SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING: EVIDENCE FROM THREE LIFE HISTORIES

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This paper examines the issue of social structure and individual agency in language learning through the life histories of three young engineering graduates in Hong Kong. English is identified as an important form of cultural capital, which to a considerable extent determines the development of the three individuals, each of whom comes from a modest family background. In spite of the undeniable role of cultural capital (a product of social structure), examples of individual agency, in the form of the degrees of “investment” made in their language learning, and the application of “creative discursive agency” (which is to a large extent not a result of the official school curriculum) can be seen as influential on the development of the three young men. The discussion section of the paper considers the relative importance of social structure and individual agency in language education in a post-colonial society such as Hong Kong and the roles of “investment” and “creative discursive agency.” It argues that in order to tilt the balance in favor of agency over structure and to encourage more “investment” on the part of learners, more attention needs to be given to creating opportunities for “creative discursive agency” in and outside the classroom.

Introduction

This paper employs narrative enquiry, more specifically three life histories of young adult users of English as a second language in Hong Kong to illustrate the interplay in language learning between social structure, on the one hand, and individual agency, on the other. It interprets the life histories in terms of linguistic
capital (Bourdieu, 1973), activity theory (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 1995), investment (Norton Pierce, 1995), and “creative discursive agency” (Collins, 1993).

Until recently, the main concerns of second language acquisition (SLA) theory have been the cognitive and linguistic processes involved. Linguists and language teachers have viewed the learning of languages as a linear process that requires input in terms of the language to be learned and motivation from the learners. However, a more recent turn in applied linguistics in the last decade or more has contested this view and argued for more emphasis to be put on the social context of learning (e.g., Donato & McCormick, 1994; Hall, 1995, 2002; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Lin, 1999; McGroarty, 1998; Norton Pierce, 1995; Pennycook, 2001). Norton Pierce (1995), for example, has argued that “… SLA theorists have not developed a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context.” The view of language learners as recipients of learning has thus begun to be challenged, and a model of learners has been developed in which they are conceived of as individuals with complex social identities that affect the active ways they approach their language learning. This social perspective of language learning can be viewed as an interplay between social structure and individual agency, of how individual learners may be constrained, on the one hand, by the social world in which they find themselves, but at the same time are active participants in creating this social world, on the other.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

An important figure in developing a contextual view of language is Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, differences in linguistic repertoires can be related to social background. Bourdieu (1973) used the term “cultural capital” to refer to those attributes which are acquired through membership of a particular social class or group. An important aspect of cultural capital is linguistic capital. What is at stake with the concept of linguistic capital is not simply access to the grammar of the language, but rather language use, the ability to produce the appropriate expression in an appropriate
way in a given social context. People who do not have access to particular social milieux are unable to acquire the appropriate linguistic capital. This leads to cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973), how the education system tends to reproduce the culture of the dominant classes, thereby ensuring that they maintain their control in society.

Bourdieu wrote about monoglossic societies, social class giving rise to variation in dialect. In societies where more than two or more languages exist side by side, usually one will be the prestige language while others will be less prestigious. Thus in many post-colonial societies, such as Hong Kong, the site of the present study, English takes on the role of the prestige language, while the local language or languages is less prestigious. This state of affairs would seem to conform to Pennycook’s view that “[i]n many countries, particularly former colonies of Britain, small English-speaking elites have continued the same policies of the former colonizers, using access to English language education as a crucial distributor of social prestige and wealth.” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 14). English is at one and the same time positive, enabling access to social prestige and wealth for those who are proficient in the language, but at the same time excluding those who are not so proficient.

In Bourdieu’s terms, English (in certain key contexts such as education) represents greater linguistic capital than the mother tongue: Children who have access to English are thus more privileged than those who do not and are more likely to possess greater linguistic capital.

Turning now to the second language acquisition literature, in recent years, in contrast to earlier models that focused uniquely on psycho-linguistic dimensions, a more social theory has been called for in which acquisition is seen as developing within the social context and in which learners are seen as interacting with this social context. This is the model we would like to emphasize in the present study.

