterized by frustration. In the fourth stage, she took quite a few part-time translation jobs to earn extra income. Hence, she named it, “Hunger for Money.” In the fifth stage, her ESP reading aimed to boost her image as a professional. In this sense, it was named, “Hard Work for Profession.” She reported that in this period she had the feeling of “rong hui guan tong,” which means acquiring a thorough understanding through comprehensive study. During the last phase, “Harmony,” reading was smooth, natural, and easy. To highlight her great command of the knack of English reading, Wen-Li described it as “seeing a mountain as a mountain again.”

A border agent lack of true liberty. Wen-Li was extremely experienced in traversing and crossing the language borderland given that she had experiences of translation for more than ten years. She had translated quite a few popular English books into Chinese; she also worked as an oral interpreter once in a while. From this, she gained deep insights into both languages due to her long experiences of shuffling word chunks of one language to express ideas in the other. First of all, Wen-Li said that the two languages were facilitative of each other: progress in one brought about growth in the other. In addition, she argued that English was instrumental in nature and so good for describing facts. In contrast, Chinese was emotion-oriented.

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8 A master of Buddhism claimed he acquired Buddha’s teaching by going through three steps, i.e., “seeing a mountain as a mountain,” “seeing a mountain as not a mountain,” and “seeing a mountain as a mountain again.” The third refers to a full understanding of knowledge after a process of critical thinking involving doubts, dialects, and finally affirmations.
and suitable for expressing inner feelings. Wen-Li also reported that she acquired the two languages in different ways. In her English learning, she was like a wild ivy plant which rambled freely along a big and high fence. In contrast, the course of her Chinese language development was under complete control of teachers. To conclude the comparison, she commented succinctly: “Chinese and English are like *Word* and *Excel*. They are different types of software” (2008/1/21). When asked to explain further, Wen-Li answered, “Chinese is more like *Word*, which is the base of everything” (2008/1/21).

Wen-Li defined her role of pharmaceutical product agent as that of a messenger constantly traveling back and forth between Chinese and English worlds. The sole purpose was monetary gain. In spite of her proficiency, she classified herself as a resistant ESP reader. She claimed that she would quit reading once there was no need to make money. To her, the only drive for border crossing was financial profit. The utilitarian force had been haunting her all the way in her life. She noted:

> I am always very anxious about money matters. I try every way to put aside for rainy days. Once I happened to be informed by some Buddhists that they did not have any kitchen; they didn’t save food; they ate up everything in hand; and they put no thoughts about tomorrow. Upon hearing these, a loud bang rang in my ears like numerous thunderclaps in explosion all at once. I realize my lifelong problem is prioritizing financial security over the other life goals. If I can break the obsessions of saving and storing, the true liberty will be within my grasp. (2007/12/19)
THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE STORY

Investment in Literacy for the Negotiation of Identity

Wen-Li’s language experiences prior to ESP reading were inseparable from her negotiation of identity. In the traditional Taiwanese family, the identity Wen-Li took up in the primary Discourse was rigidly defined by her gender, birth place, and appearance. However, when moving toward the secondary Discourse, Wen-Li found that her identity was open for negotiation. Wen-Li noticed that in the new economy of meanings, excellence in school literacy had higher currency than her inherent social category, considering that her father gave particular attention to her school performance and even spared limited financial resources to send her to a costly private school. The resources Wen-Li obtained were otherwise inaccessible for her as an overweight third daughter in the family. The awareness of the high currency of school literacy in a way contributed to Wen-Li’s large investments of time and energy in reading.

As noted, Wen-Li relied heavily on the dictionary as a boundary object to move toward school literacy. The reificative connections provided by the dictionary were facilitative for Wen-Li’s academic performance, defined narrowly as her test scores in the Chinese society characterized by its long-standing culture of examinations. However, without corresponding participation, the boundary object created discontinuities of meaning in her early language learning experiences as well. For instance, she was barred from the meaning of sex-related terms like jian yin (adultery) mainly because as a young child, she had no access to the legitimate peripheral participation in
the Discourse in which the word was in use. Lack of the negotiation of meaning in the Discourse rendered the word in print meaningless to her. With strong evidence, this case lends support to the social views of reading which posit that language is not an abstract propositional representation in the print or in the head, but is tied to people’s experiences in the world (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 2001b; Rodby, 1992).

