

Article

Investment in Intersecting Identities: Negotiating Social Class and Gendered Identities in English Language Learning

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Abstract

This study presents an ethnographic case study of two Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' language learning experiences at an elite liberal arts college in Shanghai. Drawing on data collected from a 13-month longitudinal inquiry, the study utilizes the model of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015) and the notion of intersectionality (Block & Corona, 2016) to examine the interplay between language learners' investment in English language learning and their social class and gendered identities, with a particular focus on the intersectionality of these two identity dimensions. The findings explicate how the intersecting dynamics of social class and gendered identities mediate learners' access to and engagement with EFL practices. Specifically, social class functions as both a driver and constraint on learners' investment, while learners' gendered perceptions of language learning significantly affect their commitment to the target language. The findings also highlight the intersectional nature of identities in EFL practices, suggesting that language learning investment serves as a site of power dynamics among intersecting social forces. The study calls for more exploration of language learners' social worlds to uncover the underlying discourses that give rise to structural inequalities, and advocates for a critical pedagogical approach that promotes feminist consciousness, as well as acknowledges and addresses the structural constraints in language learning. This is not only for harnessing the transformative potential of language learning for identity development, but also for advancing a more equitable and inclusive language educational environment.

Keywords

Investment, gender, social class, intersectionality, English language learning

1 Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed a rapid development of research on identity and language learning, ever since Norton's foundational work on immigrant women's investment in learning English in Canada (Norton Peirce, 1995). A wealth of empirical studies has generated abundant findings, covering

diverse contexts and populations (e.g. [Liu & Darvin, 2024](#); [Marshall & Bokhorst-Heng, 2020](#); [Shahri, 2018](#)). However, studies that offer nuanced analyses of the relationship between learners' language learning investment and their gendered and social class identities remain limited, and this is particularly true with Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. Moreover, since identity dimensions are often overlapping and interdependent, shaping learners' learning trajectories in an intersectional manner, it is essential to explore how multiple identity dimensions intersectionally affect individuals' language learning experiences ([Norton & De Costa, 2018](#)).

Therefore, the present study is intended to probe into the interplay between language learners' investment and their social class and gendered identities, with an explicit focus on intersectionality. Drawing on data from an ethnographic case study of two EFL learners at an elite liberal arts college in Shanghai, the study adopts the model of investment ([Darvin & Norton, 2015](#)) and the notion of intersectionality ([Block & Corona, 2016](#)) to address the two research questions:

- 1) what is the interrelationship between students' investment in English language learning and their social class and gendered identities?
- 2) how do social class and gendered identities intersect to influence learners' investment in language learning?

Research findings shed informative light on how the intersecting dynamics of social class and gendered identities mediate learners' access to and engagement with EFL practices. Implications for identity research and EFL pedagogy are discussed in light of these findings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Identity, investment and language learning

Identity, within poststructuralist scholarship, is conceptualized as a dynamic and evolving process that emerges through situated social practices and discursive interactions ([Bucholtz & Hall, 2005](#); [Butler, 1990](#)). Rejecting essentialist notions of a fixed, coherent core, the poststructuralist perspective posits identity as a site of struggle, shaped by power relations and multiple competing and colluding discourses ([Darvin & Norton, 2015](#); [Weedon, 1987](#)). As individuals navigate diverse subject positions within intersecting discourses ([Darvin & Norton, 2023](#)), they negotiate relations with the external world and a sense of self ([Norton, 2013](#)). Identity is thus emergent from social practices and interactions in individuals' day-to-day activities.

In language learning research, the relationship between learners' identities and language learning commitment can be explicated by the notion of investment, which was first proposed by Norton Peirce ([1995](#)) in her research on the English language learning and use experiences of five immigrant women in Canada. Norton ([2013](#)) defined investment as 'the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it' (p. 6). Norton further explained that learners' investment in the target language reflects their anticipation of increasing the value of their capital. The forms of capital, drawing inspiration from Bourdieu ([1986](#)), come in three types: economic capital (as monetary possessions or property rights), social capital (as social networks or memberships in a particular group), and cultural capital (as embodied dispositions or institutionalized credentials). The notion of investment complements motivation as a sociological construct, acknowledging that language learning is not merely cognitive, but deeply intertwined in the social world where learners are situated. Through the construct of investment, we can dissect the social world where language learners perform multiple identities and examine how their histories, lived experiences, social practices, and power relations shape language learning ([Darvin, 2025](#); [Darvin & Norton, 2023](#); [Norton, 2013](#)).