In an attempt to develop a more comprehensive model of SLA, Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995) invoke activity theory. The theory sets out a philosophical framework which helps in understanding the different forms of human practice at both the individual and social levels, and how these interact. There are two salient principles we would like to highlight here:
1. how internal activities, such as mental processing, cannot be understood without reference to the external activities which impinge upon them; and

2. how human activity can only be analyzed within the context of its continuous development, and within its social context.

Activity theory’s relevance to second language learning can be seen as a way of acknowledging learner human agency, of how learners create their own world of learning, and of what motivates them to put time and effort into their learning. From this sociolinguistic perspective, learning a second language is more than just mastery of the linguistic code; it also entails the creating of an understanding of the world: “. . . the language acquisition device is not located in the head of the individual but is situated in the dialogic interaction that arises between individuals engaged in goal-directed activities.” (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 1995, p. 110).

While goal-directed behavior is one of the main principles of activity theory, Norton Pierce (1995) challenges the concept that second language learners are motivated by goals, whether intrinsic or extrinsic. She suggests that we should replace the term motivation with investment, as the notion of motivation does not take into account the “complex relationship between power, identity, and language learning.” (p. 17). In her detailed analysis of non-native English immigrant speakers attempting to integrate themselves into Canadian life, Pierce uses investment to conceptualize the complex nature that the learning of a language has with the social context in which it is used. She illustrates through her participants’ diaries and conversations with her as researcher that these learners have multiple contexts in which to use English and that the degree of their investment in learning and using the language depends on many variable, most of which are not found in a language classroom, for example, family, protector, and caregiver.

There is one other concept that we need to introduce in this introductory section, that of “critical discursive agency” (Collins, 1993), that is, how individuals are able to initiate or take advantage of opportunities for the creative development of their discursive practices. Following on from Bourdieu’s notion of subjective action and objective conditioning (cited in Livingstone and Sawchuck, 2000), Collins argues that subjects are cast in a
reactive role, unable to initiate positive action because of the power of social structure: class condition, capital composition, habitus, and so forth. Creative discursive agency is a notion which allows for individual agency as a counterbalance to the weight of social structure.

In an investigation of Hong Kong secondary school classrooms, Lin (1999) focuses on the dilemmas a group of teachers and students find themselves. In interpreting her ethnographic data, Lin employs the notion of creative discursive agency to highlight the creative discursive strategies used by teachers and learners to overcome problems created by a mismatch of students’ cultural and linguistic capital and the requirements of the official curriculum. While the students’ strategies are primarily of resistance, Lin shows how the teachers use at least partially effective discursive strategies to engage with their students. Examples she draws from her data include using the L1 in what was supposed to be an English-only class, spending free time with students to create rapport, and sharing students’ jokes.

The notion of creative discursive agency invoked by Lin is a powerful one. While, as just mentioned, the creative discursive strategies employed by the learners in Lin’s study were primarily of resistance, this need not necessarily be the case, as we will demonstrate through our own life history data. However, it will be notable that much of the individual discursive creativity in our learners is conducted outside the classroom setting.

**Narrative Inquiry**

In recent decades, narrative inquiry has developed into an interdisciplinary field (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 213) encompassing not only historiography (e.g., White, 1987) but also literary criticism (e.g., Mitchell, 1981), psychology (e.g., Bruner, 1990), moral philosophy (e.g., MacIntyre, 1984), and many other disciplines. Narrative inquiry sees participants not as subjects in a study but also as “... distinct individuals in a unique situation, dealing with issues in a personal manner” (Polkinghorne, 1995). Language education research has employed narrative as a research tool since at least the time of Heath’s seminal *Ways With Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Heath,
1983). In second language education, as Bell (2002, p. 208) notes, narratives have been employed in learner autobiographies, diary studies, life history, and case studies. Casanave (2002) provides a review of narrative in second language writing research.

A range of different terms has been used to refer to different types of narrative account: biography, autobiography, life history, and oral history. In this paper we use the term life history. However, we would not claim that we are focusing on the whole lives of our participants, but are interested in one particular aspect—the role of English.

