



Impact of English Learning on National Identification of Mongolian English Majors' in Universities for Nationalities: A Case Study of Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities

JIA Ji'nan^{[a],*}

^[a]Lecturer. School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities, Tongliao, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by Research Foundation of Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities (No.NMD1365).

Received 6 November 2013; accepted 11 February 2014

Abstract

This research investigated the national identification of Mongolian English majors, the effects of English learning on national identification and the reasons. The survey has showed that: Overall, mother-tongue identification of Mongolian English majors in Universities for Nationalities is relatively high, but it has dropped a lot compared with that in the past. Meanwhile, these students had a low recognition mainly in the social and cultural aspect, followed by the material and spiritual aspects; and this result relates to content of English teaching, learning motivation and learning time.

Key words: Mongolian English majors; English learning; National identification

JIA Ji'nan (2014). Impact of English Learning on National Identification of Mongolian English Majors' in Universities for Nationalities: A Case Study of Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 8(1), 120-125. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320140801.4149>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320140801.4149>

INTRODUCTION

Since the foundation of New China, Chinese people have learned English for as long as half a century. As early as in 1956, English replaced Russian to become the only foreign language course in most high schools. Since then, English teaching has developed rapidly in China. At present, China has more than 400 million people learning

English, which is about 1/3 of China's total population. Experts predict that in a few years, the number of English learners in China will be more than the total population of English speaking countries.

Gao holds that second language learners have dual identifications—national identification and foreign language identification (2003). The current large scale of English learners has worried many scholars: In the process of learning English, will Chinese students completely condemn or abandon traditional national culture and blindly adore and copy Western cultures? Scholars have various reactions on this. Professor Mao Han in Huaqiao University called on government to immediately halt the national frenzy of learning English, and let a handful of people to become professionals specializing in English. Professor Li Qingben in Beijing Language University and Professor Sun Youzhong in Beijing Foreign Language University believe that English frenzy won't westernize China as long as it doesn't touch the core values. Is Mao Han too pessimistic or are Sun and Li too optimistic? How do Chinese learners of English identify with their nationality? English frenzy needs to cool down? For these questions, this research took 150 Mongolian English majors in Inner Mongolia University of Nationalities as objects, investigated their national identification, the impacts of English learning on their national identification and the reasons for these impacts, in the hope to obtain enlightenment on English education for minorities in China.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 National Identification

National identification is closely linked with cultural identity of community members. Hamers and Blanc (1989) consider complex cultural integration combined with individual personality constitutes a cultural identity. They stress that cultural identity is the result of individual

socialization. Kramsch (1998), on the other hand, believes that cultural identity is the membership of a cultural group formed by government identification or the self-identification of the members. He stresses that a member has self-recognition and external recognition on the group culture. Cultural identity is both a member's cultural gene and attribution to a cultural group, and also a cultural passport and identity card to show the world "who we are". Although scholars differ on the definition of cultural identity, they believe that cultural identity is related with individuals' attitudes to a culture. It is believed that national identification is a general attitude on all areas about a person's nationality, including political identification, moral identification, artistic identification, historical identification and so on (Chen, 2008). National language identification is social members' recognition and emotion of their own national language (Gao, 2006). In this research, national identification specifically refers to recognition on Chinese language and Chinese culture of Chinese learners of English.

1.2 An Overview on Foreign Language Learning and National Identification

Many scholars have been working on the impacts of second Language acquisition on national identification. Lambert proposes two bilingual types of "Reduction" and "Addition". Learners of the reduction type's mother language and native cultural identification are replaced by the target language and target cultural identification; Learners of the addition type maintain their mother tongue and native culture attribution while obtaining the target language and target culture (Lambert, 1974). Gao (1994) proposes the "productive bilingualism", namely, to grasp, understand mother language and target language, native culture and target culture in complements, and learners' cognition, emotion, and behavior capability can get an overall improvement. This theory has been recognized and approved by some empirical tests. However, studies of impacts of English on Mongolian students' national identification are not much. Wang Fang and Guo Wen designed questionnaires to test national identifications of Chinese college students, and the results indicated that today's college students' national identification were severely affected by the aggressive Western cultures, which confirmed the concerns of scholars. But their questionnaires were not comprehensive, which focused only on individual aspects of learning motivation, moral values and so on. Ren Yuxin conducted surveys on Chinese college students' Chinese cultural identity and English cultural identity, and found that the learners had a strong sense of native cultural identity; meanwhile, at higher level a learner spoke a foreign language, more obviously he showed the target cultural identity, but Ren did not go further on the specific impacts of English affecting learners' national identifications. For the shortage of past studies, Chen Xinren researched

