

# Linguistic Expertise as Community-based Practice: Situated Learning and Identity Construction among Chinese American Heritage Language Learners

**Jing Lei**

Department of Anthropology  
State University of New York at Oswego  
7060 New York 104, Oswego, NY 13126, USA

Email: [Jing.lei@oswego.edu](mailto:Jing.lei@oswego.edu)

Phone: +1 315-312-4172 (W)

## **Abstract**

*Based on a larger ethnographic study of second-generation Chinese heritage language learners in upstate New York, this paper explores the language socialization process in and out of classroom settings (Chinese heritage language classes, media, and interpersonal contacts). Instead of using the cognitive accounts of learning and instructionally-dependent forms of knowledge transmission, it considers the communities of practice as sites of negotiating and reconstructing expertise. In particular, it looks at how different social identities are embodied through language via various participation structures and learning processes. My findings illuminate that the expert-novice relationship is not a fixed pre-existing dichotomy; rather, it is a community-based practice in which all participants are interacting and co-constructing knowledge.*

**Keywords:** linguistic expertise; situated learning; heritage language education

## **1. Introduction**

Although there is an abundance of work addressing language education within a broader context of language socialization, most works tend to emphasize the transmission of knowledge from the experts to the novices. Little attention is given to the active role of the novices in the socialization process. Additionally, we lack models which examine the expert-novice dynamics in various socio-cultural contexts. In order to address these lacunae, this paper discusses how immigrant children evaluate, negotiate, perform, and co-construct linguistic expertise through different communities of practice.

Beyond a descriptive account of how immigrants move from marginal to legitimate membership through active participation in a particular community of practice, this paper aims to address critical conceptual and empirical questions, including: 1) how do we understand language socialization in culturally and linguistically heterogeneous communities? 2) how do we extend concepts of participation to complex forms of mediated participation, especially related to media-based interactions? And 3) how do we analyze identity and agency in a globalized world of multilingual contact? I argue that co-construction, participation dynamics, and the individual network of linguistic contacts (INLC) provide a conceptual and

methodological framework of linked explorations of linguistic expertise, situated learning, engaged participation, and the construction of communities of practice.

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks

*Co-construction* is a concept for understanding interactional processes. It has roots in a number of disciplines. Since the early part of the last century, scholars of Soviet psychology (Vygotsky, 1978; Leontyev, 1981) worked on the import of social interaction in overall cognitive development. Vygotsky's (1978) notion of "zone of proximal development", for instance, highlighted the role of socially organized activities in helping children and other novices in accomplishing goals beyond their actual developmental level. The literary theory of the Bakhtin Circle (Bakhtin, 1981; Briggs and Bauman, 1992) also emphasized intertextuality, the dialogic underpinnings of texts. Within the tradition of anthropology, linguistic anthropologists have examined how cultural activities/events are collaboratively built by co-participants through various linguistic practices (Irvine, 1974; Duranti & Brenneis, 1986). In particular, language socialization studies explore the moment-by-moment production and reproduction of linguistic and cultural knowledge among experts and novices (Heath, 1983; Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984; He, 2003a). All these previous studies illuminate the fundamentally interactional basis of human activities. To synthesize various arguments about co-construction from different disciplines, this paper adopts Jacoby & Ochs' definition as "the joint creation of a form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, institution, skill, ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality" (1995, p.171). This definition implies that co-construction is not a seamless process, and the co-participants need to negotiate their differences through interactions. This is because individuals may carry with them different goals, ideas, dispositions, expectations, emotions, and norms of behavior during any social interaction. In regards to language socialization, linguistic expertise is also a joint achievement when the expert and the novice are negotiating their relations, as indicated in later discussions.

