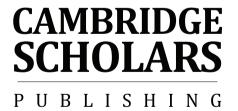# Gender Construction and Negotiation
in the Chinese EFL Classroom

Gender Construction and Negotiation in the Chinese EFL Classroom

By

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

I would like to dedicate this book to my beloved parents
Mr. Shunliu Zhao and Ms. Lanfen Ye

Parents in law
Mr. Zhaohe Gan and Ms. HuaZheng

And my husband
Dr. Lian Gan

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part I: Background to the Research

Introduction
    1.1 Concepts of gender, gender construction and gender negotiation
    1.2 The significance of examining gender construction and its
        negotiation in relation to SLL in the school context
    1.3 Organisation of the book

Second Language Learning and Identity Theories
    2.1 Sociolinguistic approaches to SLL
    2.2 Learning from a sociocultural perspective
    2.3 Theories of identity

China as a Research Context
    3.1 Gender—an under-researched issue in China
    3.2 Communicative language teaching in the EFL class in Chinese
        secondary schools
    3.3 Development of research questions

Methodological Issues
    4.1 The case study strategy
    4.2 Data elicitation and collection
    4.3 Data analysis
    4.4 Reflexive discussion on the methodology of the research

Part II: Research Findings and Discussion

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

L2	Second Language
TL	Target Language
FL	Foreign Language
CA	Conversation Analysis
DA	Discourse Analysis
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SLL	Second Language Learning
SLE	Second Language Education
UEE	University Entrance Examination
CsofP	Communities of Practice
NNCET	New National Curriculum of English Teaching

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PART I:

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Language learning involves the identities of learners (Coates 1998). Every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors but engaging in identity construction and negotiation through (re)organising a sense of who they are and how they are related to the social world (Bourdieu 1977). As Norton and Toohey (2002:115) put it,

> "Language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols, it is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to an utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks."

In other words, language functions as a symbolic resource for constructing and managing personal, social and cultural meanings and identities (Kendall and Tannen 2005). It is not only that we speak the language, but also that the language we use indicates who we are.

Gender identity is important in people's lives socially. It can be one of the most powerful components of an individual's social identity (Young 1999). Many researchers use the study of language as a lens through which to view social and cultural aspects of gender relations (Tannen 1990; Bulter 1999; Ochs 1997). As argued by Weedon (1997), language use is not only the place where various forms of social organisation and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested in day-to-day social interactions; it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, including our sense of being gendered, is constructed. From such a point of view, language appears as one important means by which gender is enacted and constructed. The following questions then arise: "If we construct gender when learning our language through the process of socialisation, what about when we are learning and being taught another language?"; "Do we negotiate our

gender identity when we learn a second language[1]?"; "If yes, how?" The current research is an attempt to explore these questions.

In the year 2006, I did my MPhil project which aimed to explore the role of gender in peer-group interactions in a Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom mainly by examining students' linguistic performance in interactions. The data collected from the project showed that female and male students did not do the same things as L2 learners in interactions. They oriented themselves towards different aspects of English and practiced different skills in doing a task. The most significant reason lay in the fact that when girls and boys were performing communicative tasks, they demonstrated both verbal and non-verbal habits associated with expected ideal gender norms (e.g. girls learning about the details and boys learning how to give directions). In other words, they tended to bring certain pre-existing gender-based ideologies and prejudices into their interactions, either consciously or unconsciously, which affected their English language learning. Then what can or does learning a second/foreign language do to students' construction and negotiation of gender? How do students construct and negotiate their gender identity in the course of learning a second/foreign language? These questions were then identified as the main research focus of the current research.

1.1 Concepts of gender, gender construction and gender negotiation

Recent work in sociolinguistics generally, and in language and gender research in particular, has promoted dynamic notions of social identities to replace the previous categories which tended to be fixed and essentialist (Cameron 1995; Schiffrin 1996; Ehrlich 1997). With respect to gender identity, more and more sociolinguists have abandoned the assumption that the meaning of gender is shared across cultures and that it is fixed, unproblematic and can be easily isolated from other aspects of social identity. Instead, they view gender as something individuals *do* and *perform*, as opposed to something individuals *are* or *have* (West and Zimmerman 1987; Bulter 1999; Piller and Pavlenko 2001). In other words, they do not simply equate *gender*, which is more appropriate for

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[1] In the research, the terms "second language" (L2) and "foreign language" (FL) were not distinguished and were used as interchangeable.