For the same reason, when reading the romance novels with her adolescent sister, Wen-Li again experienced incompetence. In this case, Wen-Li reported that she made more attempts to read, despite the great confusion brought about by reading. That is to say, Wen-Li’s interaction of participation and non-participation under this circumstance was peripherality rather than marginality. As pointed out by Wenger (1998), the line between marginality and peripherality could be very subtle. In Wen-Li’s case, it was her desire to become a fluent romance reader like her adolescent sisters that rendered her inability consequential. In contrast, reading Shakespeare in her college days was marginal mainly because Wen-Li did not have desire to obtain membership of the Discourse of Western literature.

In terms of English learning, Wen-Li experienced confusion, pain, and struggle when she was a novice EFL learner in her junior high. Specifically, she complained that English spelling was a problem for her. Fortunately, her English teacher in the second year seemed to be a good broker, in the sense that he helped the school girl negotiate meanings in different fields and made her understand that English grammar, like mathematics formulas, was reified with important information. His successful translation of elements from math to English turned out to be of great importance for Wen-Li’s
boundary crossing. However, Wen-Li’s story also showed that reificative connections via formalisms like spelling and grammar were overemphasized in her EFL learning environment. For instance, Wen-Li did not have participative connections to English until senior high school when she went to Studio Classroom. Her experiences revealed that reification was predominant in the EFL context in Taiwan.

In general, Wen-Li’s early language learning experiences echo Peirce’s (1995) theory of investment: a person may be positioned in a particular way within a given community; however, the person might resist and even manage to acquire membership in another which positions the person in a powerful rather than marginalized position. In Wen-Li’s case, her early language learning experiences were interlaced with the negotiation of her primary identity in the traditional Taiwanese family, which downplayed her role as a third daughter. It was the high currency of school literacy that led to Wen-Li’s investment in language learning in the secondary Discourse, i.e., the school.

**ESP Reading Woven Into Dimensions of Membership**

The process of Wen-Li’s becoming a competent ESP reader was integrated with the process of her becoming a full member of the professional community. Wen-Li’s initial ESP reading was adversely affected by lack of full membership of the Discourse. Specifically, her ESP reading during her college days was marked by difficulties imposed by technical terms like oligosaccharide. Similarly, she suffered in her first job when she could not unravel meanings reified in the pharmaceutical product names. However, Wen-Li made up her
mind to move beyond the boundary of the Discourse. Her determination was closely related to the identity work rooted in her primary Discourse. Wen-Li understood ESP reading was one important part of her enterprise in the community. If she had remained unsuccessful in reading, she would have lost her job as well as the access to the legitimate peripheral participation of the community. If she had lost her job, she would have lost her monetary gain, which in turn would have made her parents reclaim ownership of meanings of her status as a third daughter. Resisting the marginalized position, Wen-Li worked extremely hard to do identity work in the company. For instance, to comprehend business messages well, she asked for help from experienced members of the community. With this mutuality of engagement, Wen-Li gradually realized that the difficulties she had experienced from her early ESP reading arose not so much from the formalism as from the lack of participation in the shared learning history of the community. Specifically, she called the history “stories.” She reported that it was her ignorance of the stories that led not only to her failure in retrieving the meaning reified in medical jargon but also to her incompetence of ESP reading at the boundary.