Whatever term is used, narratives tell a story. As stories, they have a central subject and a plot, with a well-marked beginning, middle, and end (Atkinson, 1998). Stories are likely to be punctuated by what Denzin (1989) calls epiphanies—“significant, turning-point moments in a subject’s life.” In addition, an identifiable narrative voice is present in stories. Stories make connections between events and they achieve closure and resolution. As White (cited in Wertsch, 1997) notes, narratives “create an integrated whole out of a set of persons, actions and events.”

Methodology

Selection of Case Histories

The student participants who took part in this study were recruited from an opportunistic teaching group (Miles & Huberman, 1994); that is, no preselection of which class of students to include in the study was done by the researchers. The sample was ‘purposive’ (Merriam, 1988); that is, the criteria for the selection of the participants in the study were predetermined on the basis of the typical background characteristics of the students to be investigated, namely, young Hong Kong Chinese male students having gained entry to the engineering program at the university in question.

Due to space limitations and because they are sufficient to serve our purpose, we only report on three case studies here. However, the data are taken from a larger group of 17 students each of whom gave similar life histories. We read through all 17
students’ life history data. Then we selected seven of these students for further data analysis based on the extent and richness (i.e., the participants’ ability to express their feelings clearly) of their comments. By this time we had decided that the theoretical framework which we could employ for our study would be the contrast between structure and agency in language learning. From the group of seven we then selected the three reported on here on the basis of the ease with which we could contact them for follow-up interviews and the richness of the data for our theme. In this approach we are following Cole & Knowles (2001), for whom selection of life history participants should be upon the focus of the study, possible needs for diversity, and time requirements.

When the study began the three participants had been learning English for 12–13 years. Their level of English was typical for engineering students in the university in question. Two of them passed their school leaving certificate with the minimum pass for entry to university, while the third passed with a grade one level above the minimum (set at an ‘E’ pass on the local public examination, which equates to around a scores of 455 on the TOEFL).

Data

Data Collection

Data for the ethnographic study were collected in a number of ways: a series of interviews about the participants’ experiences of learning English; essays elicited from participants’ about their lives; focus group interviews; journals kept by students; observations of lectures; and verifications of data and interpretation with participants. The main part of the study was conducted over the full three-year period during which the students were at the university. Follow-up data were collected by e-mail and telephone interviews three years after the students graduated. It is the interviews and follow-up data that provide the greater part of the data for the present paper.

Access to the students was initially through their English class teacher, who was also one of the authors of this paper.
The students were taking a first-semester English for Engineers course that focused on developing listening and reading skills, at intermediate level (see Miller (2002) for a description of this course). As part of the course, the teacher announced to the class that he would like to conduct some research with them about how they learned and used English and asked for their cooperation in doing this. The students willingly agreed when it was explained what the teacher wanted to do and gave their written consent to provide data for the study. It transpired that part of the students’ eagerness to participate in the study was the opportunity it afforded them to have regular contacts with an English-speaking person. Their enthusiasm to maintain contact with their teacher/researcher throughout their three-year degree program, once their language courses had ended, and to maintain contact after leaving the university, also attests to their willing participation in the study. Indeed, one of the participants, George, was so interested in participating in the project that he volunteered to work as an unpaid research assistant. Throughout the three years of the major part of the study the teacher/researcher kept up a relatively close relationship with the participants, having lunch together, playing sports, and meeting in other forums. The participants were keen to do this, partly as a means of improving their English. The project can thus be said to have generated “catalytic” validity (Lather, 1991; Reason & Rowan, 1981), in generating an awareness on the part of the learners of the role of English in their lives. In terms of the conceptual framework of our study, in taking part in the project, the participants can also be seen to have been “investing” in their language learning and taking up an opportunity for “creative discursive agency.”

**Essays**

In the first week of the students’ English for Engineers course, they were asked to write essays about themselves and some of their learning experiences. The students were informed that this information would be of use to the class teacher to get a better understanding of who he was teaching, and that later on it might become part of the research data. In order to help the students
frame their essays, they were given a set of questions and asked to answer as many of the questions as they liked in their essays.

In subsequent interviews with the students, they were asked to elaborate on some of the points they had written about in their essays. This was a useful technique in guiding the students through an interview in English, as many of them considered their language skills weak or very weak and were unused to one-on-one conversations with a fluent English speaker.