"distinguishing people on the basis of their sociocultural behaviour, including speech", with *sex,* which refers to categories "distinguished by biological characteristics" (Holmes 2002:150). Human beings are social beings, hence it is necessary for us to distinguish them by their sociocultural behaviour. In this book, terms such as "gender role" and "gender identity" are used to refer to "gender role/identity as a girl or as a boy". However, these terms are never satisfactory because I do not want to be essentialist about gender. It is for convenience and for the purpose of the book that I decided to use them to distinguish between "gender" and "sex". In addition, for the purpose of the book, terms such as "female" and "male", "woman" and "man", "girl" and "boy" were used interchangeably.

Since gender is viewed as a social, historical, and cultural construct, it comes as no surprise that the construction of gender may vary over time within a culture, as well as across cultures (Pavlenko and Piller 2001:22). In other words, once one is turned into a gendered social being, one is not merely being constructed by the community, the society one lives in or one's family (in consideration of the fact that the construction of gender is grounded in human beings' socialisation history and must be affected by the traditional gender categories), but individuals can also negotiate their gender through talk in interaction. The whole notion of negotiation is linked to the notion of discourse in which individuals question themselves in the course of interaction. Once one interacts, he/she can choose whether or not to comply with and express himself/herself in the way other people think he/she should. Such a choice involves agreeing or disagreeing with the label people wish to attach to him/her. If the construction of gender varies culturally and contextually, whether the learning of L2 and the second language learning (SLL) classroom can become a prevailing site to open up opportunities for students to construct and negotiate their gender identities becomes a legitimate area of inquiry. Since I do not believe there is any fixed behaviour that can be labelled as that which is characteristic of a Chinese girl or boy (the "Chinese gender") or an English girl or boy (the "English gender")[2], the term gender negotiation rather than gender reconstruction is used throughout the research.

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[2] In the book, treating gender as a dynamic and fluid concept that is constructed and negotiated in interactions, the terms like "Chinese girl / boy" and "English girl / boy" were used only for convenience purposes.

The notion of "interaction" is crucial in both concepts of "gender construction" and "gender negotiation". Gender should not be treated as a given parameter that can be taken for granted but one that is communicatively produced. Evans (2002:4) declares that identities, including gender identity, are not stable things but are an effect of interaction with others and with larger concepts that are conveyed through circulating discourses. Bulter (1999) also argues that gendered selves are determined neither by nature nor by nurture but are the effects of day-to-day "acting" in ways normatively defined as masculine or feminine. Through interaction with societal norms, individuals continually fashion their physical appearance as well as their language and bodily movements as they "do" being women or men. In short, we have to treat identities and subject positions as bodily and linguistic enactments of discourse at particular times and in particular places (Block 2007:17). As a result, in the research, adolescents' construction and negotiation of their gender identity would be mainly examined through their discursive interactions (verbal and nonverbal) with their peers and with the researcher in context.

Language use deals with the notion of gender in different ways. It impacts, for example, on the way mothers talk to their babies, teachers to students and so on. Baron and Kotthoff (2001) argue that the new-born baby has no gender, but merely a sex. However, it is with the claim "It is a girl/boy!" that the sociocultural imposition of gender and associated social expectations begin. In fact, the language itself projects gender identities onto people even before they are born. Parents will choose different names which orient their thinking about the baby to be born. They may also not use the same form of baby talk to a little boy and to a little girl. They may project different hopes and images of girls and boys and of their futures as well. They may think of girls having a good husband as more successful, while thinking of boys having a promising career as more successful. As Borker (1980) argues, the links between language and gender are clearly not *naturally* but *culturally constructed*.

