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Second Language Writing as a Way of Negotiating Bilingual Identities: Case Study of a “Returnee from China”

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This study takes a socially-oriented approach to writing research, utilizing autobiographical narrative both as data and as a research tool. A longitudinal case study was conducted to examine the role writing played in the acculturation process of a bilingual adult speaker of Chinese and Japanese

本発表は自伝的ナラティブをデータとして、ライティングの社会的側面に焦点をあてた研究である。中国語と日本語のバイリンガル話者である成人女性の異文化適応過程において、ライティングの果たした役割について考察する。

Introduction

This is a longitudinal case study of Satoko (a pseudonym), a bilingual adult speaker of Chinese and Japanese. This study aims to explore the role writing played in Satoko’s acculturation process, utilizing autobiographical narrative both as data and as a research tool. This study is positioned within a social constructionist theoretical framework that views second language development as not just a process of acquiring a new set of linguistic rules, but rather as the struggle to participate in second language discourse through negotiating one’s identities (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). The telling of Satoko’s story will be followed by a discussion of the factors which caused her writing difficulties and the ways she tried to overcome these problems.

Satoko’s story

A brief biography

Satoko was born in 1977 in a small village in Heilongjiang province, in the northeastern part of China, close to the border with Russia. In 1986, at the age of nine, she came to Japan with her family for the purpose of permanent residence. People like Satoko and her family are often called *Chuugoku kikokusya* or “returnees from China”. I will clarify the significance of this term later. She had attended Chinese primary school for only six months before she came to Japan. Her Chinese literacy had not yet been developed. She did not know any Japanese, either spoken or written, when she arrived.

When she started her primary education in Japan, Satoko received neither systematic Japanese as a second language instruction nor first language maintenance education at school.

She was taught basic vocabulary and writing skills by the principal of her school in his office. Following this rather sporadic six-month introduction to Japanese, Satoko was placed in a normal classroom with Japanese children. She did not talk much at school, because of the language barrier. Even though she acquired basic communication skills, she was unable to make close friends.

Satoko completed her compulsory education and went on to technical high school for three years, which was not her first choice. She then started to think about what she really wanted to do in her future.

In the hope of developing her two languages fully, she decided to study Japanese language and culture in a two-year junior college, where Satoko and I met. Although she was a fluent speaker of Chinese and Japanese in everyday life, she had literacy problems in both languages and needed special assistance. She worked patiently and diligently on her Japanese literacy with help from lecturers. After graduation, she transferred to a four-year university to formally study the Chinese language. She felt that her level of Chinese literacy did not meet the expectations of Chinese speaking lecturers at university. She failed one of the core subjects and was unable to graduate in 2001. Satoko decided to study one more year to complete her degree. While repeating the core subject at university, she took Japanese literacy lessons from me. Finally she finished her course in March, 2002. Although Satoko was a highly motivated student, her school life was not easy at all. She often felt rejected by other students, as well as some teachers.

Historical background of her migration

To understand the circumstances of Satoko's migration, we need to consider the historical background. People like Satoko and her family are categorized as, and called, *Chuugoku kikokusya*, or "returnees from China". This term refers to the Japanese left behind in China when the Japanese Imperial Army pulled out at the end of World War II, who later returned to Japan with their Chinese spouses, children, grandchildren and other relatives. Most of the returnees had lived in northeastern China, where the Japanese-dominated state of Manchukuo existed from 1932 to 1945. The Japanese government had sent colonists to Manchukuo as a vital means of support for the Japanese army. However, as World War II dragged on, the male colonists were conscripted and sent to the war fronts, leaving only women, children and the elderly in the villages (Tomozawa, 2001). When Soviet troops invaded on August 9, 1945, many children were separated from their families during the chaos of their escape. Satoko's grandmother had been left behind, and had married a Chinese man. Her son, Satoko's father, was born in 1950. Satoko's grandmother returned to Japan by herself when the repatriation program restarted in 1953. After the normalization of China-Japan relations in 1972, a large-scale repatriation of war-displaced people and their families began. Satoko's grandmother sponsored her son's family, and they came to Japan in 1986.

Satoko's social identities

Because of her background as a returnee from China, Satoko has complex social identities. Since coming to Japan, Satoko has often been called a "third generation returnee from China", because she is the grandchild (third generation) of a war-displaced Japanese woman. The term "returnees from China" is

misleading in this case, because Satoko did not return to Japan. Although her ethnic background is Japanese, she was born and raised in China as Chinese, and spoke and still speaks the Chinese language. The “returnee from China” is a label imposed from outside, which had a tremendous influence on her through her school years.

The term “returnee from China” is also problematic in another sense, because it is based on the assumption and the expectation that people with Japanese ethnic backgrounds should be able to function as Japanese citizens upon their arrival. The government, schools, and people in general “took measures to promote their prompt adaptation as Japanese” (Tomozawa 2001:137), irrespective of a cultural background rooted in China.

Transformation of her social identities started with her name. Satoko’s family adopted her grandmother’s family name and also changed their given names to Japanese names. After eleven years of residency, Satoko’s family was naturalized as Japanese in 1997. They officially became Japanese citizens. She recalls “I was the only one in my family who did not want to be a Japanese national. I guess I still hadn’t lost my Chinese heart.”

Having Japanese passports, however, does not guarantee full membership in Japanese society. Social identity is to some degree embraced by the self, and to some degree imposed by others (Rubin, 1995). Satoko expresses how others see her: “When I was in China, I was called Japanese, while in Japan, I am called Chinese. So I wondered which country I belong to.” She was ambivalent in her sense of belonging.

Satoko tried to hide her Chinese ethnicity to protect herself from being ignored or bullied by other students at school. The impact of the conformist pressure she encountered in Japanese schools had a great consequence for her perception of self.