**Interviews**

The students were interviewed in three ways: focus groups with the tutor as facilitator, video recorded focus groups with a student as facilitator, one-on-one interviews with the tutor. In each of these situations the interviews were semi-structured. They were organized around a series of questions or issues related to how the students had learned their English, how they were still learning English, and specifically how they were coping with their engineering lectures in English. As a result of this type of interviewing, the researcher was able to revisit issues several times, or investigate new issues the students discussed.

**Follow-up Contacts**

Because the study was begun in the students’ first year at the university and at the time of writing they had already graduated and been in the workplace for three years, follow-up contacts were made by telephone and e-mail and the participants life histories were up-dated from the time they left the university. Once again the participants were very pleased to provide further information and renew contact with the interviewer. Information obtained included their job positions, the role of English in their work, the satisfaction level with their job, and future prospects. Later again, at the writing up stage, the opportunity was taken to obtain further information on the earlier experiences of the participants which the researchers had found to be necessary.
Data Analysis

Once all the data from the 17 students had been collected, it was loaded onto the NUD.IST software program ("QSR NUD*IST (Version 3) [computer software]. Quality Solutions and Research Pty.," 1994). This computer program allows for large amounts of unstructured data to be analyzed and cross-referenced in order to develop insights. An on-going process of reading and analyzing is required when using NUD.IST, and such in-depth treatment of the data results in an ability to theorize about any issues that arise. NUD.IST is also a tool for content and discourse analysis. NUD.IST was used in processing the data for the 17 participants and later for the final 7. However, for this article, because we finally reduced our focus to just three case studies, we also used the more traditional method of reading and re-reading and reflecting on all the data until we had a feel for the students, their comments, and their lives. To ensure participant verification of our analysis (Ball, 1998), also referred to as "member-checking" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the transcribed interviews and the life histories—which were much longer in their original form than what is presented in this paper—were read, corrected slightly where suggested, and validated by the three participants. Although, as mentioned earlier, we must admit to the subjectivity of these stories (we must accept them as accounts rather than facts), because of the long and trusting relationship built up with the participants, we are confident that what they reported about their language learning was as reliable as we could get.

Setting for the Study

The setting for our study is Hong Kong, a former British colony, but since 1997 a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China. Although Hong Kong was for more than a century and a half a British colony and it now promotes itself as “Asia’s World City,” many visitors express their surprise at how little English is used in the society in general (compared to, say, Singapore). While this may seem to be the case to the casual visitor, this superficial view masks the importance and power of the former colonial language. English is still used in many of
the prestige settings, access to which is limited to those who are proficient in the language. This includes the elite English medium schools; the majority of the universities, which are English medium; professional training courses, which are usually conducted in English; business, where much of the written communication is still conducted in English; the law courts, where the use of Chinese has still not become the dominant medium; and government, where all public documents have to be bilingual.

To be professionally successful in Hong Kong, a good command of English is a necessity, despite the fact that 97% of the population is ethnic Chinese with Cantonese as their mother tongue. Obviously in such a society those who have greater access to English are more likely to achieve success. However, the typical working class Hong Kong person exists in a life world far removed from the cosmopolitan, English-using parts of the territory. The center of power is, as its name suggests, a district called Central. It is here that one finds international business headquarters, where the government is located, and where the highest level courts and international legal firms have their operations. Visitors to this part of Hong Kong will have the feeling that they are in a truly cosmopolitan society, where the majority of people have a good command of English. The other area of Hong Kong where a cosmopolitan feel manifests itself is an area called Tsim Sha Tsui, just across the harbor from Central. This is the location for many of the international tourist hotels and hence another area where English is widely used. Most Hong Kong young people have little contact with these areas. 40% of Hong Kong’s population lives in government-subsidized public housing far away from Central and Tsim Sha Tsui. Young people living in such places are likely to attend the local Chinese medium primary or secondary school. In short, the typical young Hong Kong person has little or no contact with English outside the formal English lessons in school.

