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GIDP: Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (SLAT)

Conference Abstract

Presentation Title:

‘We are bilinguals. Of course this is how we speak!’: Heritage language and identity development on social media

Research Abstract

Identity development has long been of central concern to heritage language (HL) education. Previous studies have largely examined HL learner identity development in home, school, or study abroad settings (e.g., Little, 2020; Leung et al, 2022; Diao, 2017). With the advent of the digital age, language learning and use have transcended physical spaces through online communication tools. This transformation is significant for HL learners who wish to (re)establish linguistic and cultural ties with their ancestral homeland without physically crossing geopolitical borders. Surprisingly, scholarly attention to how HL learners perform, construct, and negotiate their multifaceted HL identity online is scant, despite their increasing social presence in digital spaces.

The study focuses on a Chinese HL speaker from the UK who actively participates in Chinese social media to (re)connect with her family members (e.g., grandparents) and other Chinese audience (e.g., netizens who are interested in overseas Chinese heritage speakers) in China. We examined the complex interplay between digital engagement and identity construction through theories of HL identity development (He, 2006; Li & Zhou, 2022). We applied thematic content analysis and discourse analysis to interpret the data, which were drawn from the HL speaker’s social media channel on Xiaohongshu (“RedNote”), including her video posts, and interactions with social media consumers via video comments/discussions.

Findings show that social media platforms serve as important spaces for authentic language practices with speakers across the globe, fostering HL (meta)linguistic awareness and cultural knowledge development. In her channel, she shares many of her life experiences as a Chinese HL speaker growing up in the UK and her perspectives of Chinese culture and language. Particularly, the hybrid performance of her standard British English and the Shandong dialect (a northern Chinese dialect) she gained from her parents in the videos sparks the audience’s discussions on a series of issues such as (non)standard Mandarin ideology, translanguaging practices, heritage speaker identity. The HL speaker co-constructs complex translingual identities of hybridity with the audiences through such interactions on the Chinese social media; it also allows her to better connect with Chinese-speaking family members, which is the original motivation to use Chinese social media. Consequently, such experience enhances the parts of her social networks tied to her HL and culture and exposes her audience to the lived experiences of HL learners.

This study contributes to HL education by demonstrating the affordances of digital platforms on positive identity formation among HL speakers. We propose that encouraging online community engagement can facilitate their HL development (e.g., (meta)linguistic awareness and knowledge, authentic language use context); it also fosters learners' multilingual and cultural identity negotiation. We conclude the study by providing practical insights for educators interested in leveraging digital tools for Chinese HL identity development.