

Speaking to the World: Who, When and How? An Ethnographic Study of Slogan Change and Identity Construction of Beijing Olympic Games Volunteers

Yihong GAO
Peking University, PRC

Existing research has revealed a shift of L2 user identity from a faithful imitator of native speakers to legitimate speaker and creative user of the language. Yet how L2 users experience their “speaking” calls for close examination. As part of research on language attitudes and intercultural awareness of Olympic Games volunteers, this ethnographic report explores the identities imagined, expressed, and constructed by Chinese student volunteers in Olympic Games slogans. The central phenomenon studied was a volunteer-proposed English slogan on an office wall in an Olympic Games venue, “We speak and the world will listen.” On-site participant observation, individual interviews, and a post-event group discussion were conducted concerning the origin of the slogan, the changes it went through before and during the Olympic Games, and interpretations of their meanings. Findings reveal several major types of identities: reserved non-speaker, patriotic speaker, empathetic listener, and reflective thinker. The characteristics, development, and contextual background of such identities are discussed. It is shown that, on the whole, these L2 users were ready to act as legitimate speakers in intercultural communication, yet were making explorations and experiencing dilemmas regarding content, manner, and norms of “speaking.” Implications are drawn for multiculturalism and L2 education; a dialogical communicator identity is proposed for such purposes.