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A CASE STUDY OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINESE ENGLISH LEARNERS' SOCIAL  
CLASS IDENTITY AND ENGLISH LEARNING EXPERIENCE

XUE RUI

School of English, Beijing International Studies University, 1 Dingfuzhuangnanli, Beijing, China



XUE RUI

ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate the relationship between Chinese English learners' social class identity and English learning experience. The research is conducted as a qualitative study through interviewing an English major and an English teacher. It has been found that Chinese English learners' self-identified social class inevitably influences their language learning experience or even their major choice. At the same time, one's language learning experiences can also contribute to reconstruct his social class identification.

**Key words:** Chinese English learners; social class identity; English learning experience

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many researchers have been conducted in the area of identity and language learning. Most of them fix their attention on the role of identity through the experience of studying abroad. Some studies discuss the reconstruction of second language learners' national identity of their host states or homeland (Feng Gao, 2011). Some scholars explore the negotiation of immigrant and/or minority learners' ethnic identities through their second language learning and use. Others attach importance to the effects of study abroad experience on students' vocational identity.

However, few studies have paid attention to the relationship between people's social class and English learning experience. Given that, this article employs a case study approach to study the interaction of these two factors, aiming to find how one's social class identity influence his second language learning and whether one's second language learning experience can reconstruct his identification of social class in return.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Identity

"Identity" is a term that is widely used and, as a consequence, can mean many different things to different people, which is sometimes used to refer to a sense of integration of the self, in which different aspects come together in a unified whole (Kay Deaux, 2001). While Giddens, Bourdieu, and other social theorists share the view that identity is a process as opposed to an essential fixed product. According to Weedon, identity refers to subjectivities, which are the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation in the world (1997).

In documenting the rise of identity as a construct relevant to second language acquisition, Block (2007) highlighted the potential "negotiation of difference". To him, identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of past, present, and future. Individuals are shaped by their sociohistories but they also shape their sociohistories as life goes on. The entire process is conflictive as opposed to harmonious, and individuals often feel ambivalent. The negotiation of identity, he noted, often takes place in contexts of unequal power relations and can be interpreted in terms of traditional demographic categories such as nationality, gender, or social class.

## 2.2. Social Class

In the field of sociology, social class has five indicators, that is, family income per capita, parents' educational level, parents' occupation, positions and titles (Li Qiang, 2010).

The term "class" is etymologically derived from the Latin *classis*, which was used by census takers to categorize citizens by wealth, in order to determine military service obligations (Brown, D. F., 2009). According to philosopher Karl Marx, "class" is determined entirely by one's relationship to the means of production, the classes in modern capitalist society being the "proletarians": those who work but do not own the means of production, the "bourgeoisie": those who invest and live off of the surplus generated by the former, and the aristocracy that has land as a means of production.

Social class can be generally divided into 10 sectors from the highest position to the lowest: the state and social administrators, managers..... industrial workers, farmers and the unemployed and a half unemployed. (the Institute of Sociology of Chinese Academy of Social Science, 2002)

Social class, as in a class society, is a set of concepts in the social sciences and political theory centered on models of social stratification in which people are grouped into a set of hierarchical social categories, the most common being the upper, middle, and lower classes (Grant, J. Andrew, 2001).

## 2.3. Second Language Learners

Second language learners may find new ideologies and performance "unacceptable or incompatible" (Pavlenko, 2001), and they may find the new ideologies and performance "more favorable than those in their home cultures" (Shi, 2006), so they may choose to acquire new ways of speaking and acting, and new ways of being (Feng Gao, 2011).

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Participants

Data used in this article is selected from a recent interview of two Chinese English majors, who have been studying English for over ten years. One of them is a classmate of me in my undergraduates school, the other is my former English teacher in Hubei University of science of technology. Each participant is given a pseudonym to protect their identity. Tom is my classmate from urban area of Baoding in Hebei Province, whose father is an English teacher. While the other participant John who is my former teacher, comes from a remote poor village in Shandong province, whose parents are both peasant.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The study tries to find that how Chinese learners' social class identities influence their English language learning experience and how their identities then be reshaped by the English language learning experience. The study employed case study approaches to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship between Chinese learners' English learning experience and their social class identification.