The Life Histories

We now come to the empirical part of our study, the three life histories themselves. In line with Bourdieus’s theory of cultural and linguistic capital, the principles advocated by activity theory,
the notion of investment, and the concept of critical discursive agency, the life histories will demonstrate how, while not generously endowed in terms of cultural and linguistic capital, the learners in the three case studies are prepared—to varying degrees, depending upon the cost-benefit involved—to invest in their language learning and employ their critical discursive agency because of a variety of social factors usually not accounted for in the classroom, and which, indeed, may be hidden from the language teacher.

Life History: Edgar

Edgar (the names used in each of the three case studies are pseudonyms; most Hong Kong students adopt a Western name for use in school and work) lives with his family in a 600-square-foot privately owned flat. Six family members share the flat. Edgar described his background as “working class.” His father is a building worker and his mother works in a factory. Edgar said he was not asked by his parents to go to university. Nevertheless his sister attended a teachers’ college and he has a brother at another university. “It is like a competition with us,” Edgar said, “to see who can go to the best place.”

Studying at home was described as “not easy” by Edgar. Because of the small size of the flat he only has a table which he describes as his “study area,” and even this is shared by one of his brothers. After eight in the evening, when his parents return from work, the flat becomes very noisy. In addition, there is only one computer at home, which is shared by four people. Edgar accordingly makes use of the university library for study, or sometimes goes to the home of a friend.

Learning English for Edgar was not an easy task: None of his family members were able to help him learn English. He found the language difficult to begin with, stating that for the first three years he did not like it and that he was “afraid” of it. He was more interested in science subjects at school, preferring mathematics to English and aiming to become an engineer. However, he overcame his difficulties in learning English and began to invest more in the subject. This came about due to his desire to pass the Hong Kong Certificate English Examination (HKCEE):
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In Form four to five I get the interest in the English... Maybe the target we need to pass in the HKCEE so I become more active in English so I get the knowledge.

Edgar also realized that English allowed him to read about his favorite football team from the English language newspaper:

I like the football and in the newspaper there is the news for the sport and I want to read the news. There is not too much in the Chinese newspapers about the foreign teams so I have to read the English newspaper to get the information. I like Manchester United so I have to learn English to know the news of them.

Edgar found practicing English in this way to be beneficial. He found that he began to know more than his classmates and even surprised the teacher with some of the words he used.

At the university, Edgar also become more positive about learning English when he became aware that his ability in mathematics could be traded for help with his English with other classmates:

... they (classmates) ask me questions about math and I can learn some English from them so we can teach each other. For English I always ask them to teach me, and for some mathematical problem they ask me.

At the university, right up to the final third year, Edgar said he still found English difficult. Because his English was not at a high enough level, he was required to take an additional English course. However, he found little value in this course and invested little effort, delaying taking the final test until his final year, when most students took it in their first year. Despite his difficulties with English, Edgar nevertheless managed to graduate with an Upper Second Class Honors degree. He went straight from university to his present job as an automation engineer, designing and providing automation control systems.

Edgar uses Cantonese all of the time in interacting with colleagues at work. However, his English helped him get the job because one of the main duties is to maintain contact with customers via e-mail in English. Edgar plans to stay in this job. If he has some spare money and time later on he might consider further studies. If he decides to do this then his English language skills will once more become essential in enabling him to complete post-graduate education. He said that he would not
mind working more with English but that his current workmates are all local people, and so there is little opportunity for him to practice his speaking or listening.

Life History: Peter

Peter lives with his father in a one-room, 200-square-foot government subsidized flat, his mother having died some years ago and his much older brother and sister having emigrated to the Netherlands and the United States, respectively. He has a table, a bed, and a space for his clothes. Peter described the flat as "not very tidy" and as having "not much space for [him] to study or place [his] textbooks." Peter’s father is an invalid and spends all of his time at home. He keeps the television on all of the time, so when Peter wants to study he either goes to the public library or waits until his father goes to sleep.