the relevance of college students' English learning and their national identification. His questionnaires covered various aspects of language, values, religion, politics and cultural behaviors, aiming at college students in different languages majors. The research has shown that generally Chinese college students still had a higher degree of recognition of mother language than foreign languages, showing a more rational value, but students were more influenced by the West in the spiritual and cultural aspects. Students in differential majors were not remarkably different on the overall cultural identification. His questionnaire has been designed more comprehensively than ever, and the objects were more extensive, but he only investigated the undergraduates and did not specify the factors that caused these effects. Obviously, the previous researches are not comprehensive or sufficient on the research objects or contents. To get over these shortcomings, this study investigated two groups of undergraduates and postgraduates, and tried to find out the impacts and causes of English learning on their national identifications.

1.3 Assumption on Native Cultural Identification

Cultural experts divide culture into three levels: the artifact cultural level, including all tangible and sensible diets, clothing, architectures, films, etc; the social cultural level, including interpersonal relationship norms, customs, politics, etc.; the spiritual cultural level, including moral values, etc. This research is to investigate from the three aspects.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Research Questions

a. How is the status of Mongolian undergraduates' national identification? How's the status of postgraduates? What about the Mongolian learners of English's national identification as a whole?

b. In which aspects English has affected Mongolian students on their national identification? What're the impacts on the artifact cultural level, social cultural level, and spiritual cultural level?

c. What're the reasons for these impacts? Are these impacts with related to English teaching content, learning motivation, or the length of learning time?

2.2 Research Objects

This research investigated 316 English majors in five key universities, including 207 sophomores, and 109 second-year postgraduates.

2.3 Measuring Tools

This research used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including questionnaires, interviews, etc., and used SPSS17.0 and Microsoft Excel software to statistically analyze the relevant data.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts :

The first part (of 15 questions) adapted from the questionnaires of Chenxin Ren (2008) and Gao (2003), updated them based on the three cultural levels, namely, artifact cultural level, social cultural level, and spiritual cultural level. Its form has used Likert five scale from “fully accept” (1 point) to “strongly disagree” (5 points).

The second part (3 questions) aimed at understanding the reasons of English learning affected national identification in general. The researcher set up the questions from three aspects of English teaching content, learning motivation, and learning time, and the examinees could select more than one option for their situation. The interview after test was conducted to have a more understanding of the examinees. Questions were all open-ended.

2.4 Data Collection

In the implementation process, the researcher firstly selected 42 sophomores and 20 second-year postgraduates to conduct a pilot test, and improved the questionnaire accordingly. On this basis, the researcher distributed 316 questionnaires and returned with 297 valid questionnaires, including 197 from sophomores and 100 from second-year postgraduates, with efficiency rate of 94. 0%. In addition, according to the scores, the researcher picked 10 sophomores and 10 second-year postgraduates to take the interviews respectively. They were the 5 students who had the lowest scores in sophomores and 5 postgraduates who had the highest scores in their group. Their interviews were conducted to compare the differences between undergraduates and postgraduates. In order to make the results more scientific, the researcher has interviewed another 5 sophomores and another 5 postgraduates, whose scores were the closest to the average scores of the two groups. The researcher considered that they could be the best representatives of both groups of undergraduates and postgraduates.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 National Recognition Status

For the status of national identifications of Chinese learners of English, the researcher inputted all data of the first part into SPSS17. 0 for statistics. The higher the score meant the higher degree of recognition of the native culture; conversely, the lower the score meant the higher degree of recognition of the foreign culture. For the scores please refer to Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, the student’s overall score of national identification was 3.0881, indicating that the overall identification tended to native culture. However, the score of undergraduates’ national identification was only 2.9807, less than the findings of Chen Xinren

(2008). In his survey, the score of undergraduate English majors was 3.3, approximately 0.3 points higher than this test. This difference explained that undergraduates’ national identification were presently lower than before, suggesting that with the expansion of China’s opening up, English language and culture was accelerating its impacts on Chinese students’ identification on nationality.

