

Original article

Explore the Significance and Connection of Language, Culture, Identity, and Difference Through the Case of International Students in Higher Education

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Abstract: This paper explores the intertwined relationships among language, culture, identity and cultural difference through the auto-ethnographic case of reticent Chinese and Saudi international students in group learning activities at an Australian higher education English bridging programme, grounded in Stuart Hall's Circuit of Culture theoretical framework. Drawing on existing intercultural and sociolinguistic literature and reflective student interview data, the study first unpacks Hall's core arguments regarding representation, culture, fluid identity and the formative power of difference. Hall posits that language acts as a symbolic medium for meaning construction, culture refers to dynamic shared meaning-making practices, identity is constantly negotiated rather than fixed, and cultural difference serves as the foundation of symbolic cultural orders, with all four elements operating interdependently within a holistic cultural circuit. Further critical analysis demonstrates that classroom silence among international students is shaped by unequal power relations embedded in cross-cultural education. Dominant native English linguistic standards and cultural essentialist stereotypes trap migrant students in rigid marginalised identity labels, while cultural difference is oversimplified as a static root of low participation. This research argues that identity is fluid and reconstructable through linguistic representation and cross-cultural interaction, and cultural meaning remains open-ended rather than fixed. The paper concludes that simplistic attribution of international students' classroom reticence to inherent cultural differences is theoretically flawed. To advance equitable inclusive higher education in English-speaking contexts, educators need to abandon rigid cultural essentialism, adopt inclusive pedagogical strategies, and build pluralistic classroom environments that value linguistic and cultural diversity. By enabling international students to participate in collective meaning negotiation and co-construct shared cultural conceptual maps, institutions can facilitate cross-cultural integration and innovative intercultural teaching practice.

Keywords: Stuart Hall; Circuit of Culture; International Students; Intercultural Communication; Learner Identity; Cultural Difference; Classroom Reticence

1. Introduction

How the world is represented is inevitably influenced by a multitude of socio-cultural paradigms. According to Hall (1997a), discerning the interrelationship between language, identity, and cultural differences is of essential significance to unveil the profound connotations of representation. This paper primarily focuses on explicating Hall's theoretical arguments by synthesizing extant academic literature, followed by an auto-ethnographic reflection to further analyze the connection between these four factors in the process of representation. As recent studies emphasize, reflective practice serves as an indispensable paradigm in higher education, enabling learners to critically evaluate their intercultural learning journeys and foster professional development (Ma et al., 2026). Upon reflecting on Hall's theories, this article also draws upon broader sociological and pedagogical frameworks to provide a comprehensive explanation of his positions.

During an auto-ethnographic observation prior to commencing postgraduate studies at Monash University, a persistent phenomenon was noted within the Monash English Bridge college: many Chinese international students frequently experienced significant 'struggles' in academic group activities. Silence and passivity among these students in group discussions or classroom activities are frequently occurring issues. Driven by academic curiosity, an investigation was attempted to reveal the underlying reasons for their reluctance to participate. Within a discussion group comprising three Chinese students (including the author) and one Saudi Arabian student, participants were invited to share their attitudes and perceptions towards interactive group discussions.

The findings unfolded that Chinese students confronted various socio-cultural difficulties in this form of learning, a trend widely corroborated by research on international cohorts in Australia (Tran, 2011; Yu & Wright, 2016). The subsequent reflection on these discussions indicates the 'reticence' of international students from a socio-cultural perspective. Indeed, this phenomenon demonstrates the indispensable impact of language, identity, and cultural differences in the process of representation. It is strongly argued that particular attention should be paid to the silence of Chinese and other international students in academic group discussions within higher education in English as a Native Language (ENL) countries. Far from being a cognitive deficit, this silence is a complex intercultural negotiation (Bao, 2014; Heng, 2018), and resolving this educational dilemma requires more empirical evidence, inclusive pedagogical strategies (Ryan & Viete, 2009), and further academic research.

2. Stuart Hall's Theory of Language, Culture, Identity, and Difference

The relationship between language and culture is one of the oldest focal points in human history. According to Kramsch (1998), this is fundamentally due to the long-held belief that language learning is deeply rooted in cultural understanding. Furthermore, navigating this relationship touches upon profound identity shifts in multilingual contexts (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). To deeply understand the relationship between language, identity, and cultural differences, a thorough recognition and analysis of language, expression, and meaning are needed.