In contrast, Wen-Li’s high level proficiency in ESP reading was demonstrated in her full participation in company K. As noted by Wenger (1998), full membership develops along three dimensions: mutuality of engagement, accountability to an enterprise, and negotiability of a repertoire. In Tsui’s (2007) words, these dimensions entail “knowing how to engage with other members, understanding the enterprise in which members are engaged, and sharing the mediating resources” (p. 674). It is notable in Wen-Li’s life story that
ESP reading was significant to and pervasive in the three dimensions. Simply put, Wen-Li engaged in ESP reading with other members. Mutuality of engagement was illustrated in the case of Wen-Li’s ESP reading for training Mainlander sales representatives. In addition, as in her first job, Wen-Li understood that in company K proficient ESP reading had a central role in her enterprise. Moreover, it was ESP reading which made it possible for her to have access to communal repertoire such as the shared history of antibiotics. In brief, the scenes in company K indicated the close relations between Wen-Li’s ESP reading and her full membership in the Discourse.

Full membership involves not only identifying oneself as a member but also being identified by other members of the community. In Wen-Li’s case, she identified herself as a member of the Discourse by doing what a marketing and training manager should do, such as reading to train her team members and to promote sales. Obviously, her identity was not merely assigned and reified by the job title but also constructed in the practice. Wen-Li also obtained her co-workers’ recognition, as illustrated by the event in which she was asked about how she succeeded in getting the big order from the Mainland food company. Given that it was raised by the one who had challenged her about the usefulness of data compilation, this question was recognition of both Wen-Li’s effective ESP reading and full membership.

To sum up, Wen-Li’s story indicated that her ESP reading proficiency reflects her status in membership. Her early ESP reading experiences were situated at the periphery, in which the lack of full identity made Wen-Li’s reading comprehension suffer. Conversely, in company K, Wen-Li’s high level proficiency in ESP reading was
demonstrated along the dimensions of full membership experienced in the core of the Discourse. Wen-Li herself also emphasized that her ESP reading and career were tightly inter-related with each other. She compared the two to an ivy plant and a wall, considering that the prosperity of the plant of ESP reading dependent on the support by the wall of her career. In addition to the strong affinity between ESP reading and career, Wen-Li also recognized the effect of accumulation on literacy development. This is evident in her uptake of the story told by the Tantric Buddhist who attributed her high level English proficiency to her identity in the previous life.

Wen-Li’s drive for wealth through ESP reading could be boiled down to her persistent desire to escape the marginality of her identity as the third daughter in the traditional family. Wen-Li acknowledged that her investment in ESP reading development was driven by her hunger for money. This explained why her story is titled “In the book resides a gold house.”

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The study has examined in depth an EFL learner’s long-term development of ESP reading literacy and richly describes the reader’s inner voice. Among other things, the life story has revealed the critical link between literacy and the negotiation of identity. Wen-Li’s early literacy development, for instance, has been involved with the identity acquired in the primary Discourse. On the other hand, in the work site, her ESP reading proficiency varied with different positions in the community. To be more specific, she experienced uncertainties,
confusions, and challenges in the periphery while in the core, she manifested high level proficiency of ESP reading along with her full membership.

The findings may have some important implications for ESP reading theory and ESP reading pedagogy. First of all, as illuminated by Wen-Li’s narrative, the development of ESP reading is intertwined with the reader’s identity formation. So far, reader identity has been underdeveloped and underrepresented. In spite of Gee’s (2001b) great emphasis on identity, he does not give a full picture of the concept. A more comprehensive reading theory is therefore in need to help depict ESP reader’s identity. To say the least, the theory should allow us to view ESP reading as a process of how a novice reader becomes an expert, to perceive the ESP reader as a human agent capable of negotiating identities and investment, to perceive the Discourse periphery as an important learning site, and to distinguish peripheral reading experience and marginal reading experience.

In addition, the study provides convincing evidence that ESP reading is not an individual activity in which autonomous meanings are retrieved from the text. Rather, it is a long term developmental process involving the negotiation of identities. Therefore, ESP teachers are encouraged to provide ESP readers with ample opportunities for negotiation of meanings and identities. More importantly, ESP teachers need to encourage learners to reflect their reading histories and to envision their future professional development in diaries or journals, for instance. Awareness of one’s position and orientation may help inexperienced ESP readers defy hardship in the boundary, thereby rendering their non-participation consequential and peripheral.
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摘要

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