In their seminal work, *Situated Learning*, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is situated in a specific context and embedded within a particular social and physical environment. In other words, learning is not simply transmitting abstract and decontextualized knowledge; rather, knowledge is co-constructed. They also make the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* central to their research program. This is a valuable theoretical innovation, as it considers communities of practice as sites of 'cultural learning' (Gee, 2005) that emerge out of participation in diverse forms of common endeavor (Hanks, 1996). It is further enriched by more developed frameworks of interaction analysis. For instance, in his model of communication, Goffman' (1981) uses the concept of "footing" to emphasize that participants frequently take up multiple, shifting alignments to differing ongoing activities. Such emphasis on frames of activity and participation formats greatly enriches our understanding of co-present interaction, and our appreciation of the complexities of participation. However, as others have argued, it needs to extend concepts of participation, initially developed for situations of co-presence (Goffman, 1981), to complex forms of mediated, non-face-to-face participation (Collins & Slembrouck, 2007b; Giddens, 1988; Irvine, 1996; Hanks, 1996).

The third concept, *individual network of linguistic contact (INLC)*, comes from Landry and Allard's (1992) model of additive and subtractive bilingual development. This model comprises three levels of

analysis: sociological, socio-psychological, and psychological. Ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) constitutes the sociological level of analysis. It refers to the objective EV including demographic, political, economic capital, and cultural capitals an ethnolinguistic group acquires. It is this EV that influences the structure and composition of individual networks of linguistic contacts (INLC) which is at the socio-psychological level of analysis. The INLC is established through interpersonal contacts, media-based (both oral and written) contacts and educational supports. These networks determine the quantity and quality of a person's ethnolinguistic experiences. At the psychological level, it is the INLC that determines both the linguistic competences and the cognitive-affective dispositions toward the ethnolinguistic groups with which one is in contact. In other words, the individual's experiences in the INLC leads to the development of various vitality beliefs. A sense of ethnic belongingness can also be formed as a result of the individual's experiences in the INLC. Therefore, the INLC functions as a bridge between the sociological and psychological level of analysis. The INLC is different from the notion of *social network*, the pattern of informal relationships people are involved in on a regular basis. First, the INLC includes both formal and informal relationships. Second, the INLC covers both regular and irregular interactions, the latter of which may be the best examples of the emergent nature of linguistic expertise. Third, the INLC highlights the role of language in mediating social interactions. Finally, the INLC emphasizes the import of media in language socialization. Therefore, I argue that the INLC provides a useful framework to study how expert-novice relations are co-constructed moment-by-moment through both formal and informal, both regular and irregular linguistic interactions.

Although co-construction, participation, and the INLC are presented as separate concepts, they are linked altogether when discussing the fluid nature of linguistic expertise. Both co-construction and participation dynamics emphasize learning as a joint achievement, as the latter is particularly related to the ideas of "mutual engagement", "joint enterprise" and "shared repertoire" (Wenger, 1998, pp. 72-73). The INLC is exactly the loci where various communities of practice are co-constructed to evaluate, ratify, negotiate, and re-construct expertise. In what follows, the paper will use these three concepts to explore the language socialization process of second-generation Chinese heritage language learners in upstate New York in and out of classroom settings.

### 3. Research Context

Data presented in this paper were based on an 11 month ethnographic study of second-generation Chinese American adolescents' heritage language learning and identity formation processes in Upstate New York. These children were either born in the U.S. or came to the U.S. with their parents at a very young age. Like many other immigrant groups, most of these youngsters are already English-dominant though some of them are bilingual in Chinese and English in the oral form. In order to maintain Chinese language skills as well as to retain cultural heritage, they are sent by their parents to attend the local Chinese heritage language school during the weekends. Both Chinese language classes and Chinese culture classes are offered there. In addition, some parents teach Chinese language and culture at home, such as reading Chinese stories, watching Chinese movies/TV programs, and practicing traditional Chinese calligraphy. Some children are also encouraged to participate in activities organized by the Chinese heritage language school and the local Chinese Community Center, such as the annual Chinese New Year Celebration, the Story-telling Contest,

and the International Festival. Overall, it is to improve their Chinese language proficiency and maintain their Chinese cultural identity that these youngsters are engaged in various events/activities across different settings.