Amid the growing complexity of diversity, mobility and digital interconnectedness of the modern world, Darvin and Norton (2015) developed the model of investment by locating investment at the intersection of identity, capital and ideology. In this framework, learner's investment is closely intertwined with how they negotiate their capital, the value of which is valorized by dominant ideologies. The amount of capital they are able to assemble and configure mediates their access to valued resources for language practices, thus helping them to claim the right to speak (e.g. Bao, 2025; Liao et al., 2025; Liu & Darvin, 2024) and providing opportunities for the negotiation of identities across time and space (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). This new model also highlights the role of ideology to reveal how the mechanism of power that structures positioning and value systems determines modes of inclusion and exclusion and reproduces inequalities in more invisible ways (Darvin & Norton, 2023). An interrogation of ideology can be achieved by studying how power structures shape habitus. As an internalized system shaped by ideologies (Darvin & Norton, 2015), habitus is a 'system of durable, transposable dispositions' produced in 'a particular class of conditions of existence', ...and serves as 'principles which generate and organize practices and representations' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53). These dispositions—including 'thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.55)—become embodied and durable through sedimentation. With dispositions, habitus configures in learners common sense assumptions and predisposes them to think and act in ways that are deemed socially appropriate (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Therefore, examining learners' habitus provides a window for understanding how prevailing ideologies lead them to internalize certain ways of thinking and acting, and frame the way they make sense of the world. The foci of this study, gender and social class, can also be perceived as sets of ideological norms and power structures (Block, 2016; Jones, 2016) that construct dominant ways of thinking and acting and regulate individuals' language practices. Therefore, the present study adopts the model of investment as the theoretical framework to analyze how language learners' investment and their gendered and social class identities are mutually constructed.

Extant research on learners' identities and investment mostly centers on the learning of English in a variety of contexts. Among the emerging body of research on English language learners' identities, Shari (2018) presented a case study of two EFL learners in Iran, demonstrating how they drew on informal and formal discursive resources respectively to construct the second language-mediated identities they aspired to. Elsewhere, Liu and Darvin (2024) investigated two Chinese university EFL learners from rural backgrounds, demonstrating how their investment in English learning was significantly empowered by their active engagement in the digital wilds, which afforded them a range of language resources and helped construct more powerful identities. Guan and Xu (2024) reported a case study of a college English major in China, revealing that the learner's investment in English appeared to transformed with her evolving perceptions of English learning and imagined identities, which were shaped largely under the influences of neoliberal and humanities discourses. The tensions between the discourses gave rise to her identity conflicts. The studies above have proved that language learning as a social practice can be a site of identity formation and struggle, and the model of investment has great explanatory power to unpack the interplay of agency and structure in language learning activities.

2.2 Gendered and social class identities in language learning research

From a poststructuralist view of identity, gender is not regarded as an inherent quality tied to biological sex, but rather as a socially and discursively constructed identity dimension that emerges through repeated performative acts (Butler, 1990; Jones, 2016). Drawing on Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, gender is 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (p.33). In this sense, gender is performative, produced in the 'doing' of repeated everyday mundane acts (Pennycook, 2004). The reiteration of these acts (including language use, gesture, dress, and other embodied practices) within regulatory discourses leads to the 'sedimentation' (Butler, 1999, p.120) of

gendered identities, where the iterative layering of performative acts creates the illusion of stable and natural gender categories.

Another point worth noting is that gender is deeply enmeshed in broader ideological structures that regulate what is considered acceptable and intelligible in gendered behavior. Gender normativity not only constrains but also shapes the identities that are possible for men and women to perform (Jones, 2016). These ideological norms, often disseminated through salient discourses, dictate expectations regarding appropriate roles and behaviors for women and men, forming the basis of gender stereotypes (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Such cultural expectations of adherence to the gender order exert a significant regulatory force on individuals' gendered performances.

Language learning research on gendered identities mostly focuses on how language learners draw upon linguistic and other semiotic resources to enact their gendered identities and how gender impacts on learners' access to language learning resources and opportunities. For example, Polanyi (1995) reported a study on the study abroad experiences of American young female students in Russia, showing how their unpleasant gender-related encounters cowed them into silence, which proved to be significantly detrimental to their further investment and learning achievements in Russian. Conversely, Churchill (2009) examined the English language learning experiences of a Japanese male high school student in both Japan and the U.S. The findings indicated that in comparison with his female peers, the male student acquired more opportunities for English language practice in the U.S., with his gender affording him broader access to diverse communities, such as sports teams that facilitated his language development.

Regarding social class, it encompasses the lived relationships surrounding social arrangements of material production, exchange, distribution and consumption. While often narrowly conceived as economic relationships, social class also pertains to a broader web of relationships, including lifestyle, educational experiences, cultural activities, social network, etc. (Bradley, 1996). Consequently, social class can be seen as social relations embedded in material and cultural practices and emergent in day-to-day activities (Block, 2016).

These social relations can be further elucidated through Bourdieu's theory of social capital. These forms of capital—economic, social and cultural—can be understood as usable resources and powers (Bourdieu, 1986) that individuals utilize as they engage in practices within 'fields' constituted by ideological discourses. Research on social class identities should not only investigate participants' lived experiences of how they build and mobilize capital in the material world, an inquiry into class consciousness is equally important. Wright (2005) defined class consciousness as 'the subjective awareness people have of their class interests and conditions for advancing them' (p. 22). A close examination of class consciousness helps reveal how social class becomes embodied in the individual, forming a class 'habitus' as an ever-evolving set of internalized dispositions (Block, 2016).