Hall (1997b) interprets five essential stages in the cultural process: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation, forming them into a whole system. He presents the 'Circuit of Culture' to illustrate the complexity of the interrelationships between these elements, emphasizing the importance of meaning because it supports the whole structure. This section is mainly based on Hall's premise that language, culture, identity, and difference are not separate, independent, and parallel to human society; rather, they are inextricably interwoven. In terms of the cultural circle concept (Hall, 1997b), language is considered a particular medium for constructing culture through the meaning-making representation process. Significant differences emerge in various cultural products where the question of identity can be critically located. Such a view is significant in Hall's sense, as people choose to comprehend their society and world in a post-structuralist and constructivist way (Zhou et al., 2008).

2.1 Language (Representation)

According to Hall (1997a), language is presented as a 'privileged medium' to generate and transmit meaning when it works in the representational system. Representation realizes its function of meaning production by virtue of language. As meaning is the kernel of Hall's theoretical system, the relation to meaning is the first essential characteristic of language. Language, as a "representative system," provides us with a collective opportunity to create and exchange meaning, which is vital for international students reconstructing their academic identities. From this perspective, Hall (1997a) addresses language much more broadly than written or spoken forms. It includes concepts, images, and emotions—such as sounds, words, pictures, or objects—that constitute the "culture codes." The second characteristic of language is that it operates as a symbol to establish and disseminate meaning across cultures, guiding humans to a shared 'conceptual map.' Hall (1997a) expounds that language realizes characterization because it promotes the categorization of meaning and conceptual thinking. Shared conceptual maps and similar symbols are considered common standard denominators that generate a culture in the practice of meaning representation (Hall, 1997b).

2.2 Culture

Culture is regarded as providing and receiving meaning among members of a society. Therefore, if participants share the same conceptual map that allows them to interact and perceive the similarity of the world, they may live in the same culture to express themselves intelligibly. Hall (1997b) revealed that the core of culture is to share meanings. Traditionally defined as a collection of arts and literature, culture, from Hall's post-structuralist perspective, is described as a set of practices. It is discursive and recreated by the production and exchange of meanings, rather than being static. People do not merely follow a set of values but actively participate in their "production, consumption and communication" (Pickering, 2001, p. 50). This implies that culture is a context-based, socially, and symbolically negotiated construction. Although language represents meaning, because meaning is always context-dependent and embedded in the socio-cultural background, it is not inherently fixed.

2.3 Identity

Hall (1997c) maintains that identity is multiple, varied, formulated, negotiated, and related. It is the meaning we exchange and produce in interactions that forms our identity (e.g., claiming "I am Chinese, not Australian"). Identity has been positioned and conceptualized through classification systems, which play a vital role in constructing social relations. Hall (1997c) highlights that social order consists of binary opposites. Differences can have adverse effects,

leading to exclusion and marginalization: authorities could produce "preferred" discourses which convey meaning exclusively through their lens. This process often leads to stereotyping (Hall, 1997b). Hall (1997b) suggests two approaches to indicate identity. One associates identity with a shared set of cultures, histories, and ancestors, acknowledging it as a stable concept. The other is a discursive approach that explains identity as a dynamic and fluid notion continuously constituted within representation. Identity can thus be flexible when repositioned to a different reference point.

2.4 Difference

Concerning diverse cultures and identities, difference plays a formative role. Using the Caribbean states as an example, Hall (1997c) illustrates how shared history plays a formative and complementary role in creating "differences." Hall (1997c) refers to 'difference' as 'differance' (drawing on Derrida) to illustrate how meaning is never completed but is consistently pushed around by additional meanings, tending toward the infinite postponement of meaning. It weakens identity by relocating reference points, forming cultural differences. Hall (1997c) states that culture depends on providing meaning to things and assigning them different positions in the classificatory system. Thus, the mark of difference is the basis of the cultural symbolic order. Identity relies on the construction of cultural differences, as groups identify themselves by similarity or difference (Hall, 1997c). While cultural differences provide opportunities to learn, potential conflicts in cultural boundaries may affect a person's vision of the future.

2.5 Relationships Between Language, Culture, Identity, and Difference

The interplay of these elements is perfectly reflected in Hall's (1997b) 'Circuit of Culture.' Language and cultural significance organize and dominate social practice and standardize behavior. Identity and difference are presented and constructed by language and culture. People express and share their understanding of the world and themselves through their conceptual maps via language. Meaning is the essential core; it is consumed, regulated, and endowed with culture and identity. Firstly, culture is a set of common meanings generated in language and produced by differences. Secondly, the floating nature of meaning leads to identity instability and ongoing negotiations (Gu et al., 2010). Culture provides the code by which the world can be interpreted, maintaining identity dynamically.