I argue that heritage language education illuminates a prime example of language socialization in general and situated learning & identity construction in particular. Firstly, by combining elements from family, community, and school (Bradunas & Topping, 1988; Cummins, 1992; Fishman et al., 1966; He, 2003). Chinese heritage language schools provide a borderline context to study formal and informal socialization. It is formal in term of its curriculum and administration (e.g. exams and course evaluations); while it is informal as it is family-driven with diffuse roles (many school administrators and teachers are parents whose children attend this school). Thus it offers an interesting case to examine the fluid nature of expertise and identity. Secondly, heritage language learning among these immigrant children is a good example to explore identity and agency in the era of globalization. As many scholars have pointed out, in a multicultural/multilingual society, identity boundaries are continually being revised, negotiated, and redefined according to the practical interests of actors (Pierce, 1995; Silverstein, 2003). Therefore, it is important to look at how different aspects of identity are constructed through language socialization and what processes of agency are involved. Last but not least, these children's learning and use of heritage language across settings sheds a good light on situated learning, i.e., how different participation structures and learning dynamics are involved in various contexts. In particular, their media-based learning (e.g. surfing bilingual web-sites and watching Chinese videos) has important implications for analyzing complex forms of mediated participation.

My data were mainly from two resources: participant observations and interviews. In regards to participant observation, I went to the local Chinese heritage language school every Sunday to observe and audio-tape classroom interactions. I also went to their home to observe and audio-tape their interactions with family members and friends as well as with the media (e.g. music, films, TV shows). In addition, I participated in different kinds of ethnic activities (e.g. Chinese New Year Party). I also had interviews with these teenagers, their families, Chinese teachers, and friends to get additional information of their life stories from different perspectives. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with their teachers at regular English schools to compare their behaviors in different settings. Generally speaking, participant observations aim to get first-hand data on how these children are socialized through the INLC and what identity dynamics are embodied in moment-to-moment interactions to accrue spatial data, while interviews have been used to solicit background information of a temporal nature to supplement observations.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 A Chinese heritage language class**

My first example is a Chinese conversation from a 7<sup>th</sup> grade Chinese heritage language class. Before moving to the details of this example, it is necessary to briefly discuss the classroom as a specific setting to co-construct expertise. Many scholars have pointed out that the classroom is a place where knowledge is generated through particular kinds of interactions (Green & Dixon, 199; Lin, 1993). Although schools provide an institutional framework and an organizational definition of being a teacher or a student, the role identities are not always clear-cut; rather, the teacher-student relationship is collaboratively constructed as

the interaction unfolds. In other words, the teacher's expertise and authority is not readily accepted by the students to the same degree at all times. This is especially true when the students come from different national and language backgrounds. By studying interactions in Chinese heritage language classes, He (1997, 2003b, & 2004) argues that the expert-novice relationship between the teacher and the students is an emergent one that is constantly shifting. In particular, following Goffman's (1981) interactional analysis, He (2003b) identifies students' various speech roles as animator, author, and principal, which again indicates the fluid nature of identity construction. It also implies that different students may participate to different extents in the same classroom activities, and the same students may participate in varying degrees in different classroom activities. The example I will discuss is a Chinese language class where the middle-aged teacher asks her students to make presentations on Chinese folklore and fairy-tales. Before the following conversation starts, one boy just finished his presentation. We will look at what learning processes are involved and how different role identities (teacher-student, mother-daughter, and expert-novice) are co-constructed.

1 T: 大家有什么问题?

“Do you have any question?”

2 J u d y: 女娲和玉帝, 哪一个大?

“Nvwa and Yudi, who is more powerful?”

3 T: 你问她什么是玉帝, 她不知道。

“If you ask her who is Yudi, she does not know.”

4 A l e x: 玉皇大帝。

“Yuhuangdadi.”

5 T: 我问你, 什么是玉帝?

“Let me ask you. Who is Yudi?”

6 J u d y: 我知道什么是玉帝。

“I know who is Yudi.”