With gender seen as a system of social relations and discursive practices, the goal of the study of language and gender becomes twofold: on the one hand, to investigate the effects of gender on individuals' linguistic practice and performance (e.g. my MPhil project); on the other hand, to study ways in which gender is constructed and negotiated in multiple discourses (Pavlenko and Piller 2001:23). The current study has been developed to be a more intensive study to investigate how gender is constructed and negotiated in the course of learning a second/foreign

language not only by examining students' behaviour in interactions, their rationalisation of their own and partner's behaviour, but also through exploring their perceptions and attitudes towards issues concerning gender and SLL in the school community.

1.2 The significance of examining gender construction and its negotiation in relation to SLL in the school context

1.2.1 The aim of second language learning and teaching

The study of a foreign language should lead to a positive understanding of not only the linguistic knowledge of the target language (TL) but also the sociocultural practices and the TL-mediated public personae they wish to project (Segalowitz 1976; Robinson 1985; Bardov-Harlig 1999; Kasper and Rose 2002; Rose and Kasper 2001; Block 2007). As argued by Riley (2007), learning a foreign/second language extends the range of meanings of which the individual is capable. It enables us to form a richer conception of self rather than simply being ourselves (Joseph 2004). Competent L2 learners should not only know how to use grammatical rules but also social ones (Segalowitz 1976). However, the traditional language teaching pedagogy, which focuses more on the linguistic forms of the TL, makes students more likely to separate language from the culture of the people who use it. It is communicative language teaching (CLT), which aims to develop students' communicative competence, that caters for this requirement and has gradually moved into the mainstream of the foreign language teaching pedagogy. As argued by Pavlenko and Piller (2001:7), "Successful L2 learning may entail a modification of one's gender performance in order to ensure validation and legitimacy in the target language and culture." Since CLT aims to develop learners' ability to use language in real communication, it raises the crucial issue of the way learners act socially and how they negotiate their social identities, including gender identity, in a different cultural and social context. This makes the SLL classroom a fertile environment in which to examine the issue of language and gender construction and its negotiation. Moreover, the wide use of communicative tasks in CLT also makes the explorations of learners' gender negotiation convenient and feasible in a naturally

setting.[3]

1.2.2 Lack of research on gender and SLL
from a constructionist point of view

The field of language and gender has become a particularly lively and vibrant area of linguistic inquiry; nevertheless, most prior research has focused on monolingual settings (Pavlenko and Piller 2001). One reason is that discussion of the second language acquisition (SLA)[4] field was dominated by an "input-output metaphor of learning and cognition", in which mind and brain are regarded as the "containers" of both learning processes and learning products (van Lier 2000:257). As a consequence, less attention was given to the learning processes, individual variables or the social context in which the L2 was learned and used (McKay and Wong 1996). More recent sociocultural approach has been able to offer a framework within which people can conceptualise individual learners within their communities as human beings who are capable social agents and can change things (see section 2.2 of the book for a detailed clarification of the sociocultural approach).

Although recent research in second language teaching and learning has acknowledged the complexities and challenges that learners confront when they participate in a new linguistic community, little attention has been given to the construction of gender identities in the language classroom (Piller and Pavlenko 2001). Instead, most of them primarily deal with the differences in L2 acquisition between male and female learners (Pellegrino 2005: 141). As pointed out by Norton (1995:464), SLA theorists have not developed a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context. In particular, before the 1990s, there was little or no work examining how language learners "position themselves and are positioned by others depending on where they are, who they are with and

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[3] In the book, four terms were used interchangeably to refer to the student participants: "L2/EFL learner", "L2/EFL user", "student" and "adolescent". The way I address the student participants either as "girls/boys", "female/male students" does not mean that I emphasise their identity either as a "student" or as a gendered social being. They were just used interchangeably.

[4] In the book, the terms of "second language acquisition" (SLA) and "second language learning" (SLL) were used interchangeably. I used SLL theory to cover both SLL theory and SLA studies

what they are doing" (Eckert and McConnel-Ginet 1992:464). Later on, due to the systematic and extensive borrowing from contiguous social science fields of inquiry, the notion of identity in SLL has been gradually developed. Such a lack of research on gender and second language learning from a constructionist point of view made the current project meaningful and interesting.

