SHUAI VS. SEAN: WHAT'S IN AN ENGLISH NAME FOR STUDENTS?

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Abstract

In the TESL field, it is relatively common to have some students choose an English name to use in the classroom and the broader English-speaking environment. The push factors behind students choosing to use an English name are variable and complex; the socioeconomic and psychological implications behind taking on an English identity are also as variable and complex. This article aims to explore these factors and emphasize the importance of understanding why students, usually non-Anglo and from communities of colour, would choose to take on an English name and the implications for the classroom. The author does this while reflecting on her experience as a second-generation visible minority who also has had the dichotomous experience of having two names and identities in Toronto, Canada.

"A person's name is to him or her the sweetest and most important sound in any language." – Dale Carnegie

It is well-known in the TESOL community that many students take on an English name different from one's birth name, and it is more common in some groups of students than others. In fact, among some Asian students, the practice of taking on an English name is almost de facto and one that is practiced not only in English-speaking countries, but in many schools in Asia as well (Chien, 2012; McPherron, 2009). As such, a Haeda might also be known as Heidi, Mohammed becomes Moe, and Sun-mi goes by Alice. The instructor will use the chosen

English name for the student and, over time, that name will represent the student for the instructor without much thought over the possible cultural, economic, psychological, and pedagogical implications it may have on the student. As an instructor who also possesses this dichotomous identity that comes with having two names, I found myself pondering the deeper reasons for and implications of this practice for students, as both learners and non-Anglo, people of colour in society.

Before exploring this phenomenon, however, a little introduction of myself may be needed. Friends, work colleagues, and acquaintances know me as Alice. This has been my name since grade school and I feel, after inhabiting it for a good part of my life, like Alice. However, my given Korean birth name is Sun-mi (김선미). It is pronounced with an aspirated /s/ rather than a hard /s͈/, with the vowel /ʌ/ in the first syllable. According to my mother, who tried to describe it as precisely as she could, the characters allude to being beautiful and gentle (after which I momentarily questioned the choice, but I digress). What I do know is that my father chose the name, and then also Alice a few years later. After immigrating to Canada, like many other Korean immigrants, he felt that it was necessary to give me an English name in an attempt to help make the lives of my sister and myself easier in this new country. Thus, one's given birth name was, in theory, to be used by family and close friends while the English name was to be used outside when dealing with the public. Having the experience of having more than one personal name myself, the act of taking on English names by my predominantly mainland Chinese students resonated with me and prompted an exploration of this practice. There may be various and complex reasons behind taking on an English name for students in an English-speaking context, including establishing learner identity and autonomy, cultural parallels of adopting various names, and socioeconomic factors, which I will examine here. In addition, a discussion of the factors behind this phenomenon cannot be had without exploring the psychological impact of changing one's name, and so this will be discussed as well, followed by comments on the implications for the classroom.

Learner Identity and Autonomy

In order to discuss learner identity and its importance to learner autonomy, a brief discussion of some key poststructuralist theories of language need to be

had. Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary theorist, emphasized the social and dialogic practice of constructing meaning through joint speech rather than looking at communication as solely a demonstration of linguistic competence (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 416; Robinson, 2001). In other words, meaning in communication is co-created through the 'struggle' of dialogic communication between interlocutors, which is also impacted by the social context and positions held by the speakers. As such, poststructuralists like Bourdieu (1991, as cited in Kim, 2007; Robinson, 2001) placed emphasis on the power structures that influence language construction and meaning and therefore, the impact and value placed on an interaction is closely tied to the power and value ascribed to the speaker. Learner identity is largely influenced by this perception, in that learners of English, a language with immense cultural capital, are automatically positioned and may also position themselves as subordinate. However, this negotiation of social position is also fluid and can be manipulated to achieve a desired identity within a given language community (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 414). Through the construct of imagined communities and identities, language learners have a desired outcome to aspire toward (namely, becoming a competent member of the language community), where a range of identities are possible (p. 415). In other words, an investment is being made toward this imagined community and identity, and one of the first of many steps toward investing in an English-oriented identity is in the adoption of an English name (Edwards, 2006, p. 96). The practice of selecting an English name among TESOL students through the lens of language learning and autonomy may be interpreted as an autonomous and productive, rather than deficit-based, practice on the part of students.