Studies on social class identities in language learning mostly focus on how social class mediates access to language learning resources and how capital is revalorized or converted in transnational experiences. For example, Darvin and Norton (2014)'s research on Filipino migrant students in Canada demonstrated how the affordances and constraints of their social class can impact their social and educational trajectories, leading to divergent learning outcomes. Shin (2014) investigated the experiences of four Korean early study abroad learners from middle class backgrounds in Toronto. Her study revealed how these immigrant learners suffered a degree of declassing, along with encounters of racism and social exclusion. Yet they strategically drew upon valued stylistic resources from Korean cosmopolitan discourses to establish a heightened sense of middle-class entitlement. This also served as a form of resistance, enabling them to contest racial and linguistic stigmatization. In contrast, Vandrick's (2009) study on English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students from upper class backgrounds in the U.S. showed a different pattern. She observed that social class privilege often lessened the negative impact associated with being labeled as ESL students, and such privilege was reinforced by the widely held perception of multilingual and multicultural knowledge as a symbol of elite status. Recent studies on digital literacies

(e.g. [Liu, 2025a, 2025b](#)) showed how EFL learners of rural lower-class background in China were subjected to marginalized and inadequate positions as they migrated from under-resourced rural spaces to the urban elite field, but engaging with digital literacies in the wild empowered them to reframe their identities as legitimate English speakers, challenging the prevailing rural-urban exclusionary ideologies to claim the right to speak.

2.3 Intersectionality in language and identity research

The notion of intersectionality, tracing its origins to political activism and civil rights demands by women and people of color ([Anthias, 2013](#); [Block & Corona, 2016](#)), offers a crucial lens for understanding the complexities of language and identity. Initially proposed by Crenshaw ([1989](#)) to critique the marginalization of Black women within feminist and civil rights discourses, intersectionality highlights how experiences of injustice are shaped by the simultaneous interaction of multiple identity dimensions. Crenshaw's analysis of Black women's encounters with the legal system demonstrated that their experiences could not be adequately understood by examining racism or sexism in isolation; rather, the confluence and interactions of these oppressions produced a unique and compounded form of marginalization, where 'the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism' ([Crenshaw, 1989](#), p. 149).

In language and identity research, intersectionality can be understood as a heuristic device for examining social boundaries and hierarchies ([Anthias, 2013](#)). Moving beyond a 'divide-and-analyze' approach based on bounded and totalizing identity categories, intersectionality considers how multiple overlapping and interlinked identity dimensions interact with each other, simultaneously affecting individuals' experiences ([Block & Corona, 2016](#)). Just as Bucholtz and Hall ([2005](#)) argued, different identity positions typically occur simultaneously in a single interaction, necessitating the consideration of multiple facets in order to achieve a more complete understanding of how identity works. In this sense, intersectionality aligns with an anti-essentialist poststructuralist understanding of identity as multiple, fluid and dynamic.

The application of intersectionality addresses a significant limitation in language and identity studies, which often focus on single or dual identity dimensions without fully exploring their intricate interrelations. Some may argue that a form of implicit intersectionality may be present in some language and identity work, but making the intersectional nature of identity explicit offers a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complexity of lived experiences in the increasingly varied circumstances of the present times, leading to more insightful and socially relevant perceptions of the relationship between language and identity ([Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2025](#)).

Previous empirical studies employing the notion of intersectionality include Block and Corona's ([2014](#)) research on four Latino adolescent immigrants in Barcelona, explicating how social class interacts with other identity inscriptions including race, ethnicity and gender to shape individual experiences (such as racial profiling from the mainstream, their way of dress, etc.) Another example is Diao and Wang's ([2021](#)) research on the study abroad experiences of three multiracial Chinese American women in China, highlighting the intersectionality of gender and race. The study explored how these women made sense of their gendered ethno-racial identities in their transcultural experiences (e.g. gender norms in different cultural traditions, sexual harassment), where they rediscovered their links to multiple identity labels and redefined who they were in another cultural system of meaning making. Elsewhere, Qin and Li ([2020](#)) studied three immigrant boys' negotiation of racialized masculinities and their impact on their English language learning in the U.S., showing how their masculinity negotiation was shaped by conflicting cultural expectations and racialized discourses under the intersecting influences of racism, heteronormativity and linguicism. Examples above have demonstrated that an intersectional approach is a productive way to examine the nuanced experiences of individuals living in multicultural and multilingual contexts.

Despite a substantial body of research on identity and language learning, relatively limited attention has been paid to the dimension of gender and social class. Even fewer studies have investigated how the interaction between gender and social class influences language learning through the lens of intersectionality. To address this gap, guided by the model of investment, the present study adopts an intersectional approach to explore the interrelationship between language learning investment and learners' gendered and social class identities.

3 Methodology

This study is part of a larger longitudinal research project that investigates the identity construction of Chinese EFL learners through their engagement in English language practices. It adopts an ethnography-oriented case study design (Blommaert & Dong, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014). While the case study approach facilitates rich, detailed accounts of learners' lived experiences, the ethnography approach allows for an in-depth exploration of learners' situated environments and multi-layered sociocultural contexts through sustained immersion in the research setting. Hence this combined design is employed, aiming to achieve a nuanced understanding of the complexities and dynamic processes of gendered and social class identity formation in relation to language learning investment.

3.1 The research site and the participants

The research took place at an elite liberal arts college in Shanghai (anonymized as Phoenix University hereafter). Recognized for its strengths in foreign language education (encompassing thirty languages) and international diplomacy research, Phoenix University provides a wide range of support for language acquisition and practice. These include English-medium instruction (EMI) courses, scholarly seminars, international exchange opportunities, and other student-initiated communities and activities. A notable characteristic of Phoenix University is the pronounced gender imbalance among its student population, with female students outnumbering their male counterparts at a ratio of 4.08:1. This disparity reflects broader gender stereotypes and trends in college enrollment across China, where women are more likely to pursue studies in the humanities and liberal arts, while men tend to gravitate toward science and engineering disciplines (Broaded & Liu, 1996). The author negotiated her entry to the field through her alumni status. Final access to the classrooms was granted after obtaining informed consent from the teachers and participants.