Both these two interviews were conducted through a telephone call and recorded during the conversation by the phone. In order to make interviewees feel at ease, language used in the interviews is Chinese. Then the data was transcribed into English. Details of their narratives have been changed as necessary to protect their anonymity.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

In this article the author tries to find out the themes including: the participants' self-identification of the social class of their family; the influence of social class on their English learning in different periods; the impact of English learning experiences on social class. During the qualitative research, analytic induction was

used to analyze the transcribed interview data. By using analytic induction, the author could re-read and re-exam the data of transcripts and documentation so as to search for salient or recurring themes. At last, the author summarizes the key theme with coded data attached as supporting evidence.

#### 4. Result and Discussion

##### 4.1 Self-identification of Family's Social Class

In people daily life, the higher subjective stratum identification is usually concerned with high salary regardless of education, occupation, income and any other factors. Therefore, the factor of salary or income is the most important factor which could provide people a convincing explanation for subjective stratum identification. The report which was given by the CASS suggests that there are mainly five social classes: the "upper" class, the "upper middle" class, the "middle" class, the "lower middle" class and the "lower" class which is grouped according to wealth, income, education, type of occupation, and membership in a specific subculture or social network.

However, different people may have different opinions to defined and measure their own social class. The following section will discuss how the two interviews define the term of social class and their classification of their own family's social class. According to Tom, he thinks social class is so common in China. If let him consider his family's social class, he described it as middle class. As he explained:

*I think "social class" is so common in China. My home is located in the downtown area of Baoding which is a big city in Hebei province. My family lives a common citizen life in the city. I have an old brother who is a soldier in Xinjiang province. Both of my parents are teachers, and my father is once an English teacher in the famous high in my city and then he retires and begins to run his business with his friend and then makes a lot of money. Since all my parents graduate from university and receives high education and my father earn a lot of money by running his businesses in my opinion, I belong to the middle class. In addition, we can go traveling or go to see a movie at weekend. We really enjoy our life.*

And when John was asked to describe his family' social class, he responded:

*My family should be lower class. Income from a poor remote village in Shandong province. I have a sister who graduate from XinanUniversit, majoring in physical education. Both my parents are farmers, my father failed in the national university entrance examination and my mother graduated from middle who only know few words for the teaching condition in her times. My parents earn their living through working in the field and they can earn few money. In addition, I have to go to the field to help my parents after class.*

From the above interview, we can see that Tom classified his family's social class according to his parents' occupation, the education his parents received and the money his parents earns and their daily lives. And at the same time, John made his assessment based on her parents' occupation, the money his parents. So we could find that apart from the difference of occupation and salary, the activity is so different in different social class.

##### 4.2 Influences of Social Class on English Learning Experience

Tom and John born in different social classes, so the author wants to know if there's something different between their English learning experience. And when asked to describe the early English language learning experience, Tom explained:

*I have a good voice when I am very young, so I always be the host of the party in my elementary school and I always got the good result in the recital and lecture contest. For all the talent, I became the English subject representative of class in my elementary school. In order to get the highest score in my English score I pay too much attention to my English. One thing I forget to mention is that my father is an English teacher and I don't want to let him lose face. So you know I am an English master when I was so young.*

While John responded as the following:

*When I was young I always go to the field to help my parents do something I could do when the children in the city sit in the classroom equipped with air conditioner. Because born in the village, I want to learn more knowledge but I never heard of someone know or speak English when I was very young. In*

*order to let me receive a better education, my parents sent me into to a primary school in the county when my score is nearly the worst in my class and I know nothing about English.*

From the interview above, we can find that family's social class does influence one's English learning. Because Tom's parents have high educational level and Tom's father is even an English teacher which all combined to make Tom learned English in a so early years. Contrasting to Tom, John's parents have low educational level, they know nothing to help their son do something to learn English. They have to work in the field to earn money to send them to a good school to receive better education. However, Tom's parents is knowledgeable and they know clearly what they should do to help their son to make improvement in English or his studying. For the help Tom get from his parents, his English is so good when he was young.

In addition to the above investment, Tom has more opportunity to participant in different social activities which help him to know more about English language. As Tom explained:

*When I was young, my portents will take me to the park or to see the English film which afford me to know the English language. My parents also bought me a lot of English books, such as novels or cartoons. It is at that time, I became so interested in English, the little story in the English books make me happy and when I came across something I don't understand I will ask my father who was an English teacher at that time. Over time, my father would talk with me in English at home which gave me such a great opportunity to practice my oral English. It is really amazing and boosts my enthusiasm toward English Speaking later on.*

The above information suggests that the environment Tom lives is favorable for him to practice English. Compared with Tom, John's family couldn't provide her with the opportunity to get access to anything related to English and let alone the English social activities. The article will focus on whether such experiences will influence their choice of major. For Tom, he chooses his major because of he failed to choose the major he likes.

