

Social-Class Identity and English Learning: Importance of Education

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Abstract— English learning is influenced by the learner's identity. In this thesis, the research perspective is learner's social-class identity and the research method is interview. By analyzing the data, ideas about how the participants to percept their social class identity, how this kind of identity influences English-learning experiences and what's the influence by English learning to their social-class identity and what education should do can be thought deeply again.

Keywords— Social Class; Identity; English Learning; Education, English Learning, Identity, Social Class.

I. INTRODUCTION

The previous researches show that the relationship between English-learning experiences and learner's identity is very close. There're different kinds of identities, such as social-class identity, gender identity, culture identity, color identity and so on. All of these identities can have an enormous effect on the English learning, at the same time, English-learning experiences also influence the form of identities.

This thesis analyzes the relationship between English learning experiences and learner's social-class identity. They are influenced by each other. There're four parts: social class, identity and English learning, and the education's significance. In the following parts, I will analysis them in detail.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

About the analysis of the relationship between the social-class identity and their English-learning experiences there're many researches. Feng Gao in *Social-Class Identity and English Learning: Studies of Chinese Learners* elaborates clearly that the complex conceptualization of Chinese learners' social-class identities with respect to a shifting Chinese class stratification and examines the link between social class and second-language learning in the Chinese context by reviewing several studies on Chinese learners' social-class backgrounds and their English language learning experiences, discussing the strengths and limitations of these studies and suggesting some directions for future research.

In more recent years, scholars in second language learning research draw on social cultural theory and post structuralism and critical theory to theorize the complex relationships between the individual and the social that contribute powerfully to understanding language learners' learning, identity from this respective is seen as "socio-culturally constructed" (Norton, 2006). Based

on this social identity, Giles et al. (1997), Giles and Byrne (1982), and Giles and Johnson (1987) developed several interrelated and parallel-developed linguistic and social-psychological theory, including Communication Accommodation theory, Ethno linguistic Identity Theory, or The Intergroup Model.

III. RESEARCH MATHORD

The research method that I use in this thesis is the interview.

I choose two Chinese students as the participants. They are both the first year in postgraduate study. One is the English literature major, the other majors in law. They are postgraduate students, so about their social-class identity and their English-learning experiences they have a clearer perception and knowledge, and that is the reason why I choose them as the participants.

The process of interview is very thoughtful. The question setting needs to be deeper even though sometimes the interviews are not answered as you wish. After the tutoring of the teacher, I understand interviewees need to be guided by the interviewers' questions and then you can get the valuable information. Besides, the advantage of interview is high truth value. The result is reliable because it's the first hand research material. However, the disadvantage of this method is they can only reflect their individual truth. Whether it can be applied to one group is in doubt. The result may be a respond to the group feature.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis mainly about these three questions:

1. How the participant's percept and define their social-class identity?
2. How the social-class identity influences participants' English learning experiences?
3. What's the effect on forming social-class identity by the English learning experiences?

A. How the participant's percept and define their social-class identity?

- What is the meaning of social class?

In the past, there're different social positions, such as cadres, workers and farmers. With the social, economical and cultural development, the idea of social class is changing, too. Before, we call the different social class as "Jie ji" in Chinese, but now, we use the word "Jie ceng" in Chinese. The different word means differently. According to Feng Gao states in Social-class Identity and English Learning: Studies of Chinese Learners:

"Marx's class differentiation model was based on the ownership of the means of production, which divided a society into two opposing groups: the rulers and the ruled (Marx, 1976). Marx's theory of class polarization and Mao's concept of class warfare once trapped the Chinese in an endless dialect of class struggle, which prevented the development of the Chinese market economy. In contrast, the concept of social strata is used to address social inequality without assuming social antagonism. In this way, socioeconomic inequality is articulated as cultural difference in a hierarchy of national belonging rather than class-based conflict (Anagnost, 2008). People from various social strata may have different occupations, incomes, or lifestyles but not, necessarily, contradictory political stances. Although there is contradiction and conflict among the social strata, the class struggles of China's past are no longer desirable (Wu & Xu, 1997). The complexly differentiated social strata inspire individual Chinese to pursue their self-interests and climb the social ladder, which fits the market reforms in China (Liang, 1997).

- What is the participants' perception to their social class identity?

There're five social classes: upper class, upper middle class, and middle class, lower middle class, and lower class.

We can take a look at the interview material: (L is Participant NO.1; J is Participant NO.2.)

- Y: Firstly, do you think social class exists in China?
- L: Yes. Surely, the social class exists. Different economical conditions and social statuses can cause different social classes.
- Y: Do you think whether there's social class or not in China?

- J: Yes. Comparatively with the students whose parents has well job and good economical, the social class of course is not the same.

From the material, we can know, they both believe the existence of social class and say that "Surely, the social class exists."

They also give the specific social position of their families, and their social classes both are lower middle class. As they say, "I'm in the lower middle class. My family condition is not good. In my opinion, upper class should have good economical condition, well-respected, and honorable job. And we don't have these factors." According to the participants, their standard is "economic condition, social status, and job". I think there're a lot of points, for example, income, occupation, social status, education level, values, lifestyle, patterns of consumption, taste and aesthetic values, life chances, and self-perception. "Self-perception here refers to individuals' own beliefs or perceptions of the social class to which they belong." So we can know their answer is included in these factors.

B. How the social-class identity influences participants' English learning experiences?

- What is the relationship between partents' investment and English learning?

