

## Renaming: Class acts of colonisation or global best practice? **Meeta CHATTERJEE, University of Wollongong and Wollongong University College**

*Overseas students, especially those from Chinese backgrounds, often feel compelled to change their names and adopt anglicised names. The workshop aims at getting a closer look at the practice. Whether as an act of complicity with the new form of colonisation that education abroad inevitably imposes; or as a gesture of embracing a more global identity; this practice deserves some collective reflection. The workshop is an invitation to a forum to do this. Student stories about their own names will be the main material of the workshop. Some tips on pronouncing Chinese, Thai, Japanese and Indonesian names will emerge from this.*

### **BACKGROUND**

The study in the practice of renaming had its origins in a personal experience a couple of years ago. While teaching in Shanghai for three weeks, I was regularly called upon to suggest English names to some very eager, young, Chinese men and women. I realised later that this was not a result of my routine, unintentional tampering with the tone and pitch of Chinese names but a genuine desire to adopt a new name while learning a new language. As some one who does not have an anglicised name and has never needed one or desired one, this phenomenon was out of my personal realm of experience. However, as a student of postcolonial literatures I saw similarities between the process of older style colonisation and the new forms of colonialism that English as an international language and globalisation inevitably results in.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Names enfold the identity of an individual, signalling social and ideological affiliations, and reflect the aspirations of parents and well-wishers. Till recently, first names were meant to last forever. However, learning a language, English in particular, has initiated 'careless acts of baptism' (Hoffman, 1989:105). Large numbers of Chinese students have been going through our system recently. Some come with one name and exit with one more, either going through a process of temporary self-translation, or perhaps, significantly re-inventing themselves. As EAP teachers, we reflect on the process of self-translation that our students go through. This workshop aims at inviting a discussion on Chinese names in general, and on the practice of adopting English names in particular and I hope, an exploration of whether this practice of renaming has any implications for us as teachers. Although the abstract submitted to the EA panel promised to look at different nationalities, only Chinese names will be looked at in some detail, due to practical difficulties in looking at the big array of names.

Investigating the adoption of 'English' names has been very interesting from a TESOL teacher's point of view. That EFL/ESL teachers create bridges between the learner's and the target language is an accepted axiom in Elicos teaching. In the process of doing this, ESL/EFL teachers go through levels of cross-cultural awareness. Hanvey (1976, quoted in Savvidou, 2002) suggests that there are four levels of cross-cultural awareness. The first level corresponds to a very superficial acquaintance with stereotypes of the 'other' culture. At the second level, one is aware of differences and difficulties that interaction with the 'other' culture presents. Acceptance at an intellectual level is supposed to follow and this acceptance then becomes a frame of reference for understanding the other culture. The fourth level is characterised by empathy of the 'other' culture, which is achieved through direct experience. With regard to Chinese names I often feel that I uneasily shuffle between phase two, three and four. To complicate the situation further, cultures being dynamic, as soon as one gains some cultural awareness, one notices that the 'collective mental programming' (Hofstede, 1984) that gives one group its sense of identity, changes. So that when Xu Ke, decides to call

himself Kevin, one wonders what it implies and whether as a teacher, one should facilitate the self-translation process or carefully negotiate the boundaries of the 'self' that the student displays in the classroom environment. The injunction to teach 'just the language' involves more than teaching the sounds, sentence patterns of English, (Pennycook, 1996) it does involve recognising the identity of the person at the receiving end of our 'teaching'.

The only way of reaching an understanding has been, for me, through the first person narrative of learners themselves. The first person narrative, Lantlof and Pavelanko (2000) bemoan is not accorded a 'scientific' status and assert that literature/narratives emerging from bicultural and bilingual adults does indeed form rich data. This workshop aims at drawing on some of the rich data that first person narratives offer to make sense of the renaming practice so prevalent among Chinese students.

## METHODOLOGY

Interviews with a number of Chinese students were recorded. All the Chinese students interviewed have adopted 'English' names. In the past, there were some students who had decided not to adopt 'English' names. However, among those who volunteered themselves for the interview, except for Lu Qing Wang, a teacher from the college, every one else had an 'English' name. During the workshop, the four stages of cross-cultural awareness will be recreated, only to facilitate the discussion.