7 T: 那好, 这个故事就不要多说了, 是个神话故事。

“Good. Then we don't need to talk more about this story. It's a fairy-tale.”

8 J u d y: 玉帝大, 还是女娲大? 到底哪一个大?

“Is Yudi more powerful, or Nvwa? Who is on earth more powerful?”

9 T: 这怎么说呢。。。

“How to say....”

10 A l e x: 到底有没有女娲呢? 不清楚=

“Does Nvwa exist at all? It's unclear.”

11 T: =到底有没有女娲呢? 这个不知道。=

“Does Nvwa exist at all? It is unknown.”

12 J u d y: =我知道有, 一定有的。

“I know she is existent, certainly she is.”

13 T: O k, 这个问题我们回去慢慢说。现在没什么时间了。

“Ok. We'd better go back and take time talking about this issue. There is not enough time right now.”

The teacher asks if anyone has questions about the boy's presentation as in line 1. Following the teacher's question, Judy, also the teacher's daughter, comes up with one question (line 2) of which one is more powerful, Yudi (a male Chinese God) or Nvwa (a female Chinese God). The teacher, also Judy's mother, says to the boy who made the presentation that Judy does not know who Yudi is in line 3. Alex, another boy, would like to help Judy and spells out the complete name of Yudi (Yudi is the abbreviation of Yuhuang Dadi) as shown in line 4. Then Judy's mother asks Judy (line 5) who Yudi is. Judy emphasizes the fact that she knows Yudi but does not give the exact answer (line 6). Then Judy's mother tries to finish this conversation (line 7) by generally mentioning that Yudi's story is a fairy-tale. Not satisfied with her mother's hedge, Judy repeats her question in two consecutive questions (line 8). Judy's mother expresses her hesitancy to answer the question (line 9). At this point, Alex again steps in to break down the deadlock (line 10) by switching to another related topic: it is unclear that whether Nvwa has ever existed. Judy's mother repeats the question (line 11) immediately after Alex's remarks. Judy responds by stressing her belief that Nvwa does exist as in line 12. Finally, Judy's mother has to finish the conversation by offering to discuss this issue back at home and finding an excuse that there is not enough time left for the rest of the presentations.

This conversation shows an interesting pattern of how a mother-daughter relationship intersects with teacher-student power relations between Judy and her mother: she challenges her mother's linguistic expertise but does not get a satisfactory answer from her mother. As a girl who is curious about various things, Judy loves asking questions in both Chinese and English classes. However, her curiosity is not satisfied by her mother as much as by her English teachers. I also heard complaints from Judy that she got frustrated on many occasions when her mother hedged, as in this case, or even ignored her questions in the Chinese class. Based on observations and conversations with both Judy and her mother, it seems that Judy's mother considers Judy's questioning as a challenge to her authority as the Chinese teacher. In the cases when Judy's mother does not know the right answer, the best way is not to reply directly, but to hedge or simply ignore the question. In other words, Judy's mother does not want to lose face in front of the whole class. However, Judy may not realize her mother's intention, or maybe she deliberately challenges her mother as a typical teenage girl.

This conversation also illustrates Alex's identity of being a linguistic expert as well as a problem solver between the teacher and her students. Being fluent in Chinese and English as well as being knowledgeable in both Chinese and American cultures, Alex often functions as the linguistic and cultural broker in his class. Since the teacher (Judy's mother) does not speak English very well, Alex usually helps her translate his classmates' English conversations into Chinese. Alex also occasionally helps his classmates in answering the teacher's questions. In this conversation, there are two occasions when Alex tries to solve the problem. The first case is when the teacher assumes that Judy does not know Yudi, Alex volunteers to spell out the complete name of Yudi (Yuhuang Dadi), although it turns out later that Judy does know who Yudi is. The second case is when the teacher finds it hard to answer Judy's question of who is more powerful, Yudi and Nvwa. Alex again comes out to break down the deadlock by switching to another related topic. Since his attempts, in both cases, are to save face for Judy and her mother, Alex's identity of being a problem-solver and mediator is easily ratified and sanctioned.