Moreover, most of the research focuses on immigrants' experience (e.g. Blackledge 2001; Goldstein 2001; Ohara 2001; Teutsch-Dwyer 2001)[5]. In fact, the majority of the foreign language learners learn the TL in a local context which is referred to as a "FL context"[6] by Block (2007). Their experience of constructing and negotiating gender identity in the course of SLL might be very different from that of immigrant people. Research on it should consider important social and educational connotations. For example, the research conducted by Ohara (2001) showed that American English female learners who were learning Japanese in Japan did not always choose to conform to the high pitch level used by typical Japanese females in Japan because it downplayed their status as women in the matter of communication. However, since they were perceived as foreigners there, they did not care greatly about the hidden cost of not conforming to the high level of pitch (i.e. being excluded from the mainstream Japanese society). Their identities displayed at that moment not only showed them to be a female but also a foreign visitor. In other words, what they were facing was different from what local Japanese women face. In all, the review of these studies oriented me towards conducting research with adolescents who were learning EFL in a local secondary school setting.

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[5] For the purpose of the book, "immigrant" refers both to those people who resident in the targeted language country either permanently or just for a short stay to learn language or work there

[6] "FL" refers to "the context of millions of primary school, secondary school, university and further education students around the world who rely on their time in classrooms to learn a language which is not the typical language of communication in their surrounding environment" (Block 2003:5). Block (2007:144) argues that the foreign language (FL) context contrasts manifestly with naturalistic adult immigrant settings where there is the potential for partial or full immersion in the target language (TL) community. It also differs notably from the context of studying abroad context where FL classroom instruction gives way to "being there", which increases the potential for immersion in TL-mediated environments and the emergence of new TL-mediated subject positions.

As far as the data collection tool was concerned, in the previous studies interview was the principal tool used to learn about immigrant participants' own account of their life or experience of study in the "new" country (e.g. Blackledge 2001; Palvenko 2001). Few of the studies observed participants' in site performance and negotiation of their gender identity in interactions very closely. In other words, most of the approaches have been developed on the basis of narratives provided by immigrant talking about themselves (about the "I"). They neglected the fact that each individual's identity is not only individual but also collective. Answers to the question of "who we are" should not emerge only from our own perceptions of "who we are", but also from how we are perceived by others and how we actually perform "we" in interaction (Joseph 2004). As a result, the current research tried to probe into the issue of gender negotiation in relation to SLL by both examining adolescents' performance of gender in interactions and their viewpoints concerning relevant issues to discover how they perceived themselves, how they are perceived by others and how they behaved in interactions as gendered social beings in the course of learning English as a foreign language.

In addition, all the studies that I found interesting following the poststructuralist stream provided evidence of the impossibility of discussing issues of gender identity outside a specific context. In other words, there is no way of talking about gender and gender negotiation in SLL without seriously taking the social, cultural, historical and political context into account other than the linguistic context. The work conducted by Heller (2001) in a bilingual school tried to understand how the naturalising ideologies which legitimate positions of power are constructed and contested, and with what consequences for whom (2001:259). The approach taken by Heller and her colleagues showed that issues could not arise if there was no careful, in-depth investigation of the particular school. Any quantitative design is going to be insufficient for an investigation of the complexity of gender as a social and cultural construct and the variation that gender relations can exhibit across speech communities and social contexts (Ehrlich 2001:109). If researchers want to study what goes on in terms of negotiation at the micro level, they have to orientate themselves towards a qualitative study and pay attention to the cultural context of the educational institutions. This review of the previous studies oriented me towards a case study design within the time limit of a PhD project to allow for in-depth investigation of the issue of gender (see section 4.1 for presentation of

the case study strategy).