## DISCUSSION

From the interview a few interesting things emerged. I had expected to find some ambivalence with regard to the adoption of English first names, but it was not there. Lu Qing Wong, a teacher from the college, kindly consented to an interview that explained Chinese conventions of naming. The semantic, phonological, personal, socio-cultural semiotic potential of a name is tremendous. When one has no access to the shared culture or prior information, then, names can be very confusing and can cause embarrassment. The following points emerged from the interview: Chinese names have two or three characters. The first one represents the family name: the more common ones are *Chen or Chan, Lin, Huang, Li, Zhang or Chang, Wu, Wang or Wong, Cai or Tsai, and Liu*. A middle name seems to be optional and may indicate a link in a family tree. The first name, which immediately follows the surname, nowadays, generally is a noun with very pleasant associations. Most female names typically stand for beauty and virtue, whereas male names strength and magnificence. Chinese names reflect the history of the country. After China was established as a republic, in the 1960s and '70s, the decades of the Cultural Revolution, patriotic names like *Guoqing* (National Day) and *Hong* (Revolutionary), *Yonghong* (forever red) were very common alongside older names. The practice of naming children to ward off the evil eye, may seem far-fetched and even mirth inducing but has parallels in most societies. The anecdote of the 'chained donkey' was an interesting one because it highlighted that names across cultures carry some fascinating anthropological messages. The present generation had the luxury of giving names that mirror parental aspirations for their children. Lu Qing's name, 'the green path' is representative of the naming practice of the time. These days *mei* (enchancing, beautiful), *ming* (bright), *Meng* (visionary), *hua* (flower) and *zhijian* (firm in spirit), *Man* (abundance) and *jinsong* (sturdy pine) are frequently given to children in the hope that they would grow up with those qualities.

For outsiders, Chinese names present difficulties because, as mentioned in the video, there are many characters that could easily represent the sound of a name. The choice of the character significantly impacts on the name. To add to this, some sounds in Chinese are represented by alphabets that do not phonetically convey the Chinese sounds eg. 'q' in Lu Qing resembles the 'ch' sound rather than the 'k' sound. 'X' resembles 'sh' as in 'shall'. Furthermore, Chinese being a tonal language, the wrong tone could turn 'mother' into 'horse'. This was modelled in the interview with Lu Qing. During the workshop the pronunciation

aspects were looked at and participants with some knowledge of Mandarin modelled some of the names.

None of the Chinese students interviewed felt any anxiety about taking on English names. Lu Qing suggested that from the 60s to the 90s there was some resistance to English names, but the present generation is eager to take on English names. For them, it was a way of 'feeling close to the local people' or to make it easier for 'native speakers' to people to pronounce their names. It is almost as if, they are taking on responsibility of facilitating the teaching and learning process by adopting 'English' names. The ways in which interviewees chose their names are interesting. Some of them chose to name themselves after their favourite basketball player. Another chose his name from a dictionary. Kelly was given a girl's name and has lived with it for so long that it was too late to change it. Christie was fascinated by the word 'Christmas' and wanted to have a name that phonetically conveyed the sense of 'Christmas'. One chose a name that was phonetically like her Chinese name.

For some taking on an English name was only a temporary arrangement till they go back to their countries. Some cannot relate to their English names and often cannot recognise it as theirs. One of the students interviewed would continue to use their adopted 'English' names because they have had it for a long time and is known by his English name, although it is a female name.

The question: 'Does adopting an English name make you feel any different?' was generally met with 'No' its just a name. It does not mean anything'. Only one student said that he had chosen the name 'Frank' because he liked what it signalled. He suggested that adopting the name made him feel 'free' and he did feel different. Lily indicated that choosing an 'English' name gave her a sense of autonomy. She felt that renaming herself gave her a sense of deciding on an important aspect of her personality.

## **A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS AT THE WORKSHOP**

Participants generally felt that students should be addressed in the way they want to be addressed. If they adopt a name to take on a new persona while studying a language, then that should be respected. If, however, the name change is only aimed at making it easy for teachers to pronounce their names, then it is obvious that teachers need to spend some time getting the names right. It does seem as if the 'collective mental programming' (Hofstede, 1984) is changing and that renaming is not seen as an imperialistic imposition. There is an element of choice and often a playfulness that can be harnessed to advantage in a language-learning context.