#### 4.2 A personal conversation

Different from the first case where learning takes place in a formal setting, a heritage language class, the second example is a personal conversation between me and Jane, a 17 year old Chinese American girl, when they met at the open house of the local Chinese Community Center. Unlike classroom learning activities where the role identities of teachers and students are more well-defined by common institutional organizational patterns (time, space, curriculum), interpersonal communications are more situated in a natural setting in which expertise/authority is accomplished interactionally in real time and space. This type of expertise is called interactional expertise that is a practical accomplishment negotiated within linguistic interaction (Collins, 2004; Collins & Evans, 2007; Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991). The following short conversation shows how expert and authority status is evaluated, reversed, and re-constructed when the girl and Jing greeted each other in Chinese.

- 1 J: 阿姨, 你好。  
Aunt, how are you doing?
- 2 M: 你好。不要叫我阿姨。我没有你想得那么老。  
How are you? Don't call me "aunt". I don't look as old as you think.
- 3 J: 那你多大了?  
So, how old are you?
- 4 M: 我只比你大十岁。  
I am only ten years older than you.
- 5 J: 真对不起。那我该怎么叫你呢?  
I am so sorry. So how should I address you?
- 6 M: 就叫我 Jing 吧。  
Just call me Jing.
- 7 J: 我还是叫你静姐吧。  
I'd better call you Sister Jing.
- 7 M: 那太好了。  
That's great.

This conversation is a good illustration of how different interpersonal relationships are constructed, challenged, and negotiated through using various address terms. Jane calls me *ayi* (aunt) to show her respect at the very beginning (line 1), because she is not familiar with my background except that I know her parents. Feeling uncomfortable with the term *ayi*, I point out that I am not as old as Jane has thought (line 2). Responding to this concern, Jane asks my age (line 3). After knowing that I am only ten years older than her (line 4), this girl quickly apologizes for her misjudgment and asks for my suggestion of an appropriate address term (line 5). I then propose to use my first name to indicate the egalitarian relationship as well as the casual setting (line 6). Surprisingly, Jane opts for using another Chinese kinship term *jie* (elder sister) (line 7) which implies an age difference between us without undermining the solidarity. Of course I am satisfied with this choice as in line 8.

This girl's use of *ayi* (aunt) and *jie* (elder sister) also demonstrates the situated nature of learning Chinese kinship terms. She first addresses me with *ayi* based on her previous knowledge that this generalized kinship term is used to show respect for someone as a senior from the parents' generation. After

knowing my exact age, she realizes that using this term is inappropriate. Instead of accepting my suggestion, she chooses to use another generalized kinship term *jie*, which perfectly recognizes my relative status (older than her, but within the same age group) while maintaining a friendly relationship. Finally, her choice is confirmed by me who is considered as an expert on Chinese language and culture. Therefore, her knowledge about such social dimensions as age, status and solidarity as encoded in these kinship terms is displayed, negotiated, and enriched through this social interaction. And the expert-novice relationship is also challenged, negotiated, and co-constructed via this brief exchange.

#### 4.3 Exploring the Internet at home

My last case involves Judy's (the same girl in the first case) exploring the Internet at home to finish a Chinese culture project. The learning process involved here is quite different from the previous two, as media becomes the means and target of interaction and there is no face-to-face participation. Many scholars point out that media provides alternative ways of learning and understanding outside school settings (Gee, 2003b & 2004; Squire, 2003). For instance, Gee (2004) has enriched the framework of situated learning by making distinctions between knowledge as activity and experience versus knowledge as information and facts, and between situated as opposed to verbal understandings. For him, game-like learning through digital technologies can facilitate situated understandings in the context of activity and experience grounded in perception. The features that make games good for learning are: interactivity, customization, strong identities, well-ordered problems, pleasant frustration, and cycles of expertise. Cycles of expertise means that expertise is formed in any area by repeated cycles of learners practicing skills until they are nearly automatic, then having those skills fail in ways that cause learners to have to think again and learn anew. In other words, expertise is not a static property; rather, it is constructed through practice and participation over a long time. Good video games as well as other media-based interactions such as surfing online websites and Googling images support exactly this cycle of expertise. Following Gee's framework, I will then look at what learning processes take place when Judy is exploring the internet and how expertise is interactionally constructed.