1.2.3 The secondary school setting as an important site
in which to investigate gender issues

Among the three central areas of interaction between SLL and gender, namely institutional/ public, private and educational settings, comparatively little work has been conducted in the educational setting, especially at the secondary school level. The school is an institution of social and cultural reproduction (Heller 2001). The habitual roles allocated by communities and societies to male and female students are reflected in the school, the classroom and the curriculum. Arnot (2002:6) claims that "whether structurally or culturally, education [is] analysed as a major site for the reproduction of the class structure and its unequal relations of power". The notion of "male" and "female" school subjects can be taken as a typical example: science, mathematics and technology are usually rated as "masculine" by teachers and students and preferred by boys, while English, humanities and music tend to be regarded as "feminine" and preferred by girls (Arnot, et al. 1998). In addition, it is often assumed that female students are more likely to comply with argument while male students should play a more competitive role in the process of discussion.

Issues of education should be addressed first and foremost in terms of identities and modes of belonging, and only secondarily in terms of skills and information. It (education) must strive to open new dimensions for the negotiation of the self (Wenger 1998:263). A look at educational settings allows us "to understand how they contribute to the production and reproduction of social categories, and to the construction and distribution of what counts as knowledge" (Heller 2005:256). On the one hand, students may

> "Construct themselves as *gendered* by habitually engaging in the social practices of a speech community that are symbolically and practically associated with masculinity and femininity or some mixture thereof" (Ehrlich 1997:440).

On the other hand, some of them may possibly reject these roles prescribed by the external communities and societies which are based on the simple label of sex differences. Instead, they may need certain free spaces in which to behave as they would like as capable social beings. In

particular, adolescents aged around 15 to 17 (at secondary school level) are in a comparatively unstable situation concerning their sense of identity and their ability to change. The SLL classroom generally, and the Chinese EFL classroom specifically, especially within a communicative language teaching setting, may be able to offer this kind of free space to probe into the above issue since it provides individual learners sufficient opportunities to play roles in all kinds of tasks, whereby both female and male students are able to become aware of other aspects of themselves and their peers and hence reposition themselves if possible. Therefore this research targeted students in secondary schools as its main research participants and examined how they construct and negotiate their gender identity in the course of learning English as a foreign language.

The originality of this research lies in the following points: firstly, the fact that males and females do not speak or act in the same way has been demonstrated by many researchers in sociolinguistics in the past 50 years, whereas in this research, although I also examined both male and female students' interactional behaviour, my main focus was not whether girls or boys do the same things, but how they construct and negotiate their gender identity in L2. Education is there to help people to become conscious of not only personal but also social issues and help them to develop. This research therefore tends to reveal the importance of second language education (SLE), within the specific context of learning English as a foreign language in schools in China, in helping both students and teachers to become conscious of the way adolescents construct and negotiate their gendered selves and use this as a tool of proper behaviour change if it is necessary and expected. In other words, the research was interested in whether socialising boys and girls into negotiating gender in the L2 classroom provides the opportunity not only for language learning outcomes but also education outcomes.

Secondly, by examining the potential social, cultural and individual value that SLE brings to the students' self-consciousness and self-development within the school community, it may provide useful information for the debate not only about the role EFL plays in the school curriculum but also the role EFL plays in the whole society. Thirdly, unlike most prior studies on gender and SLA, which focus on immigrants' experience, the research targeted mainstream students' gender negotiation in the course of learning L2 in a local state school context. Finally, since this research tackled the issue of gender construction and its negotiation, an issue that is seldom considered in Chinese society, especially within the school community, it brings fresh

air to the research on gender and second language learning in China (see chapter 3 for the clarification of the Chinese research context).

1.3 Organisation of the book

The book is organised into two parts. The first part provides background information to the research and is composed of four chapters. Chapter 1 mainly gives the justification for the research topic by introducing the key concepts of the research and discussing the originality of the project. The following Chapter 2 reviews relative second language learning and identities theories, including "sociolinguistic approaches to SLL", "learning from a sociocultural perspective", and "multi-faceted nature of identity". In Chapter 3, the Chinese research context is discussed in detail, including the Chinese sociocultural background (i.e. gender is an under-researched issue in China) and the wide adoption of CLT in the Chinese EFL classroom in secondary schools. The chapter concludes with the formulation of the research questions developed in the study. Chapter 4 discusses the following methodological issues, including the adopted case study strategy, the data elicitation and collection processes, the data analysis approaches, as well as reflexive discussion on the methodology.