The participants of the study, Jia and Ran (both are pseudonyms), were selected through purposeful sampling. Two specific criteria were established to identify information-rich cases most relevant to the research questions (Creswell, 2015). First, participants should be English language learners with a minimum of one year of immersion experience at Phoenix, ensuring that they have been sufficiently exposed to the language resources available at the research site. Second, to ensure heterogeneity among participants, they were chosen to represent a diverse range of profiles—including variations in gender, social class, place of origin, academic major, and English proficiency level—in order to maximize data variation.

3.2 Data collection

This longitudinal inquiry, spanning 13 months (October 2019 - October 2020), collected data from multiple sources. Guided by the ethnographic guideline (Blommaert & Dong, 2010), the database is outlined in Table 1. On-site observations were scheduled every three weeks across the two semesters to ensure sustained engagement with both participants and the research site. These visits focused mainly on observing participants' classroom participation and their extracurricular activities related to English learning and use. In the fieldwork, I positioned myself along Glesne's (2016) observer-participant

spectrum. During classroom observations, I primarily acted as a non-participant observer, minimizing intrusion into classroom activities, while during out-of-classroom observations, I acted as a participant observer, assisting participants upon request with English expressions and extracurricular activities.

During each campus visit, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview protocol centered on 2 topics: 1) participants' EFL practices and their reflections on these practices; 2) their perceptions of gendered practices, class consciousness, and aspirations for the future. The longitudinal track of these narratives enabled the tracing of the development in both their EFL practices and their gendered and social class identities. Interview questions were also informed by prior observations of their classroom performance and relevant EFL-related activities (instances pertaining to gender and social class in particular) so as to elicit their retrospective interpretation of the experiences. In addition, interviews with the participants' teachers and peers were also conducted to triangulate the data.

Besides on-site observations and interviews, participants were invited to maintain monthly reflective journals on EFL practices and self-development, offering an emic perspective on their learning journeys and identity trajectories. Supplementary materials, including their schoolwork and institutional documents, were also collected to support the triangulation of findings.

Table 1
Summary of the Database

Collection methods	Data
Interview	With Jia Semi-structured interviews: 12 times, 11.4 hours of audio
	With Ran Semi-structured interviews: 10 times, 10.2 hours of audio
	With teachers and classmates Semi-structured interviews: 2 times, 1.2 hour of audio Informal interviews: field notes (11 pages)
Journal	From Jia 9 entries
	From Ran 9 entries
Observation	In classroom On-site observation (52 hours), field notes (91 pages), photos (53)
	Out of classroom On-site observation (6 hours), field notes (10 pages), photos (11)
Document	Introduction of Phoenix University
	Introduction of the school of English and the school of International Relations and Public Affairs
	Cultivation schemes for majors in English and International Politics
	Study abroad program introduction
	Class schedule
Schoolwork	Homework
	Syllabi
	Academic transcript

3.3 Data analysis

The process of data analysis was iterative and evolving (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), consisting of three phases. In the first phase, interview data and key excerpts from on-site observations were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts, along with journals, field notes and collected documents, were managed and analyzed with NVivo 12. A close reading of the materials was conducted to gain an initial understanding of participants' EFL practices and identity development.

In the second phase, the transcripts and journals were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in an inductive coding approach. Through iterative readings of the data, initial codes were generated and then condensed into preliminary categories to identify recurring patterns. To ensure these categories are internally coherent, consistent and distinctive, they were refined through checking against each other and examining each category's relations with the coded extracts and the entire database (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, the refined categories were theoretically interpreted through the lens of the model of investment and the constructs of gender and social class (e.g., 'accumulating linguistic capital for career prospects', 'stereotyping humanities and language learning as feminine practice'). Afterwards, categories were further examined to uncover underlying relations, and subsequently collated into themes (e.g., 'class-mediated investment', 'EFL learning as gendered practice', 'EFL learning driven by intersectional aspirations') to address the research questions.

The last phase involved a cross-case analysis, in which comparisons were made across cases around the same theme and connections among different themes were analyzed to address the research questions. Finally, to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, the transcribed data and case reports were returned to the two participants for member checking.

4 Findings

In this section, I started with a brief biography of each participant before presenting the major themes emergent from their EFL learning experiences concerning gendered and social class identity development.

4.1 The case of Jia

Jia was born into a working-class family in a small town in Sichuan Province. Her father worked at a state-owned enterprise, and her mother a homemaker. Coming from rural backgrounds and only having completed vocational secondary education, both parents nevertheless placed a high value on learning. At age twelve, her family relocated to Chengdu, the principal metropolis of southwestern China, driven by the pursuit of enhanced educational opportunities for Jia and her identical twin sister. Her father made considerable efforts to build connections, ultimately securing their admission to a prestigious foreign language middle school in Chengdu. The family invested significantly in her education, from providing a wide range of books to enrolling her in multiple tutoring classes.