The elements of learner identity and autonomy are crucial for students to form in their journey as English-language students, but how it is expressed can vary from student to student. When discussing learner identity and autonomy, I cannot help but recall a time when I felt a visceral sense of some students cringing while I was calling out their Chinese names on the first day of class. The first day of class is already an anxious day for instructors and students alike, so all utterances and exchanges seemed to take on more weight. As I was calling roll in one class, a student blurted out, somewhat defiantly, "you can just call me Bob, it's easier".

I interpreted Bob's comment as carrying out at least two functions: first, it was to establish that he could speak English relatively well and had already taken on an English identity in some way, and second, he likely wanted to relieve both the teacher and students from the collective embarrassment of having to listen to their instructor butcher their names. While I do not know the history behind the selection of his name (i.e. whether it was a teacher or he himself who chose it, why it was chosen, when it was assigned), Bob was asserting himself and his identity in this new high-stakes situation, and in this way, took on a more self-directed, agentive role in class.

Sociocultural Factors Behind Naming Practices

The practice of having multiple names is also fairly common in many cultures and usually serves the function of clarifying the relationship between two interlocutors. Within the Chinese context, having multiple names was historically not uncommon among the educated in China. According to Lee (1998, as cited in Diao, 2014), an educated person could have three names: a ming, a given name by parents, a zi, a self-assigned name, and a hao, a nickname given by peers. All three types of names served to demonstrate the relationship between speakers and correspond with the register of language that would be used in their interactions as well. While this is no longer as commonplace, the concept of having multiple names for different relationships and contexts is a familiar practice in China (Lee, 1998, as cited in Diao, 2014; Edwards, 2006; Heffernan, 2010). As well, the reasons behind selecting and assigning English names are diverse and specific to the needs of different students. In a study of US-based Chinese university students, Diao (2014) found a number of self-professed reasons why these students decided to take on English names. First, it was easier for instructors to remember than Chinese names. It provided students a certain mobility with "different kinds of people" (p. 214), and it was something that could be negotiated depending on the social context. Diao concludes that the selection and function of English names versus Chinese given names were interpreted through an adherence to either perceived community practices or cosmopolitanism by students (p. 219). This corresponds with Heffernan's

(2010) findings when he explored the use of English names among East Asians in Toronto. He found that there were both pragmatic (having to do with ease of pronunciation) and cultural reasons behind the adoption of English names for the Korean and Chinese community, but not for the Japanese community, interestingly (p. 32). With respect to pronunciation, one might observe students who may select English names that have the same initial sound as their given name, so that Shuai becomes Sean, Cheon-nu is now Charles, and Wangaiqing goes by Wendy. The cultural piece, he argues, comes from the naming practices that already exist in China and Korea where having multiple personal names, like a school or work name, is commonplace (p. 32). As an example of the compartmentalized nature of these names, I can use myself. I am Alice in my work and personal life, but among those in the Korean community who are a part of my mother's social circle and generation, I am Sun-mi. Within the Christian community in Korea, which makes up over 50% of the population, it is not uncommon for members to use Christian names like Esther or Maria to signify their membership with the church (Kim, 2007, p. 119). As a former British colony, the Hong Kong Chinese community also adopts English names at higher rates than in mainland China, and often times, the names are assigned by the family rather than the individual (Heffernan, 2010, p. 33). Expressing individuality and creativity may be another factor behind the selection of an English name, as studied by McPherron (2009). He also examined the reasons and selection of English names among university students in China and found that while some students chose traditional names associated with the Anglo community, others selected names to express their individuality and playfulness (i.e. Money). This corresponds with my experience as well as those of my colleagues who have taught students called Kinder, Milk, and Ocean. It is evident that there may be a sense of impermanence as well as function when selecting English names for these students, and thus, they feel freer to select non-traditional names that display some aspects of their character or persona.