When I arrived at her home on a Saturday afternoon, Judy was doing a project about Chinese culture. I was told that this project was an assignment for the Chinese school's learning fair. The purpose of this Chinese learning fair was to stimulate students' interest in learning Chinese language and culture through searching related literature, preparing posters, and interpreting contents to the audience by using Chinese. After getting suggestions from her mother (also her Chinese teacher at the Chinese school) and father, Judy chose Chinese calligraphy and painting as her topic. She was supposed to use both language and pictures to illustrate this topic.

In response to my question of how she got access to the needed information, Judy explained that, "It's so easy. I just go to the internet to find everything I want." Then, she showed me the whole process. First, she clicked on Google image search from her Bookmarks, and typed in the key word 中国书画 (Chinese calligraphy and painting) to search. Then, thousands of pictures came out on the screen. She only picked a few according to her preferences. After that, she showed me how to find relevant information in written language. This time, she did not use Google; instead, she opened another website <http://chinese.chnedu.com/index.htm> which is considered a leading Chinese learning site. The website is comprehensive and includes various aspects of China such as geography, climate, culture, travel, and



festival. In addition, it is displayed in both Chinese and English. Judy seemed to be very familiar with this website. She quickly clicked on a subsection of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting from the section of Chinese Culture. Then, a lot of information about the introduction, history, and typology of Chinese calligraphy and painting was unfolded in both Chinese and English. Responding to the question of how to choose something out of all the information and apply it into her own project, Judy explained that she would read all the English information first to get a general idea, and then made a decision on which contents she was interested in. Then, she would go to the Chinese section to figure out how to express those ideas in Chinese words. Finally, she would paraphrase those Chinese contents and put them into her own words.

Judy's learning Chinese painting and calligraphy by exploring the Internet is another demonstration of the fluid nature of expertise. Judy seems to be proficient in using appropriate channels (Google Image Search or Chinese learning website) and appropriate languages (English for reading comprehension or Chinese for written report) to achieve various purposes of learning. It is exactly the Internet that provides Judy, as well as other Chinese students, with the ability to learn various contents of Chinese language and culture that are not necessarily familiar to their middle-aged parents and Chinese teachers. In this sense, Judy is an expert in media-based language learning.

Another interesting issue came up when I asked Judy why she chose to paraphrase instead of directly copying the contents from the website. It is much easier and it also saves time to copy and paste. More importantly, both her mother (also her Chinese teacher) and father would allow her to do so. However, Judy told me that, "I know Chinese people do not care about it, but that is plagiarism in America. It is totally wrong." Judy's way of doing a Chinese project shows a good example of how the ethnic self emerges with other aspects of identity. On the one hand, she enjoys exploring the bilingual website to finish her Chinese project, which shows her strong ethnic affiliation. On the other hand, instead of copying which might be seen as plagiarism, she chooses to paraphrase. This indicates that she wants to be a good "American" student.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Participation structures in learning practices**

These three cases involve different participation structures and learning processes. The first example takes place in a classroom setting where the teacher and her two students co-construct the meanings of two mythological figures in Chinese folklore. One student (also her daughter) brings up a question and the teacher avoids directly answering it, but the student persists in her quest for truth. This deadlock is mediated by a second student who helps to answer questions as well as to divert the topic. The second case involves a personal conversation between an adult and an adolescent girl in a natural setting. Being familiar with indexical meanings of various Chinese kinship terms, she manipulates her linguistic resources to construct, challenge, and negotiate various relationships. Her indexical knowledge about such social dimensions as age, status, and solidarity, as encoded in these kinship terms, is also displayed, negotiated, and enriched through this social interaction. The last case provides another scenario of language socialization. A girl explores the Internet to search relevant information for a project. She seems to be proficient in using appropriate channels (Google Image Search or Chinese learning website) and appropriate languages (English for reading comprehension or Chinese for written report) to achieve multiple purposes of learning. These different

interactions and processes indicate that knowledge transmission is not only instruction-dependent; rather, it is situated in multiple sites in and out of school.