Part 2 of the book pursues the research findings and discussion and is composed of five chapters. It starts with Chapter 5, which reports findings about students' representations of "ideal" girls and boys in Chinese community. The following Chapter 6 deals with students' representations of English girls and boys[7]. Students' reactions to these gender representations are discussed in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 considers the findings concerning students' identity negotiation between the social role of being a good student and being a good girl or boy in discourse. The educational and pedagogical implications of the research are discussed in Chapter 9. The whole book closes with Chapter 10 which provides a conclusion to the whole project.

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[7] By convention, in the book, the term "English girls and boys" was used to refer to British, American, Canadian and so on because it is the way learners of English in China at that age (i.e. students participating in the study) see the world. Although it is not what I believe to be true, for the same reason, the term "English countries" is used to refer to "native-English-speaking countries" (see section 9.3 of the book for further discussion).

CHAPTER TWO

SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING
AND IDENTITY THEORIES

This chapter reviews relevant SLL and identities theories of the study, including the sociolinguistic approaches to SLL (in section 2.1), learning from a sociocultural perspective (in section 2.2), and the multi-faceted nature of "identity" (in section 2.3). Language and identity are crucially intertwined (Edwards 1985; Bruner 1990). The concept of an individual's social identity has been employed by several researchers as a way of viewing and explaining the patterns of language use and the language attitudes of bilinguals (see McGroarty 1998; Young 1999, for a review). Norton (2000:5) tries to develop a more dynamic view of identity. For him, language, identity and context interact mutually:

> "I foreground the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's social identity…It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to – powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak."

Ehrlich (1997) indicates that the types of social identity constructed by learners in a target language will be the result of learners' own social positionings, as well as their perceptions of social identities in the target culture (also see Lantolf 1993; Siegal 1994, 1996; Kramsch and Hoene 1995). Theories in the field of second language learning which claim that social factors are secondary are thus criticised (for a review, see Polanyi 1995). Our identities are not just something we can decide by ourselves. Instead, they are the product of social interaction between individuals and other members of society (Riley 2007). The value ascribed to speech cannot be understood in isolation from the person who speaks and that the person who speaks cannot be understood in isolation from larger networks of social relationships (Bourdieu 1984). Hence, a context-sensitive

approach has to be adopted in examining learners' gender negotiations as L2 learners in discourse.

2.1 Sociolinguistic approaches to SLL

Acquisition and use of language take place in a social context; thus it is important for SLA researchers to understand the ways in which social context and the acquisition and use of a second language are related (Young 1999). Piller and Pavlenko (2001) argue that SLA has been characterised by an almost ubiquitous gender-blindness due to the prevalence of psycholinguistic and Universal Grammar approaches in the field, which assume all human beings inherit a universal set of principles and parameters that control the shape human languages can take, and which are what make human languages similar to one another (Mitchell and Myles 2004:54). It is then from a sociolinguistic point of view, which commits itself to explaining why people speak differently in different social contexts, that the role of gender in language use and learning has become influential and makes it a particular interesting issue for research in the field of language education.

Sociolinguistics, or the study of language in use, views language as a social practice (Mitchell and Myles 2004). It emerged as a multidisciplinary endeavour to provide an understanding of language behaviour giving due regard to the context in which it was spoken (Giles and Smith 1979:45). In short, it is concerned with the relationship between language and the social context in which it is used (Holmes 2002). Sociolinguists believe that the way people talk is influenced by the social context in which they are talking. By examining the way people use language in different communities, rich information may be obtained, including the way language functions, the social relationships in a particular community, and the way people signal aspects of their social identity through their language, including gender identity of course (Holmes 2002). In other words, individuals' speech styles vary in different contexts according to who they are and to whom who they are speaking, where and when they are talking, as well as how they are feeling (Holmes 2002).