## **IMPLICATIONS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM**

As teachers or administrators involved in the process of constructing TESOL education, in an era of globalisation and borderless education, the identity and its reinventions by learners is of some pedagogic importance. As Pennycook (1994) points out, the notion of 'just teach the language' is untenable because with it comes an array of questions about curriculum, educational systems, classroom practices. This raises questions about how much of assimilation and accommodation needs to happen in the process of 'just teach (ing) the language'. As ELICOS, especially EAP teachers, we are expected to develop critical thinking and independent learning in our students. In the process of doing so, are we expecting an answer that fits the template (assimilative) or do we facilitate the process of students developing their own voice, their own subjectivities through language and accommodate that in our teaching? This deserves another forum for collective reflection.

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**Appendix: 1**

**Objective of the workshop:**

To invite teachers to participate

- in a discussion on names
- and explore whether there is a general feeling that the adoption of 'English' names has any pedagogic implications in an English teaching and learning context.

**Four phases of the workshop:**

1. warm up
2. viewing the video
3. video +scenario
3. discussion on pedagogic implications

**Phase 1: Getting to know you/ transformation**

1. What is your first name?
2. Who gave it to you?
3. What does it mean?
4. Would you change your first name? Why? Why not?
5. Here is a list of first names in Chinese, if you were to choose a Chinese name, what would it be?

<b>Female names and meanings</b>	<b>Male names and meanings</b>
<i>An</i> : peace	<i>Kai lai</i> : opening the future
<i>Bing Qing</i> : clear as ice	<i>Kuan Yin</i> : Buddhist deity of mercy
<i>Bo</i> : precious	<i>Liang</i> : good
<i>Zen Juan</i> : precious and beautiful	
<i>Fang Yin</i> : Fragrant carpet of grass	<i>Shai Ming</i> : sunshine
<i>Huan Yue</i> : joyful, happy	<i>Li Jun</i> : Beautiful truth
<i>Li Rong</i> : beautiful lotus	<i>Yi De</i> : justice, ties of friendship
<i>Qiao</i> : handsome and pretty	<i>Ming Kai</i> : Bright future
<i>Qing Yuan</i> : clear spring	
<i>Shu Fang</i> : kind, gentle and sweet	
<i>Yi Min</i> : happy and smart	

<http://chinaunique.com/names.htm>

**Phase two:**

1. Do you find that many of your students adopt 'English' names?  
If so, what nationalities?
2. What other nationalities give you 'other' names?
3. How do you feel about the 'English' first names as a teacher?
4. If you had five Chinese students in a class, four of them had English names and one did not. Would that make a difference to you as a teacher?

Some Chinese names: Pronunciation practice:

Zhu Wenxuan  
LiYuqing  
Li Zhongzhi  
Song Yu  
Ling Qinglong

**Phase 3: From names to identities**

1. When a student adopts an 'English' name, it is a gesture towards embracing/accepting what English has to offer. Any implications?

**Appendix 2: Questions for Lu Qing:**

Would you say that using 'English' first names is becoming popular in China? What is/are the reasons for it?

How do people feel about this practice?

Do you have an English name? Would you like to share your experiences on getting/adopting the name?

Who gave you the name?

Was it important that you used it?

Was there a choice?

How did you react to being Lucy?

Why did you go back to your Chinese name?

**Part two:**

I am interested in how people are named in China. Would you be able to share some of your experiences and thoughts relating to this?

First of all, the parts of a name:

Then, first names in general.

What are the common first names?

Why are they so common?

Structure and Form: Characters

Tips on pronunciation:

The X, Z, Q, C, Zh sounds

**Appendix 3: Questions to students**

1. What is your full Chinese name?
2. Does it mean anything in particular in your language?
3. Who gave the name to you?
4. Do you have an 'English' name?
5. Did you choose your name? Who did?
6. Why did you/they choose that particular name?
7. Do you like the name or would you change it in the future? Why?
8. Is it a common practice in your country for students who study a different language to adopt a 'new' name?
9. Would you keep your name even after you finish your course?
10. Does your new name make you feel different? How?

(Thank you very much for your time and effort. It is much appreciated. The results of this survey will be of great help for a study that I am undertaking to write up a conference paper).

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