Peter’s experience of learning English was somewhat similar to Edgar’s. That is, he had little or no parental support for his education, and he found learning English very difficult while at secondary school. However, his interest in learning changes when he attended a vocational training institute (VTI):

The best experience I have when I study general English at the VTI is because we don’t have to worry about the open exam and we don’t have to practice the exam skills. We can just learn English that we need. Before this course I only got a grade F in the HKCEE and I have not taken this exam again, but I think if I do take the exam again I can improve. After study this course my grammar has improved and I understand a lot, but in the course the teacher is not teach us about grammar. I think this is interesting. I like to learn English this way but in secondary school I not know it is possible.

On entering the university, Peter still had problems with his English. Although he now had some positive experiences in learning English and he understood that his university classes would mostly be conducted in English, difficulties still remained:

Yes, I know that the classes will be in English and I feel concerning about this problem. In the first year some of the lecturer the English is difficult to listen and some native speaker can speak very fast and so it is difficult to follow. And more, some of the knowledge that the lecturer teaching is very complicated, you cannot understand immediately and when you think about it then the lecturer go on then it’s difficult to manage when you don’t understand something.
To overcome these difficulties, Peter relied on reading more about the subjects and continuing to invest in his language learning in other ways:

*I have worked for Marks and Spencer Department store for about half a year. There have a lot of chance to practice English as a lot of their customers are foreigners. It is a useful experience as I get more confidence to speak in English in that job. It was a part-time job I work for the weekend.*

Peter also uses English for e-mail correspondence:

*I also use e-mail and I always use the English. I communicate with my friends and with my brother and my sister with e-mail. I can use it quite easy.*

Peter graduated with a Lower Second Class Honors Degree, which he said he was happy with, given his disadvantaged background. After graduation, Peter joined BMW and now works in Kunming, SW China. Peter does not use a lot of spoken English on a daily basis. But there is one German colleague in the company and they communicate in English. Also, all written communication with BMW offices in China and in particular with the head office in Beijing is done in English.

*Life History: George*

George’s father was only educated up to primary school level, while his mother studied up to the fifth year of secondary school, gaining passes in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education. In George’s words, ‘‘All of my family members were born after the war and they were very poor so that they were not well educated.’’ In spite of this limited education, along with his uncle, George’s father owns a small factory in Mainland China. Nevertheless, their personal circumstances keep them rooted within the lower socio-economic group in Hong Kong and his family still live in a small flat of only 500 square feet. George has his own personal computer and a corner of the living room as a study area.

George was relatively successful in English from the beginning, a success which he attributes primarily to the influence of his mother:
My mum . . . forced me to learn English during my primary school. So after this period and I get a very good result then I can study by myself in the secondary school and she does not need to force me anymore . . . Every night we, me and my sister, have to sit and do homework with mum.

George’s success in English at primary school seems to have been in spite of rather than due to the instruction he received in school:

The main problem learning English at primary school was that we only copy, copy, copy, just simply exercises, we copy the words. During the lesson the teacher just read the book and she tells us to follow her in our books and we don’t know what we are learning at that time. We just do what she tells us. Even half of my lessons in primary school were in English I don’t know what is going on sometimes. But I still manage to pass the examinations so I must be OK.

At this time George also attended a private tutorial school. Here he found the classes more worthwhile:

I think that most of the English I have learned are from my private tutorials and not from my schoolwork.

Because of his success at primary school, George was able to enter St. Paul’s College, an elite school, with a policy of English medium instruction. George had relatively little problems studying in English:

I don’t find that there were a problem for me to accommodate the teaching in English as I have got a lot of English lessons in my primary school and my mum help me a lot before. It is still not easy but I can manage.

At secondary school, George was motivated in English by one particular teacher:

When I was in F2 or F3 I was teach by a nice guy, I like this man a lot and he was really enjoy teaching us English and that year I found that learning English is very interesting and I got my vocabulary built up. The teacher did not follow the old way of teaching but he made things fun for us young kids.

George said that this teacher was popular with all of the students:

He introduced a lot of vocabulary and a lot of things outside of the book to us. And he goes hiking and other activities with us so the relationship between the
teacher and the students are more friendly... He was 20 something. A young guy and similar to us. He is from Hong Kong, so we can talk with him easy in [Cantonese].

In addition, George took the opportunity to talk with the foreign English teachers he encountered at his secondary school. Another motivating aspect of English learning for George was participation in annual summer camps about American culture. George found these to be useful for improving his English by talking to native speakers. He was also interested in meeting people from different cultural backgrounds.