3. My Experiences with the Interplay Between Language, Culture, Identity, and Difference

To discover the underlying reasons behind the silence of international students in the Monash English Bridge course, two students from my discussion group were invited to assist my research.

3.1 First discourse: Zoe, a girl from China

Zoe preferred to be a listener rather than a speaker in group discussions and class activities. She said that one apparent reason is that our teachers are native speakers; although her English is quite good in reading and writing, it is also challenging to keep up with them. In group discussions or classroom activities, listening and speaking capabilities are required much more than reading and writing skills. While demonstrating strong receptive and academic writing proficiency, she struggled to adapt to the spontaneous, context-specific, colloquial interactional styles of native English-speaking instructors and local peers.

Sometimes, teachers might use examples relevant to their own context to illustrate concepts and knowledge points that would be elusive to her. For example, when they talked about celebrities who were famous in their countries or used folk adages, she would hardly understand them or add comments. Once, the teacher used 'Good day mates' as a greeting, but she had no idea what it meant. Other classmates told her that it was a common greeting in Australia, just like 'How are you'? Besides, she also told me that she often heard many local students or native English-speaking students regard Chinese students as timid and lacking the ability to speak English fluently. Therefore, she chose to be a "bystander" during discussions, especially when there were local students in the discourse. Consequently, she formed a habit of speaking less in discussions, even in class activities. Another reason is that, in the context of Chinese culture, careful listening is always considered an important sign of respect. It is common in Chinese classrooms, students are usually silent to receive knowledge from teachers, and rebuttal of the teacher's point of view is usually regarded as rudeness and discourteousness. She had also consulted the teacher about a similar issue, and the teacher took it as an ordinary cultural difference and just told her to relax and be more optimistic.

Native English-speaking peers frequently stereotype Chinese international students as timid and orally incompetent, perpetuating fixed negative group narratives (Norton, 1997). Internalization of this marginalized identity compels students to withdraw from interactive discourse and adopt passive observational roles in academic activities. Culturally, traditional Confucian educational epistemologies prevalent in Chinese educational contexts prioritize respectful listening and teacher-centric pedagogical authority. Within Chinese classroom norms, silent receptiveness signifies deference to instructors, while spontaneous questioning or verbal dissent is conventionally regarded as discourteous. This deeply ingrained cultural script fosters passive learning dispositions that conflict fundamentally with the student-led, question-driven interactive pedagogy dominant in Western university contexts.

3.2 Second discourse: Ali, a boy from Saudi Arabia

He stated that group discussions might be more useful for Westerners. The situation in Saudi Arabia is similar to that in China; they also prefer their traditional way of listening to instructions and taking notes. However, before coming to Australia, he had spent several years in America studying English. During that period, he attended various

tutorials to practice his oral English, and he forced himself to participate in discussion groups with native English speakers. He told me that, at first, other students seldom talked to him because of his accent and non-standard pronunciation. He felt frustrated and disappointed by this. The situation worsened when he read news on papers or websites that presented non-native English speakers with ridiculous accents and uncorrected pronunciation. Some people even mock the Chinese and Middle Eastern ethnicities for not being able to learn standard oral English well. On this occasion, he would rather button up his mouth because of his inferiority and insecurity. Despite this, he did not give up practicing his oral English, and he improved significantly after two years.

In cross-cultural academic discourse, standard Anglo-American pronunciation is institutionalized as the sole legitimate linguistic benchmark, framing non-native accents as deficient and substandard (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). Mainstream media and public discourse further perpetuate stereotypes mocking non-native English speakers' pronunciation, exacerbating communicative anxiety and identity insecurity among culturally and linguistically diverse students (Wang & Zhang, 2024).

Ali recounted experiencing peer exclusion and limited verbal engagement during his early American studies due to his non-native accent. Cumulative negative interactive experiences cultivated a self-protective silence-avoidance coping mechanism. While sustained oral practice and measurable linguistic improvement, the marginalized identity formed through early discriminatory social encounters continued to undermine his proactive academic participation in group discussions (Norton, 2001). Despite this, exhibiting remarkable agency, he continued practicing and improved significantly (Marginson, 2014).