### 5.2 Co-construction of linguistic expertise and other aspects of identity

All three examples demonstrate the fluid nature of identity construction in general and linguistic expertise in particular. The first example shows how the expert-novice dynamics intersect with teacher-student and mother-daughter power relations. The teacher's position of being the expert is challenged by her student's (also her daughter) consistent efforts at seeking answers and another student comes in to be the expert as well as the problem-solver. In the second example, the girl's choices of using different kinship terms to address a knowledgeable adult reflect how the expert-novice relation is co-constructed. It is also through choosing kinship terms that different social relations are established, negotiated, and reconstructed between them. The final example of using the Internet to finish a Chinese project also shows the dynamics of expertise. The student's flexibility to use appropriate channels and languages to achieve different purposes indicates that she is proficient in internet-learning. In addition, her choice of paraphrasing instead of directly copying shows her blending of Chinese and American knowledge and affiliations regardless of her parents' (her mother as the Chinese teacher) suggestions.

In a word, these three examples suggest that expert-novice relationship is not a fixed pre-existing dichotomy; rather, it is a community-based practice in which all participants are interacting and co-constructing knowledge (Ochs, 1996; He, 2003b; He, 2004). It also implies that identity construction is so performative a process that it demands for a careful and thorough analysis of individuals as conscious and creative agents who may engage in acts of innovation, transgression, or even subversion. Many scholars of practice theory have addressed the issue of identity construction and human agency. For example, Holland, et al. claims that improvisation is the major power of agency. For them, "improvisations, from a cultural base and in response to the subject positions offered in situ, are, when taken up as symbol, potential beginnings of an altered subjectivity, an altered identity" (1998, p.18). Bucholtz (1999) makes a similar argument that identities are improvised "through the innovative reworking of previously formulated structures". All these indicate the nature of human agency: individuals are not passive receptors of assigned cultural meanings; rather, they can have some innovations or choices based on available resources. This may be especially true for immigrant children who are exposed to multilingual and multicultural environments. Their diverse experiences make them develop overlapping or even conflicting identities. However, they may only highlight what is true for all—identity "as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change" (Peirce, 1995, p.9). Therefore, community of practice again becomes an insightful framework to look at the fluid nature of identity.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper uses three examples to discuss how language socialization occurs in different contexts: Chinese heritage language classes, media, and interpersonal contacts. Instead of using the cognitive accounts of learning and instructionally-dependent forms of knowledge transmission, I argue that the communities of practice are sites of negotiating and reconstructing expertise-novice relations. It illuminates how different communities of practice are constructed through language as a target of socialization and as a tool for

socialization (He, 2000). In particular, it highlights the dynamic and fluid nature of linguistic expertise during moment-to-moment interactions among the co-participants

By revisiting the three questions at the outset, this paper has important and empirical implications. As to language socialization, it shows that language socialization is not only a process but also more important as a set of social practices—how learning takes place in and through language regardless of the setting (heritage language classrooms, interpersonal contacts, or digital media). In other words, learning heritage language and culture is embedded in wider social practices of talking, doing, seeing, listening, valuing, choosing and interacting. In regards to identity and agency, my findings suggest that these immigrant children's diverse experiences make them develop overlapping or even conflicting identities. They are not simply the combination of being Chinese and American, but rather the sum of their personal experiences. Accordingly, their language choices and group affiliation are not fixed and unchanging, but fluid and contingent, as they adapt to specific types of social, economic, and political circumstances in a multilingual and multiethnic society. To conclude, this paper will shed some light on the relationship between linguistic expertise, situated learning, and the construction of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wortham, 2005) in specific local contexts.

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