Satoko’s linguistic identities

Satoko has maintained her Chinese language while living in Japan for 15 years. At home she talks to her parents mainly in Chinese and with her brothers in Japanese.

In Junior college days, her self-image of ‘Chinese speaker’ was not very positive. She wrote

When the teacher asked me to give a Chinese lesson in her teaching methodology class, I felt I was different and hated myself being a Chinese speaker.

Satoko felt herself caught between two languages, neither of them fully her own. She revealed what it was like to have two languages.

Many students tell me that I am lucky because I can speak Chinese well. I want to ask them “Do you want to swap?” I’ll be happy to do it. It’s not easy to have two languages.

She expressed her feelings concerning her lack of linguistic foundation:

*Which is my first language, Chinese or Japanese?
Or do I ever have my first language?*

Writing lessons

Satoko decided to develop her Japanese writing proficiency by taking private lessons from me. We had 17 lessons in total over eight months from April to December 2001. Taking literacy tutoring was her own initiative and she decided the genres and

the topics on which she wanted to work. She produced 15 pieces of writing during this time. The genres included a book report, recipe, description, and an autobiographical narrative. When she was a student in junior college, she either did not have enough confidence to decide what to do, or she was not emotionally ready to express her opinion. Now she had a clear idea of what she wanted to write, and she had enough confidence to try out these ideas.

Book report

During the first two months, Satoko worked on a book report based on *Madogiwa no Totto chan (A little girl at the window)*. This is an autobiographical narrative written by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, an actress and an activist working for children's rights in UNICEF. The author describes her primary school days prior to and during World War II. She was expelled from her first school because of her misbehavior, transferring to a small private school where she met a wonderful headmaster. She enjoyed her school life with her friends and teachers until the school was destroyed by fire as a result of the Tokyo air raids in 1945. This book is written in easy Japanese, and is close to a spoken mode.

Satoko tried to summarize and comment on the story. She projected her school experience onto Totto-chan's story. Reading somebody else's narrative had a positive effect on her, triggering her childhood memories and motivating her to write down her own story.

Childhood memories

While she was reading *Magogiwa no Totto-chan*, Satoko's memories of childhood returned. On our first meeting, she suddenly started telling me about her primary school in China. Although she spent only six months there before she came to Japan, she had very vivid memories. It was the first time I had heard her story of her life in China at length, although I had known her for six years.

Following the book report, Satoko started writing about her childhood in China and produced 12 pieces of writing. She chose a different topic or episode for each piece, which included her village life, Chinese New Year, green tomatoes, raspberry picking, school life, a field trip, sports day, reading books, class activities, and the farewell party.

Discussion

The characteristics of her autobiographical texts

As an autobiographical narrative, all of her texts are written from the first-person perspective. However, there are two different 'Satokos' in her texts, the present Satoko and Satoko as a child. The setting is not the present China, but the world in her memory. She moves back and forth between present and past to narrate her story. Therefore, her narrative is a reconstruction of her childhood.

Motivation of writing her childhood memory

According to Satoko, the strongest motivation for writing about her childhood memories was to record and keep her memories in a written medium, which is more stable and secure than the oral medium. She has a very good memory and remembers even very small details of her childhood. Even so, she said:

I felt my childhood memory is getting vague. It is an old and deep-rooted memory. It's so precious that I don't want to lose it. So I wanted to write it down before it's gone, before it's forgotten. It would be nice and much easier, if I could write it in the Chinese language. Though I can't do it now, I want to write it in Chinese someday.

Her comments reveal her dilemma concerning language choice. Since her topic was something that happened in China and which was experienced in the Chinese language, it felt more natural to her to write about it in the original language. However, she felt that her written Chinese was not good enough, and so decided to do the second best, which was to translate her memory situated in the Chinese language and culture into the Japanese language.

There is another important aspect of this language choice, which involves the type of audience. In writing her experience of China in the Japanese language, Satoko is addressing a Japanese audience with limited background knowledge of the northeastern part of China. This challenge leads to her second motivation.

Her second motivation was to practice writing in the descriptive genre. This was the genre which she identified as problematic and wanted to work on more. "I want to describe things in China for the reader who doesn't know about it." Her

writing objective was 'description', rather than her personal memoirs. As a result, her text became more reader-conscious and also more reader-friendly.

Factors which caused her writing difficulties

From Satoko's story, we can infer some of the factors which caused her literacy problems in L1 and L2.

1. L1 literacy was not yet established when Satoko entered the L2 environment.
2. Opportunities to develop her L1 literacy were not provided.
3. Insufficient L2 introductory instruction
4. Insufficient social support at school
5. Social pressure of early adaptation to Japanese school
6. Social pressure causing her to conceal her Chinese background

The factors which created her literacy problems are not only linguistic: They are also social. If we see L2 development as the process of participating in L2 discourse, these social factors cannot be overlooked.

Significance of reconstructing one's childhood in L2

I'd like to discuss the significance of writing an autobiography in L2. Through writing her autobiography, Satoko made her Chinese ethnicity public. This was the first time for her to write about her childhood in China, although she had wanted to do so for a long time. As she had been trying to hide her Chinese background at school, she had not wanted to talk or write about

her past experiences. Now her attitude had changed and she was ready to present her Chinese background, which is an important part of her present self. She had felt alienated from written language before, but now she found her voice in it.

Concluding remarks

To summarize, Satoko tried to develop her L2 writing proficiency by way of L1, which means writing about her memories stored in L1 and making her L1 background public. Although her L1 literacy was not well enough developed to aid her L2 literacy development, her self-affirmation of L1 background played a vital role in her transition.

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