At school, Jia distinguished herself as a diligent and self-motivated student. Her academic achievements enabled her to gain direct admission to the English Studies program at Phoenix University without having to take the *gaokao* (national college entrance examination) test. Faye's habitus to maintain a good scholastic record sustained at Phoenix. Because of her outstanding academic achievements, in the second year she was selected to the honors college, an institute Phoenix set up to cultivate elites in international affairs.

4.1.1 Exercising class-mediated agency to negotiate capital for enhanced future possibilities

At Phoenix University, Jia as an English major gained access to a wealth of resources related to EFL learning and use. These resources encompassed not only professors and peers, but also a humanities-oriented curriculum, diverse extracurricular activities, and academic seminars. Her investment in EFL practices appeared to transform with her changing perceptions of English learning, which was informed by her participation in and reflection on EFL practices at Phoenix (Guan & Xu, 2024). Her perceptions of a good English learner changed from a good test-taker, to an expressive speaker, and later to an erudite orator. This evolving perceptions guided her investment in a series of EFL practices from coursework, to

public speaking and debating training and activities, and eventually to reading classical and literary texts. Jia's active participation in these practices was fueled not only by her enthusiasm for the major, but also by her awareness of the enhanced academic and career opportunities tied to high achievement. As she explained,

Only when you excel in your major, can you have the opportunity to choose, like those awards, scholarships, the honors college, great job opportunities... all these are based on your level of expertise. (4th interview)

Jia invested in these EFL practices to build her cultural capital (expertise in the English language), with the intention of negotiating access to enhanced opportunities. Indeed, during her time at Phoenix, she invested in a series of resume-building practices, including winning an award in an English public speaking contest, obtaining translation and interpretation credentials, and securing an internship at the IELTS department of the British Council. The language capital she cultivated in college was strategically leveraged to unlock valuable opportunities for future upward mobility. This mindset was shaped by her habitus, nurtured by her family that had made significant efforts to ensure her access to elite education, seeding a strong connection between academic success and social class mobility.

Social class not only drives Jia's investment in EFL practices, but also mediates her access to language learning resources. For example, upon entering the honors college at Phoenix, she noticed a significant gap in oral English proficiency between herself and her peers. She expressed her frustration in the interview,

I've met a lot of amazing students in the honors college—they're really good at English public speaking. A lot of them have been doing debate or public speaking competitions since middle school and have won all kinds of awards. I think a big part of it is that they've been exposed to that kind of activities from a young age. ...There's definitely a noticeable gap between their spoken English and mine. Sometimes it feels like I'll never catch up, but other times I just think I need to push myself harder to get to their level. (5th interview)

In this excerpt, Jia attributed this disparity in oral proficiency to unequal exposure to English language resources in early education. Earlier in the interview, Jia recalled that back in high school, her English learning primarily centered on coursework and exam preparation, with limited opportunities to practice speaking. Jia's class-mediated investment reflects the longstanding issue of unequal distribution of EFL education resources in China, where social class background and regional disparities shape learners' access to language learning opportunities (e.g. [Hu, 2005](#); [Jin & Ball, 2020](#); [Liu & Darvin, 2024](#)).

4.1.2 Embracing feminist discourse to contest gender normativity

In college, Jia developed a strong interest in literature and poetry. It was through a literature course that she was introduced to Virginia Woolf, a writer widely regarded as a pioneer of the feminist movement. In the following excerpt, she expressed the intention to write her graduation thesis on Virginia Woolf:

Researcher: Why did you choose this writer for your paper?

Jia: I just really like Woolf. I've read some of her books and watched films about her.

Researcher: What is it about her writing that you're drawn to?

Jia: Her narrative style, for one thing... and also the feminist vibe. And the themes—she writes a lot about women and their experiences.

Researcher: Can you think of anything in particular that really moved you?

Jia: Yeah, like her book *A Room of One's Own*. She talks a lot about how women need their own status and financial independence—basically, a woman needs a room of her own. She believes

that female writers have to have their own space to be creative... And she also points out how women's voices have been suppressed by men, that there's a power dynamic behind it all.

Researcher: Do you agree with those ideas?

Jia: Yeah, I really do. (10th interview)

It appeared that Jia's investment in EFL learning was gendered by a feminist discourse, which was internalized through her reading of Wolf's work. In Jia's comments on *A Room of One's Own*, she accentuated the themes of independence and feminist subjectivity. She further critiqued the patriarchal structures that historically relegated women to subordinate roles. Aligning herself with feminist thoughts, she drew on the discourse to construct her perspectives on womanhood. For instance, Jia recounted tensions with her mother regarding educational aspirations,

I decided to do a Master's in interpreting, but my mom wasn't really supportive. She said we couldn't afford it, that it was too much for our family, and besides, it wasn't really necessary for a girl to pursue a degree that high. But I thought, how could she say that? Why should a girl's degree be considered unnecessary? (10th interview)

Jia drew on feminist discourse to critique different cultural expectations of men and women. These expectations are shaped by gender normativity (Jones, 2016), which is deeply embedded in the Confucian patriarchal structures that emphasize male dominance and female subservience (Mun, 2015). Within this ideological framework, women were traditionally expected to fulfill domestic duties with limited opportunities for public or social engagement (Xu et al., 2023). As a result, women's access to higher education and career advancement was often restricted in comparison to their male counterparts. Although there has been a clear trend toward greater gender equality in recent decades, the role divisions informed by Confucian gender norms continue to persist in modern East Asian societies. In response, Jia mobilized feminist discourse internalized through EFL practices to counter the enduring gender norms. By resisting the traditional gender roles ascribed to women, she asserted her entitlement to advanced education and constructed her gendered identity as an autonomous, independent woman.