George’s school results were good enough to secure him a place at the university, where he did very well, graduating with first class honors and going on to further study and an MPhil degree.

George is now working as an assistant consultant in a design company in Central, as mentioned earlier, the most cosmopolitan part of Hong Kong and the center of power. In his work now he has to interact with native English speakers and colleagues from other countries, so he has to use English on a daily basis both orally and in written form.

Discussion

What can these three life histories tell us about the interaction of social structure and individual agency in language learning? Although the participants in the three case studies focused their attention on the acquisition of English language skills, primarily for what may appear to be instrumental purposes, that is, gaining access to higher education and the prospect of a good job, the participants demonstrated that their language learning has to be seen within a wider sociocultural context of the use of English within Hong Kong society. The students demonstrated that they are prepared, as previously indicated to varying degrees, depending upon the cost-benefit involved, to invest in their language learning and create discursive opportunities outside what teachers may acknowledge in the classroom.

For Edgar, there was a case of sibling rivalry to gain access to higher educational establishments. As English was the key to success in this endeavor, he was willing to invest time and energy
in his language learning at school. He also had a keen interest in sports and was thus willing to make the effort to read the English newspapers and thereby widen his vocabulary. As a result of this, he outshone his classmates at times and received positive feedback on using this learning strategy. Another opportunity for creative discursive agency was the use of his skill in mathematics to barter for assistance with English from his classmates at the university. On the other hand, he was not willing to invest heavily in his English course at the university, as he did not think it to be of much benefit.

In the case of Peter, he was driven to invest his effort in learning English by his disadvantaged family situation and encouragement from older siblings who had done well, even though he had negative learning experiences at secondary school and did not invest heavily in English learning there. His work for an international department store was an example of both investment and creative discursive agency. His experience of dealing with foreign clients made him realize there was an opportunity for improving his English. At the same time the experience of working for an international department store made him understand the importance of learning English for the workplace. As a result, he was prepared to put more time and effort into his English learning. Another opportunity for creative discursive agency was the chance to participate in an alternative teaching method, a method which suited his personal learning style and strategies, when he attended the VTI. In addition, Peter takes advantage of English for communicating via e-mail with his friends and siblings.

As for George, he was encouraged to learn English by significant figures in his life: his mother and an admired school teacher. The positive wash-back effect of his success in school tests and public examinations was that he became willing to invest more time in learning English. George took up further opportunities for discursive agency by talking with foreign teachers and participating in American summer camps.

Given the importance of English in Hong Kong society, these examples of investment and individual creative discursive agency in the lives of the three language learner participants include examples of what Denzin (1989) calls epiphanies, or major turning points in their lives. Some of these epiphanies
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are more clear-cut than others. The effect on George’s learning brought about by his mother and admired school teacher are examples of clear-cut epiphanies. But most of the positive significant moments recapitulated in the previous paragraphs can also to a greater or lesser extent be seen as epiphanies, in so far as they helped to bring about changes in the lives of the three young men. Nevertheless, in spite of the application of individual agency, as noted above, the role of social structure and Bourdieu’s notions of cultural and linguistic capital cannot be ignored. In this respect it may perhaps be significant that, of the three participants, it is George, whose family background is relatively better than that of his two peers, who on the face of it, comes out the best, taking a Master’s degree, working in a prestigious job and for a prestigious company in Central which uses English as its working language, while Edgar and Peter are in less prestigious jobs in the “far-flung” New Territories and a Mainland backwater, respectively, and using English less. However, it may be premature to pass judgment on the relative life success of the three young men.