*I failed two times in my national university entrance examination. In the first year, I failed to choose business administration in Hebei University as my major for my low score. In the second year, I also failed to choose "econmicadmistration" as my major and then been assigned to English department. Since I've reviewed two times and I have no patience to review again, so I accept the assignment of my school and become an English major considering my English is so good. Both of my parents don't support my choice, for they think English is shouldn't be a major but a tool to communicate.*

For John, after the entrance examination, he chooses English as his major for his English is so good in his class and his parents think that English is such a fantastic major for their son with bright future which ensure that their son won't work in the field. For John himself, he thinks that there few boys who could speak English well which may bring him lots chances to further develop himself. So he chooses English as his major. However, when John entered his university, he astonished to find that almost all his classmates could speak a better English, he had such a strong accent which made his classmates laugh when he spoke. So he suffered a lot in order to correct his accent. The following is his description.

*After I entered the university, I find my English accent is so strong which is always teased by my classmates. My English is so bad. I takes me so long a time to correct my pronunciation. I even want to give up learning English for its hard pronunciation. I finally acquire a good pronunciation for my unremitting effort which makes me become confident again.*

This interview suggests that social class inevitably influences their access to practicing and learning English considering economic, social, cultural and other factors. The experience which the children have will determine their choice of major when they grow up.

#### **4.3 The Impact of English Learning Experiences on Social Class**

In the last section, we will discuss the influence of one's English learning experience on his social class. Since we have learned English for many years and we want to know the relationship between English learning experience and social class or whether English learning experience help shape or reconstruct one's social class.

As Tom explained, he born in a teacher's family and his parents always take him to participate different kinds of English related activities which all help him to identify his social class as middle class in the

city. Compared to Tom, John born in a peasant's family, he never contact something about English, his parents are peasants who never receive high education. All John's experience help him to identify himself as a low class.

Depends on all the discussion above, the author tries to find whether English learning experiences would help learns' to reshape and reconstruct their social class. When asked this question, Tom responded as follows:

*After long time of English studying in my university, I've found the great demand for foreign language talent in our modern society. I've also found that our English major win much respect not only at school but also in the society. I gradually change my attitude to love English. The change of my classmates from the remote village is great, they are shy and nervous when in their first year but when they graduate from university they not only could speak an excellent oral English but also become confident and it seems like they become another person, they are now not the lower person they used to be and they become the talent of the society.*

And for John who born in a lower class family, his self-identification is no longer the same as before. As he described:

*I'm so satisfied with my recent social condition which wins me a lot of respect than before. There are mainly two types of students among my classmates, one is the student from rich family in the city, there's little change during their four years studying, the other is the students from the poor family in the village who change a lot during their four years studying, such as that they become more confident and they believe they have been an important member of the middle class in the society. They think English is a high-class language which guarantee international standard and high-quality life.*

From the interview above, we could find that the English learning experience could improve one's social identity and especially for the students from rural area to improve their social status.

When asked about something about the job, Tom's answer is like that:

*A lot of my classmate choose to be a teacher in the school, and some of them even enter the foreign company to earn more money. As for me, I'm satisfied with my recent job to work in the bank. I am also a member of the middle class.*

John's answer is like that:

*I'm so happy to be an English teacher in university, it's my dream. I become a middle class member through English learning. As a student from the village, you must struggle more than the student from the city, so it's English makes who I am today. I'll spend large amount of time teaching my son English and let him be a master of English which is not a major but a tool of communication.*

In conclusion, all the data we get from the research suggests that English learning experiences can influence his self-identification and expectation of social class, and even help to change his social class.

## 5. Conclusion

The author tries to get the relationship between English learners English learning experience and social class in this article. By using the inductive method, the author comes to the conclusion that one's social class influences one's opportunity to learn and practice English especially in the early years of a people. At the same time, one's English learning experience could change the identification of one's social class or even change one's original social class.

This paper also tries to tell the English learners, especially the students from the rural areas, studying is the most effective way to change your social class. If you work hard, nothing is impossible in your study. And it also tell us that, English is so important in modern society, we must make good use of it not only as major but also as a tool which enable us to communicate with the rest of the world. It is hoped that this study would provide some pedagogical implications for second language teaching and learning.

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