Sociolinguists aim to not only describe those sociolinguistic variations, but also, if possible, explain why it happens. Like those sociocultural theorists, sociolinguists also believe that learning is a collaborative affair, and that language knowledge is socially constructed

through interaction (Mitchell and Myles 2004). No language has meaning except with reference to how it is framed (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974) or contextualised (Becker 1984; Gumperz 1982). Interactional sociolinguists emphasise how implied meanings can be derived from details of interaction that signal the appropriate cultural frame of reference for interpretation (Bucholtz 2003). Gender-related differences in language use are one aspect of the most pervasive linguistic differences in society reflecting females' and males' social status and power differences (Holmes 2002).

Sociolinguists have traditionally studied the role of language in structuring the identities of individuals and the culture of entire communities and societies (Storch 2002). The ability to participate appropriately in relevant speech events has been seen as an important part of communicative competence (Mitchell and Myles 2004:1).There are two main strands of sociolinguistic theorising about second language use and second language development. One strand is the quantitative study of second language variation focusing on interlanguage variability at the lexical and morphological levels. From this viewpoint, the setting of language use, as well as participants' cultural background, gender, social status and other social categories can be described independently of language use (Young 1999). This stream of variationist study that codes aspects of social identity as categorical and unvarying across contexts attracts criticism from researchers who view the performance of social identities as variable across social, situational and interactional contexts (Ehrlich 2001; Schiffrin 1996).

The other strand deals with second language learning in a broad way, embedded in its social context. Such work is typically qualitative and interpretive in nature, using the techniques of ethnography or conversational analysis to provide accounts of the social processes of second language interaction and development (Mitchell and Myles 2004). From this perspective, context is viewed as emergent and dynamic, and social categories, like gender and social status, are negotiated through interaction (Young 1999). Influenced by the general research on gender and language, researchers in the SLA field have recently called for the need to conduct more research, focusing on ways in which gender mediates the learning and use of additional languages, and on ways in which gender relations and performances may be transformed in the process of second language socialisation (Pavlenko and Piller 2001:17). In terms of my current study, I responded to this call and conformed to the second research strand. What I am interested in is not whether gender

mediates students' second language learning, use and performance per se, but how students negotiate their gender identity as a Chinese girl or as a Chinese boy via the use of English as a foreign language in interactions.

2.2 Learning from a sociocultural perspective

Many SLA theories view L2 learners as passive vessels for receiving input and producing output. Neither the input hypothesis[1] advanced by Krashen (1982; 1985; 1998) nor the output hypothesis put forward by Swain (1985; 1995) greatly challenges the concept of "an autonomous language module or cognitive mechanisms at work within the individual learner" (Mitchell and Myles 2004:159). Sociocultural theory in contrast questions the oversimplification of the model of input and output as an explanation for SLA. It questions the view of language as individual minds acquiring linguistic, or even sociolinguistic, competence. Learners, from this perspective, are seen as members of social and historical collectivities rather than individual language producers (Lantolf and Genung 2003; Lantolf 2002).

The fundamental assumption of sociocultural theory is that "learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community" (Rogoff 1994:209). Learning is a mediated process (Lantolf 2000). It is not only mediated partly through learners' developing use and control of mental tools, more importantly, it is also dependent on face-to-face interaction (Mitchell and Myles 2004:195). In other words, from a sociocultural perspective, interactions cannot be simply seen as a source of input for autonomous and internal learning mechanisms. It is essentially social rather than individual in nature (Mitchell and Myles 2004). Interest in the learner as a social being leads to concern with a range of socially constructed elements in learners' identities, including their gender identity. In this project, I was interested in seeing, on the one hand, whether and to what extent the socialisation of girls and boys into becoming Chinese girls and boys seems to affect their behaviour and attitudes towards English learning, and on the other hand, how students negotiate their gender identity in discourse via the use of English as a

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[1] Input hypothesis claims basically that the only necessary condition for language learning to take place is that the availability of input is comprehensible, whereas the output hypothesis declares that learners" language output in a real discourse context is a necessary requirement of second language (Mitchell and Myles 2004).