As regards education, the effects of social structure and individual agency lead to reproduction and personal transformation respectively (Pennycook, 2001). At what place in this dichotomy can we say that our participants arrived? One might say that they have made the transition from the working class to the middle class. In this sense their lives have been transformed. However, it needs to be noted that the social structure is developing rapidly. If our participants had been members of the previous generation they would not have had access to the university. It is because Hong Kong’s economy has developed rapidly and because there is now a tremendous need for professional engineers that they are able to take up the greater opportunities now offered them. In this respect, the three participants are serving to perpetuate the (evolving) social structure. On the other hand, we should not dismiss the positive benefits of their individual agency. Our participants’ development of creative discursive agency is considerable. In addition to helping them professionally, it has led them to a certain level of cultural enrichment, as testified, for example, by Edgar’s ability to read about football in English, by Peter’s ability to use e-mail in English and his contact with people
from different cultures, and by George’s ability to communicate with English-speaking foreigners. There has thus been a degree of cultural as well as vocational enrichment.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Does Hong Kong want to rely on chance discursive creative agency, as illustrated in our three life histories, or does it want to find a more systematic approach to developing the cultural and linguistic capital in the society? Arguing in terms of language as a form of capital and English in Hong Kong as the socio-economically dominant “symbolic resource” (Bourdieu, 1991), Lin (1997) has argued that all children have equal rights to this resource. She writes that “Education should facilitate the social mobility of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups and contribute to the development of a more meritocratic society” (Lin, 1997, p. 24) and that “[a] schooling and education funding system founded on the principle of ignoring the children’s varying amounts of initial linguistic cultural capital contributes to the reproduction of existing social stratification and the lack of social mobility of children from disadvantaged groups” (Lin, 1997). On this basis she argues that children with little English capital “should be provided with culturally compatible English programs ... to enable them to acquire the linguistic capital required for gradually switching to English to study a certain proportion of the curriculum so that they will be in a better position to compete with their middle/professional class counterparts for higher and professional education, which is still largely English medium” (Lin, 1997, p. 27). Lin then goes on to map out the fundamental changes that are needed in the school system to enable what she proposes. These are very comprehensive, applying to the following: curricular materials and resources; teaching syllabus/schedules; school assessment materials and practices; classroom practices; teacher’s workload pattern; class size; teacher’s [sic] opportunities for professional development; the development of a teacher-researcher identity and a teaching-researching culture in the school; and teacher participation and autonomy in curricular development.
While Lin’s program for reform is a worthy one and our life histories have provided evidence of some of the deficiencies in the Hong Kong educational system, Hong Kong has a history of large-scale, top-down language reform. These include the introduction of a communicative language teaching syllabus (Evans, 1996), the introduction of a target-oriented curriculum (Selected papers and published articles related to the TTRA/TOC initiative 1989-94, 1994), the separation of schools into Chinese and English medium, as already reported, and the introduction of a “benchmark” proficiency test for all English teachers. None of these initiatives has “solved” the language “problem” in Hong Kong. That is, many students are frustrated at their inability to use English as well as they would like to after 12 years of school learning. The answer may not only be sought in large-scale top-down education reform, but also in a move of pedagogy away from a traditional teacher-centered approach, to a more student-centered one. As the three participants in this study illustrate, they are influenced by a variety of nonclassroom-based factors in their language learning and are prepared to invest in different ways in their quest to become proficient language users.

We agree with Norton Pierce (1995) and McKay and Wong (1997) in advocating a teaching method that encourages students to voice their feelings and attitudes to their teachers when learning English. Basically, for teachers to spend time getting to know their students and the personal investments they are making in their learning. By adopting a more student-centered approach to language teaching and by acknowledging that students are already taking responsibility for their learning, teachers may go someway to empowering their students with the skills they need to take control of their learning and appreciate the control they may already have.

Journal writing, allowing students time in class to talk about their learning, and spending time with students out of class are ways to develop a student-centered approach. Via such activities as journal writing and reflective discussions with classmates and the teacher, students can be encouraged to uncover the amount of investment they are already making, or are prepared to make, in their language learning. Students may come to feel a sense of achievement and justification for the individual ways
in which they are learning and using English. Given that many of the opportunities for creative discursive agency we have identified among our three participants have been outside the classroom, more opportunities should be created in the form of extracurricular activities which are likely to provide the conditions for such individual initiatives and open the way for more individual investment in learning. Finally, a more student-centered approach such as the one suggested here might also allow for a more critical perspective on the goals of Hong Kong society and its primarily instrumental conception of English as a tool of capitalism rather than as a means of intellectual and cultural enrichment.

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