Table 1
National Recognition Status

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard deviation
Second Year Postgraduates	100	2.73	4.07	3.3135	0.34058
Sophomores	197	2.27	3.87	2.9807	0.33564
Total	297	2.27	4.07	3.0881	0.36939

Test result:
t=3.632,
p=.001<0.05

In addition, Table 1 showed the significance index of $p = 0.001$ ($p < 0.05$), which meant, the postgraduates and undergraduates had a significant difference on the scores of national identifications. As can be seen from the average value, the degree of national identification was much higher in postgraduates than in undergraduates. This result might be due to the different social environments where undergraduates and postgraduates have grown up. Undergraduates were generally born in 1990s, while postgraduates were mainly in 1980s. On the one hand, 1990s born students started learning English in an earlier age than the 1980s born students, and English learning was also more important to them. The interviews after the questionnaire showed that most 1990s born students started learning English from kindergarten, and usually participated in a variety of English extracurricular courses. Parents and teachers all have stressed the importance of English. Some of them have studied in English-speaking countries during their high school. For many postgraduates, they began to learn English till high school. Compared to mathematics, physics and other science courses, English became somewhat insignificant in their learning. On the other hand, with the rapid development of network, 1990s born students began to contact Western culture through network earlier than the 1980s born students. Many 1990s born students had a computer in their primary schools, they could easily download many English data from the Internet, and would often discuss about American movies, songs with each other, etc.; in a contrast, most postgraduates were in contact with the network when they entered colleges, they were not familiar with Hollywood movies or Oscar songs, etc. In the high school classes they only listened to English tapes recorded by Chinese people, whose contents were also related with English textbooks written by Chinese people, while these materials did not contain real Western cultures.

Of course, this remarkable difference may be due to the presence of a turning point. Once learning English exceeds the turning point, students will adopt a productive learning method instead of the reductive learning method. In interviews, some postgraduates have mentioned this change. With their understandings of Western culture continued to deepen, they would no longer blindly admire foreign cultures, but held a rational view on differences between the two cultures.

3.2 Impacts of English Learning on National Identification

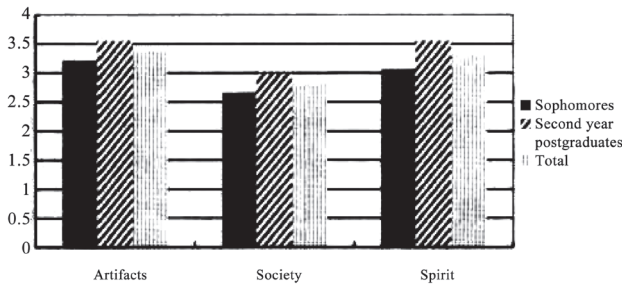


Figure 1
Three Levels of Learners' National Identification

As can be seen from Figure 1, students held the highest levels of national identification on artifact culture, followed on the spiritual culture, and the lowest on social culture which had the biggest difference to the score of artifact culture. To be prudent, the researcher has carried out statistics on all topics to reveal the unique problems reflected by the individual topic. For details please refer to Figure 2.

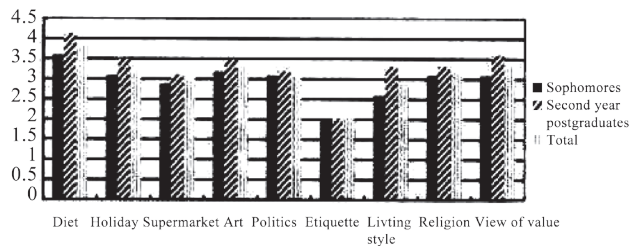


Figure 2
Learners' National Identification at the Three Levels

In Table 2, diet, holiday, supermarket, and art belonged to artifact cultural level, politics, etiquette, and lifestyle belonged to the social cultural level, and religion and value belonged to the spiritual cultural level. Figure 2 showed that students disagreed with traditional Chinese etiquettes and lifestyles the most. Interview results supported this conclusion. For example, when most people have been praised, they preferred to say "thank you" like Westerners instead of saying the modest words like "I don't really deserve it". These habits might be influenced by the long-term impacts of lifestyle presented by U.S. films and televisions. Instead, students had a high degree of recognition of traditional Chinese holidays, televisions and tea cultures, not like in the survey of Chen