4.1.3 Negotiating intersectional aspirations of class mobility and feminist autonomy

In the final interview, Jia was asked about the underlying motivation driving her commitment to EFL learning and her major studies. In her own words:

We're a pretty average family, my parents just have two of us sisters, so we've always had to count on ourselves. They put a lot into our education, so I feel like I should really make something out of it and do something for our family... I've always believed girls should be independent — that's what my dad always taught us. Work hard, make money, and *churen toudi* (stand out from the crowd and make something of yourself). (12th interview)

Jia's narrative illustrates how her gendered position as a daughter in a working-class family intersects with class-based aspirations to drive her English language learning. Her account highlights the intersecting influences on her language investment. On the one hand, the fact that her family leveraged education as a tool for social class mobility instills a class consciousness in her to convert linguistic capital into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). English proficiency therefore, is not merely a skill, but a gateway to elevated social status. On the other hand, Jia emphasized the importance of self-reliance for women as a pathway to self-actualization. This does not only reflect a gendered internalization of neoliberal values (Brown, 2003), but also echoes with feminist discourse that advocates women's autonomy. Thus, Jia's investment in EFL practices was shaped by a confluence of social dynamics, particularly the intersectionality of gender and class. For Jia, English functioned as a medium through which she negotiated gender constraints and aspired to social class mobility.

4.2 The case of Ran

Ran was born and raised in a prefecture-level city in Yunnan Province. His father was a civil servant, and his mother held an executive position at a local company. As the only child in a middle-class family, he enjoyed a carefree and nurturing upbringing. His parents were highly supportive of his education, investing all available local resources to foster both his academic performance and personal interests.

At high school, Ran was a science-track student, excelling in mathematics, physics, and chemistry. He also performed well in English, although he viewed it primarily as a school subject and approached it with a pragmatic goal: to earn a high enough score to gain admission to a prestigious university. His initial aspiration was to study engineering at a top university in Shanghai; however, his *gaokao* results fell short of the admission threshold. Following his mother's advice—a former English major—he applied to Phoenix, a liberal arts college specializing in foreign language education. Once enrolled, Ran encountered difficulties with both his major and English learning, saying that he was ‘not used to the study strategy in humanities and liberal arts disciplines’ (Interview). At the time of the research, he was a sophomore majoring in international politics.

4.2.1 Navigating inequality and opportunity with English proficiency

In Yunnan, Ran explained that the primary method for learning English is a traditional, teacher-centered, text-based approach, focused on rote memorization and exercise drilling, offering ‘few opportunities or occasions to use English’ (Interview). Although Ran performed well in English in high school and achieved a high score on the *gaokao*, upon entering Phoenix, he found his English proficiency lagging far behind that of his peers, especially those from Shanghai and neighboring provinces. In English classes, he revealed that many times the instructional content was beyond his understanding, leaving him unable to keep pace with the curriculum. His frustration peaked during the final exam of the first semester, where he failed the exam. Following this, Ran reported adopting a resigned attitude toward English learning, no longer actively engaging with EFL practices. Ran's experience upon entering Phoenix echoed with Jia's, highlighting the inequality in English education resources across regions, which results in discrepancies in students' English proficiency. When schools fail to address the needs of students with lower proficiency, it might lead to disengagement and passive investment in EFL practices.

Despite the challenges, in his third year at college Ran rekindled his commitment to English learning. He enrolled in an English minor, memorized vocabulary on a daily basis, and practiced oral English with peers regularly. When asked about the reason behind this change, he explained,

A lot of jobs that seem really great have pretty high English requirements. You might miss out on those opportunities just because your English isn't good enough. Same with exchange programs abroad — they usually need TOEFL or IELTS scores. Studying overseas too. If your English isn't strong, you could end up missing out on some amazing things. Just because your English isn't good, you might not even dare to apply. (1st interview)

Ran's renewed commitment to English learning appeared to be driven by the desire to access enhanced career and educational opportunities. Indeed, English in China is more than just a language competence, but also functions as a gatekeeper to broader life prospects (Gil & Adamson, 2011; Cotazzi & Jin, 1996). English proficiency often serves as a credential for enrollment in advanced education, as well as high-paying jobs and promotions. This gatekeeping role is intertwined with social class, not only because language learners' aspirations for social class mobility lead them to fulfill language requirements so as to access future possibilities, but also because English proficiency itself is a marker of privilege. Access to English education resources in China is significantly conditioned by regional economic development and social class background (Hu, 2005). As such, high English proficiency implies a good educational background, thus becoming a stratification factor signifying elite and distinction (Bourdieu, 1986; Li,

2020). For Ran, while he sought to unlock enhanced opportunities through English proficiency, he also faced the pressure of conforming to societal expectations that linked linguistic capital with social prestige. Therefore, English in Ran's case serves as both a ladder for mobility and a mirror of entrenched class divisions.