Socioeconomic Factors Behind Naming Practices

While English-language learners may be adopting English or English-sounding names for reasons of establishing learner identity and autonomy as well as for

functional efficiency, there may also be socioeconomic factors at play for students and former students who take on an English name, particularly within the English-speaking context. It is not difficult to find study after study outlining how ethnic minorities with non-English sounding names in countries like Canada and the US 'whiten' their resumes in an effort to not so much as gain an edge in their applications, but rather to put themselves on as equal footing with their white and Anglo counterparts. In one study, thousands of applications were sent to employers in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, out of which researchers found that candidates with Anglo-sounding names were 35% more likely to be chosen by employers than those with non-Anglo names, despite identical education, skills, and work histories (Oreopoulos & Dechief, 2012, p. 3). In fact, even when employers had an explicit pro-diversity hiring policy, minority applicants fared worse than with employers who did not, likely due to the fact that these minority applicants were less likely to 'whiten' their résumés at all (Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik & Jun, 2016). Applicants who modified their résumés to appear more 'American' in this US study did so by changing their first names, adding in middle initials in order to sound more American, and deleting any experiences connected to their racial or ethnic groups (Kang et al., 2016, p. 475). Applicants with Asian-sounding names (specifically Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani) with Canadian experience were less likely to be called for an interview than those with Anglo-sounding names, and there was no discernible difference in callback rates between applicants with Asian-sounding names with Canadian experience and those with international experience (Banerjee, Reitz, & Oreopoulos, 2018, p. 3). Unfortunately, the discrimination does not end there. If and when racialized job applicants make it into the workplace, the pressure to accommodate and essentially 'whiten' their identities may continue in subtle ways. Shah (2019) writes about the pressure that employees of ethnic minority backgrounds feel to change their names into something more 'English', as highlighted in a study where out of 1000 participants, a third of them indicated that they were asked to do so at the workplace (para. 2). He adds a revealing anecdote of when his father, Vikram, was asked if he could be referred to as Victor by Ken, a white colleague. Vikram responded, "[t]hat depends. Can I call you Kanubhai?" (para. 6). In the face of these findings, it is then unsurprising that non-Anglo, ethnic minority

job applicants in English-speaking countries are more likely to anglicize their own names, bestow English-sounding names to their children, and implicitly internalize as well as perpetuate the message that this is a necessary part of one's successful integration in this context. Students who study English within English-speaking milieus are also likely aware of the racial discrimination and biases that exist in the job market and society at large. This, in turn, likely compounds the desire to take on an English identity, starting by adopting an English name or Anglicizing one's name. Disheartening as it may seem, until and when systemic and structural discrimination in society ceases to exist or is significantly reduced (which may arguably never happen), prospective employees will continue to do what they can to gain a foothold in this society.

Psychosocial Impact of Naming Practices

When students or individuals use their English names, there may also be a psychosocial accommodation that is happening that can deeply impact their self-perception and identity. A student or individual who adopts an English-sounding name does so with an understanding of how they may be viewed in the eyes of others. W. E. B. DuBois, an American sociologist and historian, coined the term, "double-consciousness" which encapsulates the experience of being constantly aware of how one is being perceived by others, in describing the experience of black Americans (DuBois, 1897). Visible minorities in the English-speaking world today are likely to be very familiar with the experience of understanding oneself through the eyes of others and as a result, may make minor or major adjustments to assimilate and adapt, in the hopes of one day thriving. Yet, when one makes these accommodations, there can be a psychological dissonance that can form over time, and it may take some time to come to terms with. Zheping Huang, a journalist for Quartz magazine, details how he adopted various English names throughout his studies, from grade school in China to university in the US, going by William, Peter, and James over the years before returning to William by university. It was not until he was in Hong Kong for graduate school that he decided to go by Ping, a shortening of his first name. Today, he publishes as Zheping Huang. Mohamed Hassan, a producer and poet, revealed his experiences as a person of colour in a white-dominant world

in his spoken word film, (Un)Learning My Name. In it, he describes how in reinforcing the correct pronunciation of his name, he was also asserting who he was after decades of navigating internalised racism and discrimination. Kohli and Solórzano (2012) make the bold argument that teachers who do not make an effort to correctly pronounce a student's name are unknowingly committing racial microaggressions that can have a lasting impact on the student. In the article, they outline numerous cases of former students who endured feelings of anxiety, embarrassment, and shame when their name was called in school. This shame seemed to be alleviated once names were shortened or changed entirely by some students, as was the case for Anita, now a Chinese American teacher. The following is a description of her experience:

> Every teacher she ever had mispronounced her name. She dreaded daily attendance, never raised her hand, and tried to remain inconspicuous and anonymous in the classroom. She graduated from one of Portland's high schools with honors. At the honors ceremony prior to graduation, a vice principal walked to the podium to present the student with a prestigious award. He butchered her name mercilessly, shaking his head and laughing as others laughed along. The student slumped in her seat and hid behind the person seated in front of her. She did not go onstage to receive her award and did not attend graduation the next night. As soon she was able to, the student changed her name to 'Anita'. (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012, p. 11)

This dread of having one's name called is also reflective of my own experience in grade school when I remember the anxiety I felt when my teachers would mispronounce my name when calling roll, by either pronouncing it with a hard /ʂ/, or with the vowel /uː/ rather than /ʌ/, or simply call out, Sun?. The teasing by other students that ensued was inevitable as well as my own embarrassment, and so when I eventually decided that I would be Alice by fourth grade, the first-day-of-class jitters were no longer as potent. I remember this to be a conscious decision on my part since my father had given me the name Alice years before, but I had still gone by Sun-mi without much thought up until this point. Despite this effort on my part to take control of my experience in school and among peers,

I cannot deny that a part of me is saddened that this was the action I took at the time. I am also disconcertingly aware that a lifetime of using Alice rather than Sun-mi likely has afforded me certain gains, including having little discomfort during roll call in grade school, smoother introductions with new colleagues and friends, to possibly, job interviews, something that my eight year-old self might not have fully understood, but could intuit in some way. Since I have been Alice for most of my life (and feel that I embody the name now), I do not and will not ever know what my life would be like had I remained Sun-mi.

Implications for the Classroom

To return to the TESOL classroom, in the face of this information, how does one approach our students, specifically their names and identities, in the classroom? The common response is if a student insists on being referred to by their non-Anglo birth name, they will have to accept possible mispronunciation of their name. As well, if a student insists on being called Chris or Ariel or Pearl, why should this be a problem? My argument is that it is not and should not be a problem at all, whether students decide to stick with their given birth names or with a different name of their choosing. As instructors, our duty is to accept the student and their identity as they are at that point in time with an awareness of the social, cultural, and psychological forces that influence students' choices and their lived experiences. We have seen that the factors behind adopting an English name are complex and multi-layered. Students take on English names to create an English identity, to take control of their language learning experience, to accommodate teachers and peers, to find employment in the English-speaking world, and ultimately, to participate in the adopted society in a way that they feel they have control over. However, if a student decides to opt out of adopting an English name and uses their own given name, it is incumbent upon the instructor to do what they can to learn how to pronounce the name to the best of their ability, or at the very least, demonstrate in some way that their names are important and not a burden that is being imposed on them. As instructors who teach English as a second language, we wield undeniable power over our students as we directly and indirectly represent what is acceptable or not in the English-speaking world. In the last few years, I have tried to take time on the first day of class

(sometimes half the class period) to demonstrate that I, the instructor, want to learn the students' names and that the class is about growth and development as students of English and as individuals. I might do this in the form of icebreakers that require learning each other's names and preface it with the point that I would like to be corrected if I do mispronounce their names, stressing that it is important for me to learn the proper pronunciation of their names. I add that students are not required to have English names, which some may not be aware of, especially if they are coming from schools that required an English name. Paired with the heightened tension and excitement of it being the first day of class, students are more likely to internalize this message deeply. Other possible activities can include reading about or listening to the experiences of people who have taken on different, more easy to pronounce names, like that of Zheping Huang, or Mohammed Hassan, to acknowledge the importance of one's name in the educational environment and beyond. After reviewing such examples, students can be encouraged to discuss these cases and examine the reasons for and against adopting a different, English-sounding name. Reflective writing can be a follow-up homework assignment where students describe the reasons and experiences behind their selected or given names. Ultimately, the goal here is to underline the importance of one's name and identity for students on the first day of class or early in the term, and then accept whatever name a student chooses. As instructors, we have a duty to not only teach, but to empower our students to become better versions of themselves. We must meet students where they are, but allow room for growth as well. We need to be aware that a student who may have started off as Jessica on the first day of class will one day decide that she really is Xinyi later on.

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