(2008), a lower degree of recognition on these has been found in students. This might be because in the teaching process, English teachers have gradually begun to pay great attention to teach traditional Chinese cultures. In interviews, both undergraduates and postgraduates have mentioned that when they learned English, teachers encouraged them to compare Chinese and Western cultures, but these discussions only stay on the surface. In addition, students held a higher degree of agreement on politics, religion, and values of China, but should be noted that, compared with the survey results of Chen Xinren, the degree of agreement of today's students in these areas has reduced a lot than in the past. Therefore, we must be alert to the imperceptible influence of English language and culture, foreign cultures have gradually penetrated into the students' spiritual dimension. In a word, learning English affected students mainly in the social cultural level, followed by the spiritual cultural level and artifact cultural level.

3.3 Reasons for the Impacts

The researcher input data of the second part of the questionnaire into Microsoft Excel for analysis, and the results showed that the content of English teaching, learning motivation and learning time would cause an impact to the students on their national identifications. For specific scores please refer to Tables 2, 3 and 4.

3.3.1 English Teaching Content

Table 2
Chinese and Western Cultures Learners Obtained From Classrooms

Options	Sophomores	Second year postgraduates	Total
A: Extensive Western culture	81%	75%	79%
B: Little Western culture	19.1%	25%	21%
C: Extensive Chinese culture	9.5%	20%	12.9%
D: Little Chinese culture	54.8%	30%	46.8%

Note: The answers of the question "what have you learned from your English teacher in your undergraduate or postgraduate period?"

As can be seen from Table 2, 79.0% of English teachers taught plentiful Western culture in the classroom, but only 12.9% of teachers talked about Chinese culture. In addition, teachers of postgraduates taught Chinese culture more than that of undergraduates, and postgraduates held a higher degree of identification on native culture than undergraduates. It was to be inferred that to promote Chinese culture in English teaching might help improve students' national identification. In subsequent interviews, both undergraduates and postgraduates have expressed their willingness for teachers to teach more Chinese culture. As English majors, they received education of Western cultures systematically, but the knowledge of traditional Chinese culture was rare. Even schools offered courses of Chinese traditional culture taught in English, teachers focused more on vocabulary and translation,

which did not really help students understand the essence of Chinese thoughts and culture.

3.3.2 English Learning Motivation

Table 3
Reasons of Learning English

Options	Sophomores	Second year postgraduates	Total
A: Like English language	43.9%	80%	55.7%
B: Like Western culture	41.5%	70%	50.8%
C: Like communicating with foreigners	19.5%	15%	18%
D: Course arrangement	24.4%	15%	21.3%
E: Prepare for study overseas	31.7%	5%	23%
F: Prepare for future job	68.3%	25%	54.1%
G: Let world understand China	24.4%	40%	29.5%

Note: The answers to the question "Why do you learn English?"

Table 3 showed that there were 68.3% of undergraduates learned English in order to get a good job, 80% of postgraduates liked English language, 70% of students liked Western cultures. This showed that the majority of undergraduates learned English because of its practicality, which was an external reason, and most of the postgraduates had a hobby in English, which was an internal reason. Another finding was that 40% of postgraduates learned English in order to make the world understand China better. Obviously, Chinese cultural identification was the prerequisite to expect the world to understand China. This also explained why in the research postgraduates had a higher national identification. In addition, there were 31.7% of undergraduates wanted to study abroad and work. The desire to study abroad implied recognitions on foreign education and cultures, and therefore, their national identification was lower than the postgraduates.

In a word, although there was no obvious correlation between English learning motivation and national identification, the motivation to let the world understand China benefited the preservation of national identification, and the desire to study abroad would reduce students' national identification.