4.2.2 Negotiating gender stereotypes associated with being a humanities-track student

Ran's initial disengagement from English learning stemmed not only from frustration with low achievements, but also from his lack of identification with the humanities discipline. In his words,

Since I was a science-track student at high school, I used to look down on this kind of stuff—the humanities things, you know... But now they want me to read English literature and all those kinds of stuff? I'm not interested in it at all. It's not really my thing. It's just too delicate and subtle for a rough guy like me. (2nd interview)

The division between science and humanities has long been associated with gender stereotypes. Although these biases are increasingly challenged, it remains widely believed that men excel in STEM fields due to their rational thinking, while women are considered more adept at the humanities and liberal arts because of their empathy and meticulousness. This perception has led to the stereotyping of STEM disciplines as masculine and humanities disciplines (including foreign language learning) as feminine (Narasimhan & Bhargavi, 2019). In this extract, Ran expressed his aversion to English literature, deeming it too 'delicate and subtle,' linking it to feminine qualities. He further described himself as a 'rough guy' in opposition to these traits to affirm his masculinity. Ran's rejection of English literature reading seems to concur with Preece's (2018) study of working-class male undergraduates at a British university, where resistance to academic texts was a means to perform their 'laddish' identities. Ran's gendered perception of English language learning led to his lack of identification with humanities learning, which in turn resulted in his lack of commitment to EFL practices during his early studies at Phoenix.

Over time, Ran's increasing engagement with Phoenix's community transformed his gendered perceptions of humanities and English language learning. On several occasions, he expressed admiration for the eloquence and erudition of his male teachers and peers during English classroom debates. In our casual conversations, he shared his thoughts on classic works by male writers (e.g. Aldous Huxley, Adam Smith and Lu Xun). Gradually, through continued participation in these activities he developed a new gendered perspective on humanities learning:

Ran: Now I'm totally defending the humanities, I'm a humanities-track student too, and humanities are awesome.

Researcher: Really? You think so?

Ran: Yeah! Look at it now, most of the US presidents are lawyers and stuff, and they study humanities and social sciences at college... so it's actually humanities people running the country, right? That's the trend. And the humanities have a huge impact. For example, I used to look down on novels and literary works, but thinking about it now—if we had a society that was purely rational, like that dystopian world in *Brave New World*, where everything's turned into a reproduction machine, basically like a world of robots—that would be terrible.

Researcher: Yeah, that's true.

Ran: So the humanities are really important for society. Humanities and sciences shouldn't look down on each other. (8th interview)

It can be observed that Ran's increasing identification with the humanities and English language learning can be attributed to the following three aspects. First, Ran's admiration for eloquent male teachers and peers in English classroom debates provided counter-stereotypical models of masculinity within

the humanities, challenging his earlier gendered stereotyping of humanities and language learning as feminine. Second, Ran's reference to U.S. presidents indicated his discovery of the humanities' leadership potential and social impact. Specifically, his mention of U.S. presidents' educational backgrounds positions the discipline as a pathway to power—a traditionally masculine ideal. In Kiesling's (2002) study on the language styles of fraternity men, he found that men tend to draw on power discourse to construct their masculinity. Similarly, in Ran's case he strategically reframed humanities learning as a source of power and social impact to establish his masculinity. Third, Ran's critique of the dystopian world suggests that he reframed humanities learning as a rational, critical endeavor, in opposition to his former perception of the field as sensitive and delicate. He selectively drew on the analytical and critical dimensions of humanities learning to align with his perceived masculinity as rational and logical. Therefore, by associating the humanities and English language learning with power, social impact and rational critique, he integrated them into a redefined masculinity, hence deepening his commitment to the humanities and English language learning in his later years at Phoenix.

5 Discussion

The present study explores the interplay between language learning investment, social class and gendered identities by examining the learning trajectories of two Chinese EFL learners at an elite liberal arts college in Shanghai. Guided by the theoretical model of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015) and the notion of intersectionality (Block & Corona, 2016), the analysis illuminates how the intersecting dynamics of social class and gendered identities mediate language learners' access to and engagement with EFL practices. Through unpacking how class structures and gender normativity construct learners' investment in EFL practices, the study contributes to the extant literature with new insights into the intersecting nature of identities and the roles of class and gender in language learning.

The study reveals that social class acts as both a driver and constraint on learners' investment in EFL practices. On the one hand, driven by the prospect of upward social mobility, learners negotiate access to enhanced life opportunities by improving English proficiency, an institutionalized gatekeeper for advanced education and career development in China (Gil & Adamson, 2011). In the cases of Jia and Ran, both learners invested in EFL practices with a conscious awareness of improving English proficiency as cultural capital to access broader future aspects. This seems to align with Marshall and Bokhorst-Heng's (2020) study on Anglophone learners learning French in Canada, where learners' investment in French was largely driven by the perceived future economic benefits associated with the language. On the other hand, learners' social class backgrounds mediate their access to valued resources for EFL practices. For example, upon entering Phoenix, Jia and Ran discerned the disparities in English proficiency between themselves and their peers from more affluent areas around Shanghai. While their peers were exposed to English-speaking opportunities and advanced teaching resources from an early age, Jia and Ran were primarily engaged in text-based learning and exercise drilling to learn English. This inequality stems from the unbalanced distribution of EFL resources across China (Hu, 2005; Li, 2020). Although Jia and Ran later navigated these challenges to further their language learning investment, the structural inequalities underlying the uneven distribution of EFL resources are highly likely to frustrate learners' commitment to language learning.