Different social classes have different investment to their children. As the participants say:

- Y: Do you think your family condition has an effect in your English learning?
- L: Yes. The cost in money and the help in learning is less because of the limitation of the family economical.
- Y: How do you define your social class? Do you think there's some influences in your individual development?
- J: I'm in lower middle class. It influences my English learning. I believe, different social classes are different in education background, education environment, investment and faculty. Good family condition will make a good learning condition.
- Y: Then in your English learning, do your parents invest enough time and energy?
- J: They try their best to invest and help me. In their affordable scope, they pay much attention to my English learning. For example, they always buy English reference books.

Firstly, the quantity of investment is different. For their lower middle class, parents' investment is limited, as the first participant says "the money and the help in learning are comparatively less.", and the second participant says

“because of the limitation of the family economical condition, the cost is less”s.

Secondly, the form of investment is different.

There're some kinds of investment: economical investment, knowledge investment, guanxi investment and emotion investment.

Economical investment, for their lower middle class, is limited, but within the acceptable scope, the investment is accomplished, for example, “they bought me the reference book.” But for the upper or upper middle class, the economical investment can be large, such as the tutor, an auxiliary class, or the chance to study overseas.

Knowledge investment is different. In the interview, the participants cannot be tutored by their parents. As the first participant says “the money and the help in learning are comparatively less.”, “they don't know English much.” However, for the upper middle class, if parents are teachers or professors, children can be coached by their parents.

Guanxi investment is different. For the lower middle class, to go to a much better school with high-quality teaching by parents' interpersonal connections is really difficult. But for the upper middle class, it's so possible.

Emotion investment is different. It means children can gain encouragement by parents' speech or figure. At this point, the second participant told me that parents always encourage her to stick to the goal. Therefore, the specific content of emotion investment, but they all try their best. For the upper or upper middle class, children can gain more encouragement when they make mistakes in learning.

- **What is the relationship between social-class identity and learning motive?**

- Y: When did you begin to study English?
- L: When I was in my third grade, I began to learn it. And I was interested in it very much at that time.
- Y: Then why?
- L: More because my English teacher's education. My families know little about English.
- Y: Why do you love English at first?
- J: I love languages. And I like my English teacher's teaching style. So I love English.
- Y: Do your parents give you some help in your English learning?

- J: They don't know English much, so mostly it's my teachers that help me. And I learn it hard.

There are different learning motivations, such as situational motivation (because of textbook or teaching style of teachers), interest motivation (for study overseas or employment), and social responsibility motivation (for promoting Chinese integration with the world), individual development motivation (for a good job), grade motivation (for a good grade) and face motivation (for the respect or as the self-cultivation). According to the participants, they both like English as soon as they learn it at the beginning. It belongs to the situational motivation. They like the teacher's style, thus they like English. In this way, education is very important, and it may influence the students' interest in English learning.

- **What is the relationship between social-class identity and participants' grade?**

- Y: Is there any difficulty in English learning?
- L: For me, not much. But if the family economical condition is better, then I can use more tapes and maybe the listening ability will be much better than now.
- Y: What's your difficulty in your English learning?
- J: I really want to study aboard.
- Y: Do you think this limitation is related to your social class?
- J: Yes, I think so. If the family economical condition is better and I can study overseas, I think I can learn English much better and faster in the real English environment.

As the first participant says, “My English learning depends on individual's hard work more.” This means education is an important factor to lower middle class. They also say that “If I can use more tapes, my listening ability can be better than now.” “The chance to study abroad is less.” “If the economical condition is better, then I can study overseas. To study in the real English environment must be quicker and better to English learning.” These words all show that participants' lower middle class identity influences their grade.

And this is a respond to the research that students with higher class identity usually have a better grade than those with lower middle class. However, this is not a must thing.

- Y: Do you think there is any difference with those students who have better family condition?

- L: Not too much. It depends on the hard work, too. In my primary class, for the students with good economical condition, some students' grade is very good, some really bad.
- Y: Do you think what the reason is?
- L: I think some students study harder with the benefit of the great learning condition; some will rely on the parents and they nearly didn't study seriously. This is my opinion. (The first participant)

So, not all students with upper class get the good grade. It's just a trend.

C. How to form their social-class identity by learning English?

As the participants say, "I want to become an English teacher." "I hope I can enter one middle class. I like this job, to share knowledge with more people." "I want to become a lawyer, or a professor." "I hope I can enter the middle class as a teacher in one university." So for them, as the lower middle class, they want to enter middle class. They may believe lower middle class will be easier to enter the middle class but harder to enter the upper class. This is the English learning experiences' effect on the forming of the social-class identity.

VI. WHAT EDUCATION SHOULD DO

From the analysis of the interview, we can know the following information about the participants from lower middle class. Firstly, their parents' many kinds of investment are comparatively less. Secondly, even though the investment is less, they are still interested in English. Thirdly, they are not only interested, but also get a good grade. Therefore, education is very significant to students' learning, especially at the beginning. Education should play an important role of compensation, especially for the lower or lower middle class.

Education is really essential to students' English learning. Then English learning has a great effect on the form of students' social-class identity, and in reverse, the social-class identity can influence English learning experiences in huge degree.

With the development of society, the social progress depends on education in a more and more degree. So, English teachers are very important to the whole society's fairness. People cannot overlook education in many ways.

VII. CONCLUSION

This thesis analyzes the relation between the participants' English learning and social-class identity as lower-middle class. Their lower-middle class identity will affect the investment. The quantity and the form of investment influence the participants' learning interest, learning motivation and learning grade. In reverse, the participants' English-learning experiences play an important role in the form of social-class identity. Thus, education should take the responsibility of help students' English learning and identity forming, especially for the lower-middle class.

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