3.3.3 English Learning Time

Table 4
The Frequency Learners Watched English Movies

Options	Sophomores	Second year postgraduates	Total
A: Watch everyday	35.7%	15%	29%
B: Watch every month	54.8%	45%	51.6%
C: Seldom watch	9.5%	40%	19.4%
D: Never watch	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Note: The answers to the question "do you often watch original English movies?"

English movies often reflected lifestyles of U.S., U.K. and other English-speaking countries, which have been closely related to English culture. Therefore, people who often watched English movies would be subtly affected by the habits, thinking ways, values, etc. of English nations, therefore accepted the culture, habits, ways of thinking and values associated with English nations. As can be seen from Table 4, more than 80% of students regularly watched English movies, that was to say, most students have been affected by the English language and culture, which explained the reason of the lower ratio on national identification in today's students than in the past. Comparing the scores of sophomores and second-year postgraduates, it could be found that nearly half of the postgraduates did not often watch English movies, while only 10% of undergraduates didn't. As previously mentioned, the undergraduates could easily download films from the Internet, while the postgraduates' situation was the opposite. This difference might result in that fewer postgraduates than undergraduates have been affected on national identification. The way of life presented by movies also led to the lowest recognition on socio-cultural level of Chinese students. From this perspective, the longer students learned English, the lower they identified with their nationality. However, it was worth noting that the postgraduates might study English longer than undergraduates, but they had a higher degree of native cultural identification. As mentioned above, this result might be due to the different backgrounds of the research objects: undergraduates were generally born in 1990s, while postgraduates generally in 1980s. It's also possible that there was a turning point, once the time of learning English exceeded the turning point, students' national identification would be gradually strengthened. Therefore, it is difficult only from this research to find the relationship between English learning time and national identification, but it can be ascertained that the length of learning time will affect students' national identification.

CONCLUSIONS

This research showed that: Overall, Mongolian students had a high national identification, but undergraduates' identification declined compared with in the past, indicating that with the expansion of China's opening-up English language and culture have been accelerating impacts on Mongolian students' national identification. Meanwhile, Chinese students had a low identification mainly in the social cultural aspect, followed by the spiritual and material aspects. This result might be related to English teaching content and learning time. In addition, the research also explored the relationship among teaching content, learning motivation, learning time and national identification. These three factors were likely to affect students' national identification. When English teachers taught Western culture, if they could have compared it

with Chinese culture students might have a higher national identification; Although English learning motivation had no obvious correlation with national identification, the motivation to let the world know China better benefited national identification, while the desire to study abroad would reduce the students' national identification; the relationship between English learning time and national identification was more complicated, it was difficult to see how was relationship just from this research, but it was certain that the length of learning time would affect students' national identification. Based on these findings, the researcher believes that with today's growing globalization, English is an essential skill and Mao Han's call seems somewhat extreme. However, it is to be alerted that English learning had a profound impact on students' national identification. Through this research, I made some English teaching suggestions in order to improve students' recognition on native language and culture:

a. Although Chinese government and schools stress the importance of English learning, it cannot ignore the promotion of national language and culture. Specifically, government can hold a variety of Chinese writings, speeches, historical, and literature competitions to encourage students to learn more about Chinese culture.

b. When English teachers teach English and English culture, they can talk more about national culture, and compare them to encourage students to use a rational and objective view upon these two cultures.

Of course, this research also has significant limitations. Survey that targeted only at English majors may not be representative enough. Future research can investigate students in different majors and different backgrounds in order to make the results more accurate.

REFERENCES

- Chen, X. R. (2008). *Foreign language education in the context of globalization and national identity*. Beijing: Higher Education Press. (In Chinese).
- Gao, M. (2006). Language and national identity. *Manchu Study*, (4). (In Chinese).
- Gao, Y. H. (1994). The productive bilingual phenomenon. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, (1). (In Chinese).
- Gao, Y. H. (2003). English learning and self-identity change. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, (2). (In Chinese).
- Hamers, J. F., & Blanc, M. H. (1989). *Bilinguality and bilingualism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lambert, W. (1974). Culture and language as factors in learning and education. *Annual Learning Symposium on Cultural Factors in Learning*. Western Washington State College.