4. Reflection and Analysis

It is natural for newcomers to encounter challenges. Little and McGivern (2016) represent this phenomenon as culture shock, describing the disorientation experienced when encountering different cultures. However, a deeper analysis clarifies how language, identity, and culture are intertwined to maintain the 'Circuit of Culture' (Hall, 1997b).

Zoe's case demonstrates the interconnection of meaning, language, and culture. For her, 'Good day mates' was a meaningless term. The disjunction of meaning conforms precisely to Hall's (1997b) argument that meaning only exists when shared. Australian peers understood this expression, proving they belong to the same culture through a shared language code, which plays a crucial role in cultural maintenance (Kramsch, 1998). They used this phrase to declare ownership of their "conceptual map" (Hall, 1997b). Furthermore, Zoe's silence linked her identity to Chinese didactic teaching paradigms. Research focusing on East Asian educational contexts highlights that active and meaningful participation in collaborative activities is deeply tied to a strong sense of organizational identification and pedagogical familiarity (Xu et al., 2026). Chinese Confucian teacher-centered pedagogy socializes students into normative learning identities centered on instructor respect and receptive listening.

Norton (2001) suggests that education often creates inequality by overemphasizing such cultural differences. Thus, educators must critically understand cultural differences to guide their teaching effectively (Kubota, 2003). Norton (1997) found that students struggle with marginalization; without prompt measures, more students may stand on the edge of academic expulsion. Ali's case depicts how power and difference operate. Troubled by his unorthodox pronunciation, his silence constituted a boycott of unfair social practices (Norton, 1997). Native English proficiency is often set as a normative standard, and the inability to achieve it is wrongly framed as a communication deficit (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). Ali's self-reproach stemmed from an unrealistic language standard that validates "legitimacy" while rejecting "non-native speakers." Media discourse also constructs identification tags, trapping individuals in ideological stereotypes (Heng, 2018). Contesting these stereotypes reveals that ideology and power usually fix meaning, yet identity can be redefined.

Actually, the essence of discourse in frameworks of intelligibility refers to provide meanings by people. Thus, the whole range of visual image or news emerges with a kind of identification tag. They tend to construct a position of the identification for the viewers in relation to the discourse. People might be trapped in this identity and influenced by it. Contesting stereotypes might fix the meaning that is given to groups. Ali was convinced by the news on the paper and website and then defined himself as the same identity. However, it should not be ignored that ideology and power usually fix the meaning, and identity could be changed and redefined as different culture or position. Responding to the scholarly consensus, educational practitioners must actively deconstruct cultural essentialism, cultivate intercultural classroom ecologies that value diversity, and institutionalize equitable participation structures for international students.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay demonstrates the inseparability and intersexuality of language, culture, identity, and difference that reveals how they constitute the complexity of the issue by reflecting my cases. It would be improper to interpret the silence and issue of international students as a consequence of cultural difference due to 'cultural difference' might be represented by multiple meanings in both positive and negative ways. It is worth noting that in education practice, meaning, identity and culture are always complex, dynamic and multifaceted.

Simplistic attribution of Chinese international students' classroom silence to static cultural difference is theoretically inadequate. Cultural difference represents a multi-dimensional, dynamically constructed social phenomenon encompassing both adaptive assets and contextual conflict risks. In international higher education practice, cultural meaning, individual identity, and cross-cultural interaction are complex, fluid, and multifaceted, resisting

monolithic interpretive frameworks.

As Hall (1997b) established, all cultural discourse is embedded within power relations, with cultural identity and meaning negotiation perpetually shaped by structural social hierarchies. Reflecting on personal cross-cultural learning experiences through this theoretical lens enables critical re-evaluation of cultural identity: identity is not fixed or deterministic but continuously negotiated and reconstructed through linguistic representation and cross-cultural social interaction. As the primary medium of meaning production, language facilitates the iterative renewal and innovation of educational and socio-cultural systems. Language plays a crucial role in negotiating the renewal of socio-cultural paradigms. Through the relative openness of meaning and representation, every member of society can contribute to and reshape the shared 'cultural maps' of our globalized communities.

The indeterminate, open-ended nature of cultural meaning creates inherent potential for cross-cultural integration and educational innovation. Within globalized higher education landscapes, educators must transcend rigid cultural essentialism to establish inclusive, pluralistic pedagogical systems. Empowering culturally diverse international students to participate in collective meaning negotiation and cultural co-construction fosters synergistic cross-cultural development and equitable inclusive education.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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