In terms of gender, the study demonstrates the dynamic interplay between learners' gendered identities and their investment in language learning. In Jia's case, she mobilized feminist discourse internalized through Woolf's literature to resist patriarchal gender norms and claim autonomy over her entitlement to pursue a master's degree in interpreting. Jia's investment in English functions not only as a source of empowerment but also as a means of performing her gendered identity as an independent, autonomous woman. Her experience appears to resonate with Nagashima and Lawrence's (2023) study on feminist pedagogy in an EFL classroom in Japan, which highlights the potential of English language education as a vehicle for raising feminist consciousness. In contrast, Ran initially distanced himself from

English language learning, particularly English literature, due to the stereotypical gendered perception of the humanities as feminine and incompatible with his understanding of masculinity. However, as he became more involved in Phoenix's liberal arts community, he began to associate EFL practices with masculine attributes (e.g. power, social impact, rational critique), which enabled him to redefine an intellectual masculinity, and in turn deepened his investment in EFL practices. It can be observed from both cases that language learning can be a gendered practice (Anyia, 2017), learners' identification or disapproval of which can significantly influence their commitment to the target language. Therefore, language learning investment is also a site of identity negotiation, where learners navigate multiple discourses embedded in EFL practices to generate new self-understandings and construct their gendered identities (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

The study also underscores the intersectional nature of identities in EFL practices. Jia's investment in English was driven by social mobility and feminist autonomy, while simultaneously constrained by class structures and patriarchal gender norms. This echoes with Liu's (2023) study on the critical digital literacies of a Chinese female university student Frances, in that both Jia and Frances invested in EFL practices for enhanced future possibilities and feminist autonomy. Meanwhile, Ran's investment in English was shaped by class-based aspirations and his gendered perceptions of the humanities and English language learning. Both cases illustrate how overlapping and interconnected dimensions of gender and social class emerge in language learning activities, shaping learners' subjectivities and their investment in an intersectional manner. While intersectionality has been implicitly addressed in previous research on language and identity (Block & Corona, 2016), an explicit application of the intersectional approach highlights the multiplicity and fluidity of identities, offering a more nuanced understanding of the intricacies in learners' identities and their social environments. From this perspective, language learning investment not only serves a site of identity negotiation, but also as a site of power dynamics among intersecting social forces.

The study has important implications for identity research and English language education. Regarding research implications, the study addresses the scarcity of empirical research on gender and social class in identity and language learning by offering a nuanced analysis of how these two dimensions intersectionally construct language learners' investment. It further highlights how identity dimensions as ideological norms shape how learners negotiate access to language learning resources, how they make meaning of experiences, and how they envision future aspirations (Darvin & Norton, 2015). As for pedagogical implications, first, the study calls for a pedagogical approach that acknowledges the structural constraints in language learning. Measures should be taken to ensure equitable access to EFL resources, particularly for underprivileged groups. Additionally, specialized language training programs can be established to address the needs of underprivileged and marginalized language learners, thereby better supporting them in navigating challenges induced by systemic inequalities. This requires joint efforts from teachers, institutions and policymakers. Secondly, it is suggested that more instructional materials on progressive gender views be incorporated into the curriculum to unlock the transformative potential of language learning for identity development. A feminist pedagogy can be integrated into teaching to raise feminist consciousness and empower female language learners (Nagashima & Lawrence, 2023; Vandrick, 1994). Moreover, the study argues for caution against the gendered stereotypes associated with the humanities and language learning, which may hinder male learners' language investment. It is therefore advised that counter-narratives and critical discussions of these stereotypes be included in the curriculum to promote a more gender-equitable and inclusive language educational environment.

6 Conclusion

This study investigates the complex interplay between language learning investment, social class and gendered identities through an ethnographic case study of two Chinese EFL learners at an elite liberal arts college in Shanghai. Drawing on the model of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015) and the notion

of intersectionality (Block & Corona, 2016), the analysis illustrates how the intersecting dynamics of social class and gendered identities mediate learners' access to and engagement with EFL practices. The findings reveal that social class functions as both a driver and constraint on learners' investment in EFL practices. Regarding gender, learners' identification or disapproval of language learning as a gendered practice (in this case, feminist empowerment through EFL practices and gendered stereotyping of EFL practices) can significantly affect their commitment to the target language. The findings also highlight the intersectional nature of identities in EFL practices, suggesting that language learning investment serves as a site of power dynamics among intersecting social forces. The study thus advocates for greater attention to learner identity studies and inquiries into learners' social worlds, since a close examination of the interplay between language learners' investment and their identities, as this study has demonstrated, can reveal the underlying systemic patterns of control (Darvin & Norton, 2015) that give rise to structural inequalities and dominant discourses in language learning (Guan & Xu, 2024; Darvin & Norton, 2023).

While the findings are generated from a case study of two EFL learners and therefore cannot be generalized, the study nevertheless offers valuable insights into how structural constraints and gender normativity shape learners' investment in an intersecting manner. It also demonstrates how foreign language learning can serve as a medium of fostering gender autonomy and enabling social mobility. Future research is encouraged to further explore learner's social worlds, particularly identity transformation, not only to harness the transformative potential of foreign language learning for identity development, but also to advance a more just and inclusive language educational environment (Leung & Scarino, 2016; Ortega, 2017).

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